

## Orchestras Rising

By Daniel Webster

There is no political pressure to view the growth of symphony orchestras as part of an intelligent design. In 300 years, orchestras have evolved, almost perfectly adapting to the changes in the environment around them. Numbers of players in orchestras have grown to match composers' expanding views of music's message; instruments have been invented and improved to widen and deepen the tonal palette needed for larger halls. Performers' skills, particularly as the orchestra migrated effortlessly from Europe to North America, have helped to move the orchestra into the new world of electronics, holography and space-age communication. The symphony orchestra is an adaptive creation ideal for the invention and growth of art so profound and plentiful that it matches the visual glories of the Renaissance.

The orchestra does not live in airless glass jars. It is a social figure, an economic engine, a civic emblem, an icon of its culture with all the warts and beauties that implies. Its skin-shedding evolution is never better seen than in Philadelphia where orchestras – for nearly 200 years – have pulled on the robes and held the orbs of healers, educators, entertainers, champions, conservators and iconoclasts.

Given its history, it is no wonder the symphony orchestra is changing shape before our very ears. Economics legislate shrinking size and numbers; popular music beckons with its bumptious rhythms, instant gratification and gaudy sounds. Television and computer use have shaped a generation of quick watchers rather than long listeners. Disappearing school music programs and a decline in home music-making have contributed to the speedy evolution of next-phase orchestra life.

In what direction? The Philadelphia Orchestra is a national as well as local emblem. Founded at the start of the expansionist 20<sup>th</sup> century, it evolved from the model brought here by mainly German musicians. The Musical Fund Society ensemble played Beethoven in the 1830s from first edition printings; the Germania Orchestra celebrated in the newly-built Academy of Music. From many came the single Philadelphia Orchestra, its audience already convinced of the music's importance.

Its evolution was steady. It rehearsed in German even in Leopold Stokowski's early years, but Stokowski himself represented change. He was a galvanic public figure, unlike the solid German founding conductors, Fritz Scheel and Karl Pohlig. He embraced technological changes as a means of focusing attention on the orchestra and the city. He premiered attention-grabbing music, made groundbreaking records, pioneered LPs in 1931, led the orchestra to Hollywood for Disney's *Fantasia*. Eugene Ormandy pushed farther, leading the first national radio broadcasts, the first televised program. And all with part-time musicians.

Philadelphia? The orchestra spoke for the city.

The Ford Foundation clarified the next steps at mid-century. Orchestras in the late 20th-century would need massive funding, far-seeing management, full-time players with benefits, audience development, marketing, wider reach through electronic means. And they would need a vital new repertoire representing the new America, not the 19th-century European landmarks, no matter how essential they have been to American culture.

The new century finds the Philadelphia Orchestra...evolving. Its music director, Christoph Eschenbach, fits the local German template for the podium, yet his mandate is expansion, inclusion and innovation to balance the importance of the fundamental 19th-century repertoire. The orchestra is going through management change, too, as it sought a replacement for President Joseph H. Kluger, who had led its growth, upheavals and transitions through the eras of conductors Riccardo Muti, Wolfgang Sawallisch and Eschenbach, as well as the move down Broad Street to the Kimmel Center.

In its new season, the orchestra again renews itself. The distance between players and listeners is under assault. Who are those formally dressed players in a hall full of men and women in jeans and sweaters? Can they be spoken to?

They can. Eschenbach will offer five "Access Concerts," 75-minute early evening programs introduced by the conductor and played without intermission to bring young adults close to the players. Five new "Discovery" concerts will offer listeners exposure to new music juxtaposed with Beethoven to help develop context. How do Henri Dutilleux and Magnus Lindberg engage with Beethoven? Beethoven is examined as a revolutionary, not a sure-fire ticket seller. Chamber music, once strictly proscribed by the orchestra leadership, now brings players closer to its audience. Four-year-olds sit on the floor to hear "Music All Around" programs, and the orchestra programs a new Sunday afternoon series and added family concerts.

The Kimmel Center itself is convinced that orchestras help each other. The center imports orchestras from Boston, New York, Berlin, Washington and Pittsburgh this year. "We lose more money, but have the most subscribers for this series," says Mervon Mehta, programming vice president.

Even the doubters have a role in the season. With all the personal closeness, friendly talk, informality and potent marketing, isn't the music the point? they ask. After all, the first orchestras were born and raised to meet the needs of composers and listeners who wanted new music.

Philadelphia's Orchestra has answered that question in differing ways. New (and chancy) music is costly to a budget approaching \$40 million. Eschenbach seeks a way through developing context, but also by commissioning music from Daniel Kellogg, Gerald Levinson, Bright Sheng and Jennifer Higdon, and playing unfamiliar works by Lindberg and Dutilleux, Sofia Gubaidulina, John Adams, George Walker, Michael Daugherty, Einojuhani Rautavaara and Christopher Rouse.

It's the classic push-pull. New music shapes the future; old music insures the season. New music asks for new techniques, means, even settings. The old preserves masterpieces and fully uses the gifts of present players. From diverging forces comes...evolution.

The Philadelphia Orchestra long had the burden of being the only show in town. Others could see the folly of trying to be all things to all listeners. The great repertoires of the Renaissance, the early and late baroque eras, the newest music, and music for smaller orchestras began to compete for attention. With that appeared the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia's earliest manifestations. Marc Mostovoy's small orchestra trained conservatory graduates and harbored some veteran players while testing local interest in baroque and occasional contemporary pieces.

Evolution demanded a stronger podium and management stance, and with the appointment of pianist-conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia has become central to the city's musical profile. Playing classics to fit its size – and the appropriate Perelman Theater – and finding new works as well, Solzhenitsyn is shaping an ensemble whose motto is authenticity and quality. It will begin the Mozart anniversary year with a spring program, and connect with Eschenbach's Beethoven celebration with an opening night of Beethoven in C. The seven subscription concerts – and some tours – include one commission, Bruce Adolphe's *What Dreams May Come?*

The city's music schools have long produced players to staff community orchestras. Curtis Institute students, who shunned orchestral playing in the 60s, now form an ensemble to make many large cities envious. Conductor Otto Werner Mueller and guests mix major works with commissions in concerts at Verizon Hall. It's often a first look at players who will be in the Philadelphia Orchestra, or soloists in front of it. Temple University's orchestra has gained respect for the solidity of the training and the knowledgeable guidance of Luis Biava. Players from both schools fan out to fill orchestras in the suburbs.

Economics and the hegemony of the major orchestras tended to force composers into tighter quarters. A work for 104 players may have been possible for Strauss and Mahler, but anyone writing for those forces now needs governmental appropriations or Saudi assurances to support performance. The twentieth century saw increasingly succinct works created to allude to their massive predecessors. Players have appeared who, while wearing black jerseys, are capable of navigating complexities and native musical sources unknown in earlier years. Microtones, jazz, rock and rap, and Asian tunings are part of the discourse now, and specialized groups bring all that to the new century's searching listeners.

Philadelphia is relatively rich. Network for New Music, Orchestra 2001 and Relâche have found distinctive repertoires and voices to sketch the direction composers are leading us now. These are small budget groups – \$400,000 for Orchestra 2001; under \$200,000 for Network – but their focus is so sharp that they meet audience expectations and hopes.

James Freeman founded Orchestra 2001 under the umbrella offered by Swarthmore College. Now retired, he still has Swarthmore's facilities and some funding as he builds the area's largest new music ensemble. "This year's a little lean," he says. "We have five pairs plus runouts, but by 2010, we project 10 pairs."

Freeman led his orchestra at the Salzburg Festival in August, capitalizing on his close ties with composer George Crumb. The orchestra premiered some of Crumb's rapidly expanding *American Songbook* and will do more this season. The ensemble incorporates freelance players who also appear with the Pennsylvania Ballet and Opera Company of Philadelphia. Recordings help expand the ensemble's reach, and this season will record with jazz pianist Marian McPartland and perform music by Alec Wilder.

Network for New Music rarely fields 15 players for its concerts at the Settlement Music School. Is that an orchestra? It can be, when playing Lukas Foss' *Time Cycle* or Bernard Rands' *Oboe Concertino*. Linda Reichert's ensemble plays late century classics, commissions and music that includes other disciplines.

"The audience is our focus now," she says. "It used to be we programmed music because it was so wonderful. Now we lean to the expressive side. We have a program this season called 'From hands and hearts,' and we have a poetry-based program and we did a dance project last year with all those composers writing pieces. Our new approach is successful, I think."

Relâche found its niche in jazz-based and improvised music, but it also works the rich field of philosophical music by Rzewski, Cage, Harrison, and composers whose scores look like paintings or supply only hints and images. Their history is as strong as their being is precarious, but the ensemble rises each year to enrich the musical table.

The American Composers Orchestra expands the new music scene this year. The New York ensemble will play three concerts at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Center. Managing Director Michael Rose said the Philadelphia Music Project sponsored a New York Trip two years ago. "I heard this orchestra at Carnegie Hall, and it was one of the most extraordinary experiences I've had," Rose said. "We've used the time to get funding, and now we have the orchestra for two seasons. We have programs including movement with Pilobolus, and one with electronics. At the end of the second year, we'll have a competition for Philadelphia composers, and play works of three or four finalists in open rehearsals and in concert. We'll have the orchestra again if we can get funding."

The new music niche is being served, and so is the era of orchestral beginnings. Three established groups are making their stylish way through music of the baroque and earlier eras. Period instruments first found a sponsor at the University of Pennsylvania, but then came Elissa Berardi and her husband Bruce Bekker, founders of Philomel. Their ensemble quickly declared itself serious and well-trained – well-managed, too. Seasons played in Chestnut Hill, Center City, Doylestown, and the Main Line have encouraged the growth of a real ensemble. The players honor Ben Franklin this year, helping to lead

the city's observances. Bach, Vivaldi, and Handel are the old favorites, but the ensemble has brought to life cohorts of German, Dutch, French and Italian composers and, with its lower decibel count, illuminated the art of nuance.

With Philomel rose Piffaro, Joan Kimball's ambitious project, and survivor of its first clunky name, Renaissance Wind Band. With Robert Weimkin, co-artistic director, Piffaro's more instrumental focus has encouraged theatrical events, medieval musical plays, Christmas frolics, all propelled by energized players with krumphorns, dulcimers, psalteries, recorders and more. Deutsche Grammophon took the group international. Concerts in Chestnut Hill, Center City and Wilmington carry the music of Obrecht, Schuetz, Gabrielli to their audience. Lest it all seem too serious, the Mother's Day concert is "The Call of the Wild."

Later to the scene but also internationally known, Tempesta di Mare opens its fourth season with programs in Swarthmore, St. Mark's, Trinity Church, Old St. Joseph's Church and in Princeton. Gwyn Roberts has honed her focus on her audience. Her polls found her listeners new to concerts in general, curious about instruments, drawn by lower ticket prices. "We're doing a Benjamin Franklin concert this season," she says. "Not his music, but the music he heard in Europe when he was our presence. We're growing every year," she says. "We're solidifying as an orchestra." Her ensemble now records for Chandos.

Finding that niche keeps ensembles agile. Karl Middleman, founder and conductor of the Philadelphia Classical Symphony, turned his original vision of a Mozart orchestra into a period instrument group. Then, as the cost of finding the right players unbalanced the organization, he reorganized. "We play five centuries of music now, and I try to attach music to larger issues.

"I believe it is no longer possible to play art for art's sake. You guarantee smaller audiences that way. I try to give them portals of accessibility. When we do the Shostakovich First Piano Concerto this year, I'll show film clips from early Soviet films. Shostakovich played for silent movies, and I think that may have influenced him later when he wrote music that has such contrasts and moves from comedy to tragedy."

Middleman has scheduled a young composers' program and a concert to align Chinese music with American norms. "I'm context-building," he says.

But if the specialists are working their way forward, what of the traditional orchestral base? Community orchestras thrive, giving amateurs an outlet. Smaller cities maintain orchestras through pride. In Reading, for instance, Sidney Rothstein has guided the orchestra for 30 years. His orchestra has risen to accommodate Mahler's Symphony No. 6, a work the Philadelphia Orchestra didn't attempt until the 1970s.

"When I came, we were trying to attract a young audience. We still are. Our audience is 55 years old. I think most people now aren't ready emotionally to relate to what we do until they reach that age."

Rothstein leaves after this year, but points to programs in place for six subscription pairs, summer concerts, student concerts, family programs including dinner at sponsoring restaurants. “We give a lot of thought to our programs,” he says.

The Haddonfield Symphony redefined itself to benefit from the presence of top flight music schools in the city. Once a community orchestra, the Symphony is approaching the \$1 million level, and showcases Curtis and Temple musicians. “It’s a training orchestra,” says Trevor Orthman, the executive director. “We play five subscription concerts, two children’s concerts, and one for teens. And we have teamed with Astral Artistic Services to play at the Kimmel Center, showcasing Astral’s young soloists.”

Connecting to its constituency has not been easy. The ensemble plays in Cherry Hill, Marlton and Haddonfield, and Orthman says they lack a sense of home: “We’re hoping to find a single venue.”

The orchestra has also attracted rising conductors. Alan Gilbert rose to the top international level; Daniel Hagy conducts the Syracuse Symphony, and the incumbent, Rossen Milanov, is associate conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Evolution has its cruelties. Musica 2000 died after five years of surveying music by living composers. Conductor Rosalind Erwin said succinctly, “We had a loyal following, but not enough support.”

Yet her other orchestra, the Pottstown Symphony, fulfills its role of civic icon and neighborly provider of a mix of standards and new pieces. “We do ten concerts with something for everyone, and our outreach programs get to 10,000 kids. We have just hired our first full-time manager, and we’re hoping to develop corporate sponsorships and foundation support. Our subscriptions are up.”

In Kennett Square, Conductor Mary Woodmansee Green notes how her orchestra adapts. “We’re doing one concert with 21 players,” she says. “The budget dictates it. We’ll do the *Four Seasons* with four different concertmasters.” Her fully professional orchestra plays holiday concerts at Longwood Gardens. “I speak from the podium,” she says. “I try to instill trust.”

And so the evolution goes. Composers are not convinced. Players are often frustrated. Managements struggle to balance funding with aspirations. Audiences seek accommodation between their allegiances to television, work and child rearing. But orchestras go on. They are changing shape, size, emphasis, even clothes on their way to reaching the next plateau in this fascinating evolution.

--Daniel Webster was music critic for the **Philadelphia Inquirer** from 1964 to 1999.