

A letter on cutbacks at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra

23 January 2009

Earlier this month I had the pleasure of attending, along with my 13-year-old son, a performance of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Leonard Slatkin—the former music director of the National Symphony Orchestra—began conducting the DSO last month and the performance underscored his effort to promote works that would be enjoyed by seasoned classical music lovers as well as a younger generation.

The January 11 performance of American composers' works included George Gershwin's "An American in Paris," Leonard Bernstein's "Facsimile" and the world premiere of "Rhapsody for Orchestra" by Margaret Brouwer, the winner of the DSO's Lebenbom Competition for women composers, which was introduced by the composer herself.

A highlight was the "Triple Concerto for Double Bass, Banjo and Tabla." The orchestra accompanied the composers of this piece, Edgar Meyer (bass), Béla Fleck (banjo) and Zakir Hussain (tabla). As he played his banjo like a sitar, exchanging solos and duets with Hussain's rapid-fire drumbeats, the versatile Fleck—who is comfortable playing bluegrass, classical and a number of other music forms—reminded me of Ravi Shankar.

Explaining the piece, which was first played with the Nashville Symphony in 2006 and was being recorded at the Detroit performance, Slatkin told the *Detroit Free Press*, "These composers are finding ways to celebrate the different stylistic bends that music can bring to you, and that's something that audiences have to really understand. You don't want to make it a political statement, but you want to say that if more people in the world understood the dynamics of different cultures the way musicians understand them, we'd be in a lot better place."

The work won an enthusiastic response, particularly from the younger members of the audience, and a

standing ovation produced an encore from the three performers. Underscoring their commitment to expose youth to varied musical genres, Meyer, Fleck, and Hussain joined Slatkin the day before in a Young People's Concert sponsored by the DSO.

It was satisfying to hear my son—who initially indicated he had come along mainly to accompany me—leave the concert expressing his joy over the experience and admiration for the talent of the musicians.

The symphony orchestra is one of the few cultural treasures left in a city ravaged by the hollowing out of its industrial base, chronic unemployment and poverty and decades of official neglect. The DSO provides music programs for inner-city children in Detroit where less than a third of the public schools can afford to include music education in their curriculum.

The orchestra has a partnership with the Detroit School of Arts, a public high school with a current enrollment of 950 students, which opened in 2005 on land donated by the orchestra directly behind its home concert hall, the Max M. Fisher Music Center. It also sponsors several civic youth ensembles—orchestra, chamber, wind and jazz—that provide training and performance opportunities for students, from elementary school to the college graduate level, including access to orchestra members and conductors, as well as guest musicians as varied as Itzhak Perlman and Chick Corea.

This is why the news that the orchestra could lose millions of dollars from auto industry sponsors is so alarming—and telling about the current state of cultural life in America. According to the *Detroit Free Press*, General Motors has already notified about a dozen arts and cultural groups, including the DSO, Music Hall, the Michigan Opera Theatre and the Detroit Institute of Arts, not to expect any support from the company in

2009.

The newspaper reported that “GM’s pullback means cuts of \$350,000 to the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts, \$250,000 to the Michigan Opera Theatre, \$100,000 or more to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and \$75,000 to the Mosaic Youth Theatre.”

Detroit’s arts and cultural institutions are already suffering from the economic slowdown, which has curtailed corporate and individual donations and undermined ticket sales. The leaders of several institutions, who say this is the worst economic climate they have ever experienced, have announced cutbacks.

The Michigan Opera Theatre, facing a projected budget deficit of \$800,000, cancelled its spring production of “I Pagliacci”—the first such action in its history—and laid off three members of its staff.

Prior to the DSO concert there was a public address announcement that the performance was being sponsored by General Motors. For the first time I can recall this routine announcement was met with applause, albeit from a notably nervous audience.

The cutbacks at the DSO and other cultural institutions expose the irrationality of the dependence of the arts on corporate financing. At the same time, music and other artistic endeavors have been subjected to decades of budget cuts by federal, state and local governments. The massive deficits and outlays for the wars and bailout of Wall Street assure that the Obama administration will continue this pattern.

Jerry White

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