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## Can Symphonic Music Become Popular Music? (And Other Outrageous Questions)

by

William L. Cahn



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### **Symphony Orchestra Institute**

1618 Orrington Avenue, Suite 318

Evanston, IL 60201

Tel: 847.475.5001 Fax: 847.475.2460

e-mail: [information@soi.org](mailto:information@soi.org)

[www.soi.org](http://www.soi.org)

### ***Can Symphonic Music Become Popular Music? (And Other Outrageous Questions)***

**T**his essay opens with an exploration of the evolution of musical styles. Author Bill Cahn asserts that a mingling of styles and forms has occurred throughout musical history, but the pace of assimilation is now taking place with "lightning speed."

As he begins to answer the question posed by the title of the essay, Cahn explores definitions of "popular" music, sharing numerous examples of film scores which have successfully presented orchestral music to broad audiences.

#### **Orthodoxy and a Changing Environment**

Suggesting that orchestras need to reconnect with contemporary American culture, Cahn next addresses "orthodox" and "unorthodox" forms of presentation, arguing that hierarchical concepts (e.g., high art versus low art) are no longer relevant. He points out that "popular music" regularly reconsiders its relationship with its markets, and makes the case that symphonic music must do the same if it is to survive.

Rejecting the notion that rethinking the presentation of symphonic music will lead to a lowest-common-denominator outcome, Cahn concludes his essay by outlining four areas in which he encourages professional musicians, orchestra managers, and board members to improve their skills in order to better relate to "common" people.

## Can Symphonic Music Become Popular Music? (And Other Outrageous Questions)

**W**e are living in a time of cultural revolution that is taking place with lightning speed and worldwide scope. Classical musicians in India perform thousand-year-old compositions using digital sampling keyboards; tribal musicians in South Africa, Southeast Asia, and Australia embrace the musical forms and electronic instruments of North American pop music, while such pop musicians as Paul Simon and chamber music ensembles in Europe and North America program Brazilian, West African, and Indonesian compositional forms and styles. North American symphony orchestras devote substantial portions of their seasons to music that in the past was associated with Broadway, New Orleans, Nashville, or Las Vegas. Pop recording stars,—for example, Elvis Costello,—include string quartets in their music. What in the world is going on?

*“We are living in a time of cultural revolution that is taking place with lightning speed and worldwide scope.”*

This essay is derived from a lecture, “All Music is Popular Music,” which I presented at the symposium, Popular Music and the Canon: Old Boundaries Reconsidered, held at the Eastman School of Music on September 28, 1996. My self-imposed challenge was to make connections between the world of popular music and the world of symphonic music. The premise of the lecture was that the old musical boundaries and definitions ought to be reconsidered, because in many ways, they have either changed radically or they no longer exist. The ability to recognize and even embrace these changes in thinking could well result in the unfolding of new opportunities for symphonic music to connect with people’s lives.

### The Process of Assimilation

The tearing down of labels and distinctions, and the increasing crossover of styles are significant trends in music today, and are evident in all musical forms, including symphonic music. This mingling of styles and forms is not new; it has occurred throughout history. Seven hundred years ago, European crusaders returned from their wars in the Middle East with musical instruments from

Arabia and Persia. These instruments found their way into all genres of European music. Mozart and Beethoven embraced Turkish instruments and sounds. It was not by coincidence that Debussy composed whole-tone scales in his music shortly after attending the Paris Exposition, at which an Indonesian gamelan orchestra performed.

The process of connecting and assimilating has existed since music was first created, but what is new is the increased speed with which assimilation is taking place. The removal of genre barriers has been accelerated by, among other things, an electronic revolution and worldwide instantaneous communications. Easy access to the world's music through film, television, compact discs, and computers in this new era of "net surfing" makes it possible and desirable for listeners to be exposed to and to seek diversity—to sample one thing and then go on to the next. Listeners may be less willing to pitch their tents in one place to listen to an entire program within the confines of a single genre. Artists, too, seek greater diversity in content. This process is happening within all musical styles.

***"The process of connecting and assimilating has existed since music was first created, but what is new is the increased speed with which assimilation is taking place."***

In the July 1996 issue of *Symphony Magazine*, Fred Miller, a Bostonian specializing in change management, is quoted as saying that Baby Boomers have an "options mentality," in which they demand choices. "That's why you're seeing so many short and varied [symphony] subscription series—the 'six-pack' or sampler strategy that has strengthened ticket sales. . . . According to Miller, the next boundary [for orchestras] to push is moving from the all-symphonic series to one that would cross arts boundaries, mixing and matching an orchestra performance with a movie, a dance event, maybe even sports. . . . Offer them a six-pack that's not all Coke."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the suggestion is that symphony orchestras embrace marketing approaches which previously have been considered the province of that "other" music—popular music. Why? Because new economic pressures are gnawing away at the insulation that traditionally surrounds nonprofit musical institutions. As the system of patronage (private and government) for symphony orchestras, inherited from European models, struggles to keep up with ever increasing costs, and as patrons (private and corporate) add more and more conditions to their gifts, performing artists and institutions are forced to think more about marketing just to hold their ground in their host communities. An American model for symphony orchestras has emerged in which the ability to reach the broadest possible audience holds increased importance.

## What Is Popular Music?

In trying to explore connections between popular music and symphonic music in a fresh way, one must first ask a fundamental question: What is popular music?

The dictionary defines the word “popular” as an adjective meaning “suitable for the common people.” Popular music is therefore, by definition, “music suitable for the common people.” This begs some provocative questions: Who are the “common” people? Who is an “uncommon” person? Does the term “popular music” imply that it is not suitable for uncommon people? Is some music (for example, symphonic music) unsuitable for common people?

*“Popular music is . . . , by definition, ‘music suitable for the common people.’ ”*

The commercial marketplace has, for many years, acknowledged that any kind of music, including symphonic music, can be presented to the common people, provided that some attention is given to the manner of presentation. This assertion may seem untrue to those insulated from the marketplace, but it is only necessary to glance in the direction of Hollywood to find plentiful examples of a mode of presentation that works. If György Ligeti’s *Atmosphères*, an undeniably challenging modernist composition, can be so successfully woven into the fabric of Stanley Kubrick’s monumental film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, can there be any music that would not be suitable for the general public to hear? It has been more than a half century since Leopold Stokowski, under the hostile scrutiny of critics and skeptics, collaborated with Walt Disney on *Fantasia*, a film that had a significant impact on generations of “common” listeners. After all, the motion picture is the central art form of our age. It unites the visual and performing arts, including symphonic music, into a significant whole precisely in the manner envisioned by Richard Wagner in his operas more than a century ago.

“Movie Music is Today’s Mighty Market.”<sup>2</sup> This headline appeared in an Associated Press article dated July 12, 1998. The thrust of the article is that such recent orchestral film scores as *X-Files*, which used an 85-piece orchestra, and *Titanic*, which sold more than 25 million discs worldwide, have been hugely successful in the marketplace.

Another headline, from *The Wall Street Journal* on April 17, 1998, makes the identical point. The headline reads, “‘Titanic’ Floats Sony Classical.” The article continues, “. . . the words ‘movie music’ are pronounced with a sneer in the classical music world, as if they meant ‘gaudy, cheap, and far too popular.’ Meanwhile, though, a movie score has given Mr. [Peter] Gelb [the president of Sony Classical records] a commercial triumph. He snagged the *Titanic* soundtrack for his label, and watched it go No. 1 on the pop album chart, win an Oscar, and become the top selling soundtrack ever. All this has classical music people reeling.”<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly this article also refers to the new crossover trend as “corporate synergy.” “‘Classical’, [Mel Ilberman, the chairman of Sony Classical says] ‘can now become a resource for all our music company.’ Take, for instance, Michael Boulton, who’s signed to one of Sony’s pop labels; when he wanted to sing opera, Sony Classical was there for him. Something similar is springing up at Sony’s rival, Polygram, where Elvis Costello, the brainy rocker, signed a contract covering the company’s pop, jazz, and classical record labels, so his projects can be marketed wherever they might find an audience.”<sup>4</sup>

*“Can symphony orchestras provide what ‘people are craving’? Of course they can. But to succeed, they may need more than just 19th century forms of presentation.”*

Where does this lead in the article? It leads to provocative questions. “Albert Imperato, who runs three classical labels for Polygram . . . thinks ‘core’ classics still might sell—but, he says, they need to be marketed in modern ways the classical music business doesn’t know about. So in a way he’s just as radical as Peter Gelb. . . . Imagine what might happen when the pipeline that brought James Horner [the composer of *Titanic*] to Sony Classical starts to flow the other way. . . . Suppose, someday, that somebody with orthodox classical credentials writes deeply moving music for a film, profound in its own right, that makes the impact of *Titanic*. . . . Wouldn’t this be the major, more-than-musical event that classical composers ought to long for? Wouldn’t it start, at least, to reconnect them with American culture?”<sup>5</sup>

The Associated Press article of July 12 concurs: “*Titanic* really tapped into people’s desire for emotional connection. People are craving emotional, instrumental music.”<sup>6</sup> Common people—the mass market and American culture—are the subjects of this discussion. Can symphony orchestras provide what “people are craving”? Of course they can. But to succeed, they may need more than just 19th century forms of presentation.

The point here is not that symphony orchestras should all be making film scores. Rather, the point is that common people can embrace symphonic music, and symphony orchestras should consider finding ways—orthodox and unorthodox—to present their music to audiences to the end of touching the lives of more listeners—to reconnect the orchestras with American culture.

## **Orthodoxy Revisited**

The orthodox form of presentation (European model; 19th century) is the formal symphonic program, comprised of the standard classics and presented in a concert hall with all of the attendant customs and etiquette. This model is still quite relevant to a significant number of listeners, and I do not suggest that it be abandoned. However, I do propose that other models also be used in order to broaden the base of support for symphony orchestras. The product (symphonic music) itself is very important, but it is also important in a market-driven model

to give attention to packaging and distribution. Of course, this has already happened to a certain extent (family concerts, lecture concerts, pops concerts).

Any form of presentation other than the orthodox might be labeled as “unorthodox” (American model; 20th century). In the growing market consciousness American orchestras need in order to face their economic challenges, it is essential that the goal of unorthodox programming not be hierarchical—to make (common) people love classical music more than they love any other kind of music—but rather more consistent with the options paradigm—to make symphonic music a part of the mix of musics that enrich the lives of (common) people.

***“Such hierarchical concepts as high art (classical music) and low art (pop music) are not relevant in an options-mentality environment.”***

Such hierarchical concepts as high art (classical music) and low art (pop music) are not relevant in an options-mentality environment. The kind of hierarchical thinking that has permeated Western art (i.e., Western art is deeper than or superior to non-Western or primitive art) is rejected in this new culture; one art form is not considered a priori to be superior to any other art form, but rather different—different in the way “beautiful” is conceived and pursued. The question is not whether low art is diminishing high art. Nothing is being diminished other than a limiting mode of thought. The question is whether art (of whatever kind) can be relevant to diverse tastes?

The six-pack form of presentation Miller proposes is one unorthodox way to bring symphonic music to listeners who might be uncomfortable with the European model. This idea for diversification is in the context of a subscription series of events, some musical and some not musical at all. But the idea of diversification can be taken further by using it within the context of a single unorthodox program. In fact, such a model worked very well for an earlier generation of audiences.

The Eastman Theatre booklet for July 12, 1925, lists the following program. The “Festival Overture” by Edward Lassen was performed by the Eastman Theatre Orchestra. This was followed by “Selections from Aida” performed on organ, and then by the Eastman Theatre Jazz Trio playing three arrangements of popular songs. Next on the program was a staged play, *DeClasse*, followed by a silent film comedy accompanied by live orchestral music, classical and popular.<sup>7</sup>

This is an example of orchestral music, presented in an eclectic program, that was very successful with audiences in its day. The Eastman Theatre Orchestra’s supporters then openly asserted that in presenting symphonic music alongside the finest motion pictures, they hoped the general public would develop an appreciation for the music. The intent of this form of presentation also was to attain the broadest appeal possible in the context of a single live performance program, a high priority in any market-driven model.

This eclecticism in programming was practiced prior to the end of the Second World War, until factors such as the general postwar wealth in America, combined with great improvements in public education, made possible a resurgence of the European patronage model. Other factors affecting this resurgence included network radio broadcasts of symphonic music and the emergence of a classical music record industry in high fidelity recordings. These conditions served to widen the separation between classical and popular tastes in music.

By the 1970s, a distinct popular music genre, which had the following characteristics, was fully developed:

- ◆ It was market driven (there was sufficient market demand to support it commercially).
- ◆ The primary delivery system or medium was electronic, via radio, recordings, and videos, supported by live concerts. The personality of the performer was a key factor in marketability.
- ◆ The music was based on a combination of lyrics and melody in compositions that were relatively short (three to five minutes) and formulaic in rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic construction.

These are the traits of the popular music that became so distasteful to a classical music world which was cushioned in the blanket of European model patronage.

### **A Changing Environment**

But today, a new model of popular music has increasingly become apparent in the marketplace. It is a musical genre that includes elements which in the past were considered suitable only for nonpopular musical styles. For example, individual compositions may be up to 10 minutes or more in length, without lyrics, or using ideas that are not formulaic. Orchestral instruments might be used in contrast or in addition to the standard electronic keyboards and guitars. Additionally, since the 1970s, popular music has participated in the accelerating process of merging the distinct popular styles of folk, rock, and country musics, and even some elements of classical music, because of artists' and record companies' economic desire to broaden their markets. But this new popular music is still very market-driven; the personality of the performer is still very important; the primary delivery system is still electronic supported by live performances.

By contrast, in the nonprofit music sector, it wasn't until the late 1980s that symphony orchestras generally began to feel a squeezing fiscal vise—with an increasing rate of cost growth on one side, and a declining rate of patronage income growth on the other side. Furthermore, leisure time diminished and competition for the time available increased in the marketplace, resulting in changes in classical music tastes. A July 1996 column in *InTune Magazine* reads: "Public tastes have shifted—radically! In a sense, there is no longer 'a classical



## Orchestra X

In the September/October 1998 issue of *Strings*, Susan Barbieri reports on an enterprising orchestral organization in Houston, Texas. Orchestra X functions under the leadership and baton of John Axelrod. With permission from *Strings*, we reprint here several excerpts from that article.

The Orchestra X approach encourages audience participation in settings such as cafés, arena theaters, and coffeehouses. Axelrod says his audiences appreciate that there are players in the orchestra who are their age. The 60-member orchestra is made up of a multicultural group of young players, mostly from Rice University and the University of Houston music schools, and the average age is 25. . . . These musicians look a lot like their desired audience.

The 32-year-old Axelrod . . . has no beef with standard material, only with the way in which classical music is performed. In a fast-forward, double-click, MTV age, classical music has to work harder to attract young people's attention and keep it. And while it's nice that so many American orchestras do school outreach, that outreach may not stick with the kids as they grow into their teens and 20s.

When Axelrod wrote a business plan for Orchestra X in 1997, he included a market survey that turned up interesting data about how young people feel about classical music. . . . The most interesting [comment by respondents was]: "Whether we were there or not, it wouldn't have any impact on the quality of the performance."

This is a generation of kids who need to be able to clap along with the rhythm, sing, or feel an energy exchange between themselves and the performers, Axelrod says.

He notes that larger orchestras can't risk alienating older subscribers by doing what needs to be done to appeal to younger ones. Orchestra X can take risks with its performances because . . . it has no umbrella organization putting constraints on its repertoire or the way it is presented. Orchestra X has a 15-member board of directors, its own charter, bylaws, and financial support, and its own collective bargaining agreement with the musicians' union.

Susan Barbieri is a violin student, editor, and writer for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. *Strings* is published eight times a year by String Letter Publishing in San Rafael, California.

public'. It has splintered. There are people, believe it or not, who like and will buy obscure religious music, or modern music—even the most extreme sorts of avant-garde music.”<sup>8</sup>

Added to this expansion of classical music tastes was a substantial change in public education. Lynne Cheney, the former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, said at a public forum in Vail, Colorado, in June 1996, “The link between education and participation [in the arts] is becoming weaker.”<sup>9</sup> Few people today would deny that the primary source of information for children (and for most adults) about the arts is now the public electronic media and not the public schools.

*“The common person (... almost everyone who is not a professional musician) today hears music almost exclusively via electric loud-speakers...”*

The common person (meaning in this case almost everyone who is not a professional musician) today hears music almost exclusively via electric loudspeakers—those found in radios, television sets, home stereo systems, elevators, shopping malls, movie theaters, Walkman® earphones, and computers. The experience of a live performance is, by comparison, relatively rare for most people.

In this environment the best survival option available to the nonprofits is to take a fresh look at their relationships with their markets, something which happens regularly in popular music as a matter of course. As long ago as 1987, the president of the American Symphony Orchestra League said that, “Symphony orchestras must begin to act like businesses. Board members, not conductors, ought to

set artistic policy, not just in the hiring of conductors but also in day-to-day operations.”<sup>10</sup> What this statement really says is that symphony orchestras must become more suitable to the common people. This requires some changes in thinking by institutions such as symphony orchestras and conservatories, as well as by individual professional musicians and teachers.

## **Taking Symphonic Music to the Common People**

To return once more to the original question: What in the world is going on? The short answer is that, in general, music in all its forms is going to the common people. How can symphonic music go to the common people? Some creativity in the manner of presenting symphonic music will help. The risks of unorthodox programming need not be too large. It is almost impossible to conceive of a program of orchestral music in which some classical music could not be included. Pops concerts and theme concerts can certainly include classical works that relate to the program or theme. Arthur Fiedler of the Boston Pops was a master at this kind of programming, the goal being to insure that symphonic music is “fixed in the mix” of musics that are presented.

Musicians and business executives associated with popular music have also long recognized that a live performance of music must have something more to offer an audience than can be experienced by simply listening to a recording. This awareness gave rise to the rock show genre, with its lighting, special effects, and theatrical perspectives, thereby recognizing that the way in which the music is presented—its packaging—is an important part of the experience of a live performance. Some form of theatrical presentation is now regularly incorporated into virtually all types of live performances of music, because audiences now expect to be engaged visually at a live musical performance. This trend will continue to develop. The main challenge for live performers (such as symphony orchestras) will be to differentiate the experience of hearing live music from that of hearing virtually perfect, recorded music in the comfort and safety of one's own home.

*“The main challenge for live performers (such as symphony orchestras) will be to differentiate the experience of hearing live music from that of hearing virtually perfect, recorded music in the comfort and safety of one's own home.”*

Speaking at the National Press Club in 1987, actor John Houseman said, “The deluge of music in the environment must be taken into account by artists and institutions; audiences want hits.”<sup>11</sup> This is another trend that is likely to continue as classical music audiences, just as popular music audiences, increasingly prefer well-known, highly recognized artists, while the struggle of lesser-known artists for access to audiences becomes more intense.

In this environment, resources (money and time) will flow to the top, in the direction of the most recognized and away from the least recognized at the bottom. The New York Philharmonic will be increasingly more likely to have access to resources (especially via electronic media) than will the middle-American orchestras. The same holds true for museums, opera companies, jazz artists, performing ensembles, and individuals. As the well-known attract bigger slices of the resource pie, there will be increasing competition among the growing numbers of lesser-knowns for the smaller remaining resources. The challenge here is for the lesser-known artists and organizations to find creative ways to achieve recognition in the marketplace. In other words, marketing, advertising, and promotion will increase in importance, a situation which has been true in popular music for a long time.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all for those who care about symphonic music will be to open up to the changes that are occurring and, instead of fearing them, take advantage of them. In this attempt to rethink concepts of symphonic and popular music, I certainly do not advocate a lowering of standards for the appreciation of any existing musical style. A lowest-common-denominator mentality is not the goal. This will certainly be very difficult to comprehend for those who have a vested interest (economic or psychological) in the traditional

European patronage model of the symphony orchestra to the exclusion of any other model. The operative principle here is that the closing of minds constitutes a lowering of standards.

Rather, a raising of standards is the goal, by opening minds and by creating conditions under which the preciousness of music in all its forms can be preserved, appreciated, and made accessible to common listeners. Such a raising of standards is essential for the long-term well-being of the conservatories, symphony orchestras, jazz groups, and chamber ensembles that we all cherish. The time is upon us to remove artificial boundaries if they limit our thinking.

For professional musicians, orchestra managers, and orchestra boards, an additional challenge is embedded in the American (market) model: they must understand which skills (musical and business) will be necessary for them to effectively communicate their joy in presenting music to the common listener, and then they must acquire them. There are at least four types of skills that would be very beneficial for orchestras, on an organization-wide scope, to embrace:

- ◆ Leadership skills: presenting a positive and supportive attitude to others.
- ◆ Listening skills: the ability to assess the effect of one's actions on others—including audiences, colleagues, and supporters—by asking them the right questions and listening to what they say. This is marketing.
- ◆ Public speaking skills and advocacy for music. This is promotion.
- ◆ Financial skills: the basic ability to understand and use budgeting, accounting, and financial analysis. This is financial management.

Skills such as these could be developed through a structure of annual or semiannual paid service workshops presented by knowledgeable educators and facilitators. Participation by musicians, orchestra staff, and board members should broaden perspectives and encourage the cooperative thinking that will be necessary to make important decisions about the ways in which orchestras will relate to common people—their growing market.

In summary, the proposition that symphonic music and popular music share much in common is based on the assertion that all musicians and music institutions today, regardless of their focus on any particular musical form, face the same fundamental challenge: how to be relevant to the lives of common people.

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William L. Cahn is a member of the NEXUS percussion group. He was principal percussionist in the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra from 1968 to 1995, and currently serves on that orchestra's board of directors. He holds his B.M. cum laude from Eastman School of Music.

**Notes**

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- <sup>3</sup> Sandow, Greg. 1998. 'Titanic' Floats Sony Classical. *The Wall Street Journal* (April 17): A-12.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
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