

The Zero Option

Do regional orchestras still make artistic sense?

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New York

The Pasadena Symphony is in serious trouble. Depending on whom you believe, Jorge Mester, the music director, either quit or was fired in May, leaving the orchestra leaderless and \$1.2 million in debt. Meanwhile, the board of directors has been hacking away at rehearsal time and administrative staff in a frantic attempt to balance the budget. "This is an orchestra that used to have exceedingly high standards," Jeffrey Bernstein, the assistant conductor, recently told the Los Angeles Times. "All of that has significantly changed in the last 18 months."

The bad news in Pasadena, alas, is old news there and elsewhere. Six years ago, the Knight Foundation published "Bridging the Gap: Innovations to Save Our Orchestras," a study that recommended radical changes to reverse a nationwide decline in concert attendance. The report's authors argued that "some orchestras, especially those in smaller cities," need to "re-examine how they define their constituencies and how they select, package and deliver their musical products." Translation: Less Schubert, more "Star Wars." Many orchestras have acted accordingly, but the situation remains dire for second- and third-tier ensembles from coast to coast.

All this leads me to ask a tough question that nobody in the music business ever asks, at least not out loud: What, if anything, justifies the existence of a regional symphony orchestra in the 21st century? Many people still believe that an orchestra is a self-evidently essential part of what makes a city civilized. But is this true?

Let's start by considering some superficially similar cases. What justifies the existence of a regional museum? In the case of, say, Kansas City, Mo.'s Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the answer *is* self-evident: The quality of the art in the museum's collection, which includes such eye-popping treasures as Caravaggio's "St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness" and one of Monet's most spectacular water-lily panels, is its own justification.

What about theater ensembles? Palm Beach Dramaworks mounts first-class productions of a sophisticated repertory of classic and modern plays in its 84-seat theater. In recent seasons it has presented such challenging shows as Eugène Ionesco's

"The Chairs" and Michael Frayn's "Copenhagen." Once again, the justification for its existence is self-evident: All you have to do is take a look.

Is it possible to make such a case for regional orchestras? Most, after all, offer a predictable mix of ultrafamiliar classics and soufflé-light pops programs. If I lived in a city with such an orchestra, would I attend its concerts? A century ago I would have said yes, because live performances were the only way to hear music you didn't make yourself. But downloading and the iPod have made it possible to hear great music whenever and wherever you want. Is there any point in going to hear a pretty good live performance of a chestnut like Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, Elgar's "Enigma" Variations" or the Schumann Piano Concerto, all of which figure prominently on Pasadena's five subscription programs for the 2010-11 season? For a fast-growing number of Americans, the answer is no.

I speak as a devout believer in the power and permanence of Western classical music. But if I were the head of the Podunk Foundation and had to choose between funding the Podunk Philharmonic and a nonmusical group identical in quality to Palm Beach Dramaworks or the Nelson-Atkins Museum, I'd dump the orchestra in a heartbeat. The best regional theater companies and museums provide an aesthetic experience that cannot be duplicated by any other means. Not so third-tier orchestras. Their primary historic function has been rendered obsolete by technology, in much the same way that many of the historic functions of regional newspapers have been usurped by the web. You don't have to buy a ticket to the Podunk Philharmonic to hear Beethoven's Seventh any more than you have to buy the Podunk Times to figure out what movie to see on Saturday night.

Does civic pride count for anything? Not in our egalitarian age. Nowadays no city gets points merely for having an orchestra, whatever its quality. Orchestras that hope to survive must therefore redefine their missions—and they must do so without watering down their programming beyond recognition. If the only way for them to stay alive is by switching to slickly packaged schlock, they'd be better off dead.

I'm not saying schlock is the only alternative. Nor am I calling for the disbanding of the Pasadena Symphony or any other regional orchestra. This is a "thought experiment," an attempt to cast new light on an old problem by changing the terms of discussion. But many regional orchestras are in lose-lose situations like the one I've just described. Like the publishers of regional newspapers, their leaders must come up with a better alternative. If they don't, no one will mourn these orchestras' passing.