

It's About Time

Remarks by Jesse Rosen, President and CEO
League of American Orchestras
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Shortly after I left New York City to become general manager of the Seattle Symphony, the Symphony held a board and senior-staff retreat. The chairman, Ron Woodward, who was president of the Boeing Commercial Airplane Group, said something that shocked me. In framing the discussion, Ron made the observation that America once looked from its eastern seaboard across the Atlantic to Europe for its connection to commerce, to culture, and to heritage. But today, he said (this was 1996), America looks from the shores of the Pacific, with its independent and innovative spirit, to face towards Asia.

Since I am a born and bred New Yorker, perhaps you can see why I found Ron's relocation of America's center of gravity so disturbing. When I recovered from my shock, I realized I had just heard something as profound as it was simple: time and place really matter. And when I imagined the Seattle Symphony through these new lenses, worlds of possibility opened up.

Perhaps this "aha" moment was not only about my New York centrism. Orchestras dwell more in the world of timelessness than timeliness. We think of our repertoire as "for the ages," as indeed, much of it is, and the orchestral ensemble itself has proven to be so durable that it has barely changed in 200 years. It's no wonder that time and place have not always been in the forefront of our thinking.

I would like to spend the next few minutes underscoring just a few of the reasons why time and place should be important considerations for orchestras today: those reasons have to do with programming, finances, diversity, and artistry.

Let's start with programming. Earlier this year Sarah Lutman, former CEO of The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, asked in her blog, "How would music, people, land, and culture be served if orchestras everywhere...were to work harder to be not just *what they are* but *where they are*?" Some orchestras have been creating extraordinary answers to this question.

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The Black Hills of South Dakota, bloodied by the Great Sioux War, is just one of the sites for the extraordinary partnership between musicians of the South Dakota Symphony and musicians of the Lakota tribe. The Erie Canal, whose waters brought life to the cities of western New York, will be the venue for the Albany Symphony's "Rising Waters" concerts, featuring new works commissioned for the canal towns of Schenectady, Utica, and Rome. Boasting five national parks, Utah is America's national parks capital. The Mighty Five, as they are called, include Zion, Bryce Canyon, Arches, Canyon Lands, and Capitol Reef. Amidst the red rocks, sandstone spires, towering cliffs, and deep canyons, the Utah Symphony will perform in each park this summer with programs designed to complement the grandeur of Utah's extraordinary landscape.

These performances, and many others like them, reveal creativity emerging from a deep sense of place. Along with the world-wide acclaim our orchestras enjoy for their virtuosity, we can add productions like these that make America's orchestras uniquely American. As Sarah Lutman puts it: "Hold your place and its people dear. Embrace the deep connections that nourish vitality and satisfaction, that capture and reflect the great intelligence of nature itself. Be where you are."

Now let's talk about finances for a moment. Having a strong sense of place also means realizing that the challenges and opportunities in your local market are at least as important, if not more so, than benchmarks compared to orchestras in other communities. Simply being in the same budget category as other orchestras does not in itself establish a sufficient basis for comparison. Why? Because local market dynamics such as the presence of other performing arts organizations, the size of the population, community wealth, demographic trends, and countless other factors all are essential to forming a more complete and accurate way to assess your environment and your relationship with peer organizations.

Here's a cautionary illustration of this point. It was relayed to me by the board of the Canton Symphony Orchestra in Ohio during my recent visit there. About ten years ago the symphony decided they needed a new concert hall, following the path of quite a few other performing arts organizations. They set about to raise tens of millions of dollars for the project. Board member Bob Leibensperger was spearheading the campaign when a friend from out of town said, "Are you sure you really want to raise all that money? And even if you do, is it there in your community? And can you afford to operate a new hall? And oh, by the way, what will you do with it on the other 320 nights that you are not using it?"

That was enough to make Bob and his fellow board members think twice. Instead of a new hall, they chose to make acoustical improvements in their current hall. They built ancillary spaces adjacent to it that provided additional lobby space, desperately needed office space for staff and amenities for musicians, and a multipurpose room for educational and performance activity. This was accomplished through a successful \$5 million campaign and on May 19—just three weeks ago—the Zimmerman Symphony Center opened to great acclaim.

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For any of you who don't know, Gerhardt Zimmerman has been the orchestra's remarkable music director for 33 years! The Canton Symphony demonstrated the wisdom to set their sights clearly on what their *local* philanthropy and audience could support, not on what they saw other orchestras doing.

If you are not convinced of their wisdom, check out last year's report "Set in Stone" from the University of Chicago's [Cultural Policy Center](#). The report cites failure to consider local capacity— that is, the underestimation of operating costs and overestimation of revenue—as the leading cause of the many failed arts building projects between 1994 and 2008.

So we see how a sense of place really matters for orchestras today. What about time? An unmistakable feature of this moment in America is the movement towards a majority minority population. I see organizations and entire sectors adapting to this change as they diversify their workforces. Whether walking the corridors of Congress, meeting with our peer arts organizations, or joining with our partners across the non-profit sector, I experience the richness of working with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. But not so much in orchestras. I think we value diversity, but orchestra leaders must prioritize diversity and inclusion work if we are to make any real progress. Very little of import happens in organizations without the visible commitment of leadership. Board and executive staff must own and lead this work together with their dedicated education and community-engagement staff and volunteers.

But we can look to some successes. Last week, while participating in the League's Diversity Work Group, I was amazed to hear Kathy Finley from the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra report that 36% of the predominantly black audience from their Classical Roots concerts have migrated to other CSO concerts. This hard-won success goes back to 2001 in the aftermath of the Cincinnati riots sparked by the shooting of a 19-year-old African American by a police officer. In a gesture of community healing, the orchestra gave its first performance in an African-American church. Through sustained and relentless relationship building since 2001, the CSO has engaged the clergy, created a chorus representing 50 African-American churches, and has secured sponsorships from 38 minority business entrepreneurs. It takes this kind of commitment. So to you CEOs, and board and musician leaders: call Kathy, learn from each other, and join the League's Diversity Work Group. Time is passing!

This moment in time, 2014, is also the year that saw the end of the longest lockout on record. As I've said elsewhere, we can debate who was more at fault for this tragedy. But ultimately, this was an institutional failure. There is only *one* Minnesota Orchestra, and it includes the musicians, staff, and board—people whose lives and livelihoods are totally interdependent. They were unable to communicate effectively, trust one another, and solve their shared problems.

There are many important conversations to have and lessons to draw from the recent spate of work stoppages. For now I would like to offer one promising way forward, which I saw in Detroit. Everyone in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra has a t-shirt that says "One DSO." The orchestra gave them out to honor

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the way that their board, staff, and musicians came together following the six-month strike. This shift in mindset, the recognition that they are all part of one organization—not two or three—was a critical step forward in their rebirth. And the announcement of their most recent contract settlement six months early gives testimony to the amazing resilience of the DSO, and to what is possible when effective relationships can be built.

As Claire Chase so vividly demonstrated in Wednesday's keynote address, this is also the time of the entrepreneurial musician. Her message hardly needs reinforcing. But let's take a moment to notice, and to continue to support the entrepreneurs already playing in our orchestras, from the videographers creating content for their orchestras' websites to the ambassadors building new community relationships. And consider this: in the last two years, five musicians have become CEOs of the orchestras in which they played, and two of those musicians had chaired their orchestras' negotiating committees. That should tell us something about the breadth of talent in our orchestras. For at least these five musician/managers, there was a desire to put themselves, literally, in another's shoes. That's an example we could all follow.

So, to sum up....my message today is simple:

- Be the orchestra *of* and *for* your community, in *this* time, and in *your* place.
- Invest now in building the relationships necessary to be *one* organization.
- And it's time to unleash the full range of creativity and talent of *all* the people in our orchestras.

I'd like to close with these remarks offered by Leslie Chihuly, chair of the Seattle Symphony board, from the stage of Carnegie Hall during the orchestra's recent Spring for Music performance.

Leslie said,

"Seattle's a special town, and we believe that the orchestra should really be reflective of the city in which we live, and so we have opportunities to do things a little bit differently. We want to reflect the creativity and the innovation and the spirit of adventure that defines the Northwest. After all, we're the city where Boeing engineers helped define air travel, Amazon and Microsoft have changed the way we use technology, and Starbucks has popularized coffee culture. So we're turning it upside down and inside out. We're performing in a lot of alternative environments, with different kinds of concert formats, and we're having so much fun re-thinking what the orchestra can be for Seattle."

And if you want to sample what Leslie is talking about, hear the Seattle Symphony tonight in Benaroya Hall at their Sonic Evolution concert.

Thank you.