

# THE COMMODITIZATION OF ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS

By Michael Drapkin

In his autobiographical book of essays *The Irrepressible Musings of a Clarinet Addict* by the late Boston Symphony clarinetist Rosario Mazzeo, he describes being invited to the home of conductor Serge Koussevitzky. The maestro had heard that he was a fine Boston-area clarinetist, and wanted to hear him play. Mazzeo went to play for him, and at the conclusion was offered employment in the Boston Symphony – a position he was to hold for many decades.<sup>1</sup>

The days of a conductor identifying and arbitrarily hiring an orchestra musician on the spot, as well as summarily firing them, are long gone, as collective bargaining over the years has eliminated this system of engaging or dismissing musicians in orchestras that offer multiweek contractual employment. While musicians can still be dismissed, the process of doing so has become much more onerous, and this has virtually eliminated the ability of the conductor to summarily fire someone solely because they don't like him or her, or because they have identified a better player. The opportunity to upgrade to better players customarily only comes when players, leave, retire or die.

However, a case can be made that this security is a double-edged sword, and can be linked to the downslide of full time full year orchestras in America and has caused orchestra musicians to lose a great deal of control over their futures.

In the excellent book *Different: Escaping the Competitive Herd* by Harvard Business School professor Youngme Moon, the author states, “a rehearsal will almost always produce competence, it will almost always produce a kind of automaticity, too. There is a reason why so many educators rail against rote learning, and it is that they know it can have the self-defeating effect of promoting a kind of mindlessness. Once we overlearn something, we cease to know it anymore at all.”<sup>2</sup>

What Professor Moon is referring to concerns the education of business school students and an indictment of the business world, asserting that business professionals have “become so practiced in a particular way of doing things that they appear to have forgotten the point of it all – which is to create meaningful and compelling product offerings for people like you and me.” This indictment of business school education and the business world can also be applied to orchestra musician education and the approach that many of them carry into their professional careers.

The commonly used NASM<sup>3</sup>-approved curriculum takes aspiring music students through pretty much the same curriculum that has been used for many decades. Students are taught the same things the same way no matter what school they attend – weekly lessons with the teacher/mentor, ensemble experience, and basics in music history and theory, etc. Every year, aspiring orchestra musicians must

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<sup>1</sup> Rosario Mazzeo: *The Irrepressible Musings of a Clarinet Addict*: Self-published; Distributed by the National Music Museum, Vermillion, SD., P. 21

<sup>2</sup> Youngme Moon: *Different: Escaping the Competitive Herd*: Crown Business, P. ix.

<sup>3</sup> NASM: National Association of Schools of Music – a national accrediting agency for schools of music, founded in 1924.

perform before a faculty jury in order to be advanced to the next year and/or graduate. At this jury, students perform solo pieces and orchestral excerpts. Here begins the “mindlessness” cycle that Professor Moon describes. Students are expected to perform these excerpts the same way that most professionals perform them, irrespective of whether they will ever actually have the opportunity to perform these excerpts in an orchestra. Soloistic performance of these excerpts is discouraged, as individualism is discouraged in symphony orchestras.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, there are 12-14,000 music performance majors graduating from our colleges of music every year playing things pretty much the same way, largely due to this attestation system of teacher/mentor and jury. The only substantive difference ends up being how well they can reproduce these pieces of music according to these expectations. Case in point, in the spring of 1982, as an aspiring orchestra clarinetist, I competed in six auditions for positions with major orchestras and reached the final round in five of them, culminating with being awarded a job with the now defunct Honolulu Symphony. In hindsight, I wasn’t successful by being different; rather I was rewarded for my skills at sameness. Sameness? I was able to methodically obtain serious consideration for these jobs by virtue of being better at being the *same* as other professional orchestra musicians – sounding the way they did, and the way that the audition committees expected me to sound. After that, it was luck of the draw and whether they were buying what I was selling on that particular day, and I eventually prevailed. Did that mean that I was a great solo artist among the orchestra clarinetists auditioning in the country? Hardly, but there was no question that I was better at sameness than most of the other clarinetists that were taking orchestra auditions. Outstanding sameness rewards you with an orchestra job, and individuality gets you eliminated.

Here is a case of what happens when you are different. My lifelong friend and colleague, John Bruce Yeh, has held the position of Assistant Principal Clarinetist with the Chicago Symphony for many years. Yeh, in my opinion as well as the opinion of many reviewers<sup>5</sup>, is a rare and beautiful musician that plays with a distinctive style reminiscent of the late great Boston Symphony Principal Clarinetist Harold Wright. However, four times in recent years the Principal Clarinetist of that august organization has either retired or moved to another orchestra. Each time, Yeh has been tapped to fill the Principal Clarinet chair on a temporary basis, ironically filling in as Principal longer than some of their Principal Clarinet appointees held their jobs! He has also been asked to fill in as Principal Clarinetist of the Philadelphia orchestra, another leading American orchestra. While he is clearly qualified to fill these leadership positions, the Chicago Symphony audition committee tasked with permanently filling their Principal Clarinet position has passed him over each time. My personal opinion is no less counterintuitive: given the institutionalized “sameness” taught in our colleges of music, Yeh is too soloistic and expressive a player to be Principal Clarinetist of the Chicago Symphony. Like the joke about a camel being a horse designed by a committee, when you are deciding art by committee, somebody is bound to not like your style, and this has led to institutionalized blandness in our leading orchestras,

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to distinguish excellence, which is encouraged, from soloistic behavior that causes individuals to stick out of an orchestra with 50 – 120 members.

<sup>5</sup> Chicago Classical Review: “Tilson Thomas, CSO deliver a vital and eloquent Mahler 9,” 9<sup>th</sup> paragraph.  
<http://chicagoclassicalreview.com/2013/11/tilson-thomas-cso-deliver-a-vital-and-eloquent-mahler-9/>

Chicago included. The result is orchestras staffed with players that have beautiful tones, fine technical ability, but are musically bankrupt. Therefore, the “John Yeh Effect” avers that if you develop a distinctive and passionate style, forget becoming a principal orchestra musician. You won’t get hired. As I conjectured in my essay, *The Rise of the Industrial Clarinetist*<sup>6</sup>, I suspect that Harold Wright probably wouldn’t get hired in a major orchestra today. He would also fail when it comes to “sameness.”

Another huge lack among orchestra musicians is in the area of leadership. There is nothing in the music curriculum that teaches or develops leadership. On the contrary, orchestral musicians are taught what I call “followership.” They are explicitly taught to follow the conductor and blend in from the very first time they set foot in an ensemble. They are rewarded based on how well they follow, and castigated by the conductor for sticking out of the herd. By the time orchestral musicians graduate from college, they are experts at followership, and this mindset becomes the basis for their relationship with their employers – orchestras – resulting in many of them believing that their only responsibility to the organization is to show up and play their individual part, which is why so many of them are taken aback when others, particularly orchestra administrators, make decisions for them regarding their salary, season length, retirement package and working conditions.

Some may assert that conductors are the natural leaders of orchestras, but I would take exception to that proposition: conductors are micromanagers, not leaders. Their role affords them ability to tell every musician individually in the orchestra exactly how to do their job, irrespective of whether the conductor is qualified to do so, and it is rare that conductors are better than the collective orchestra musicians whom they conduct. By definition, that makes them micromanagers, not leaders, and micromanagement is considered to have a negative connotation.<sup>7</sup>

The discussion of leadership among orchestra musicians is germane to this examination of the decline of symphony orchestras and the waning influence that orchestra musicians have in determining their future, despite their unionization and committees. Symphony orchestras desperately need leadership to dig them out of the quicksand of irrelevance in our society, and given the followership that orchestra musicians are taught, unfortunately leadership doesn’t seem to be coming from the orchestra dressing room. Instead, most orchestra musicians continue to behave as if it was the 1950’s – a time when Heifetz and Bernstein were household names and musicians were merely obligated to show up to rehearsals and performances, and the vulgar idea of selling their art to a diminishing audience was not their problem. Instead, fiscal challenges in their orchestras are not being met with solutions and a circling of wagons collectively among administrators and musicians, but with labor unrest, strikes and a vilification of whomever the current executive director and board happen to be. The usual expectation from the musicians is that those parts of the organization only exist to raise more money in order to pay the orchestra musicians higher salaries, instead of actively participating with them as partners in the mutual growth and health of the overall organization. Hence you have protracted dysfunction as was

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Drapkin: *The Rise of the Industrial Clarinetist*, published in the Journal of the International Clarinet Association “The Clarinet”, Volume 35, No. 3, P. 58-59

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia: Micromanagement. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Micromanagement>

seen recently in the Minnesota Orchestra, an organization that is probably doomed despite any settlement.

It is easy to forget that these are non-profit organizations – groups that have been granted certain tax privileges in our society in return for acting in the public trust. This is an important distinction: the orchestra does not exist for the benefit of the orchestra musicians, but for the benefit of the public that is allowing their orchestra to be a non-profit Federal 501(c)(3) corporation. Sadly, with all of their internal infighting, these groups end up metaphorically acting like animals chewing their own limbs off instead of becoming organizations that are collectively aligned and collaboratively working towards common goals.

The argument commonly heard from orchestra musicians when faced with budget and season cuts is that it will destroy the orchestra's "sound."<sup>8</sup> Their position is that the artistic integrity of the orchestra would be fatally compromised if their players start abandoning ship and going to other jobs. I believe that this is a huge fallacy. Not only are there probably 50 people waiting in line for each position in the orchestra that are equally qualified, but given this plague of "sameness" that is prized by orchestra audition committees, any one of them will pretty much sound the same as their predecessor. In this sense, orchestra musicians have turned themselves into fungible commodities, and have shot themselves in the foot with their bland industrial playing. As Benjamin Franklin once said, "Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."<sup>9</sup> By obtaining job security through collective bargaining, contracts, an educational system that teaches blandness, like a self-replicating virus, and artistry by committee, orchestra musicians have become little more than easily replaceable commodities.

I do not believe that there is such a thing as an orchestra sound; if it even exists. I also do not believe that audiences can tell the difference between one sound and another or whether that even attracts audiences to concerts at all. Ironically (or perhaps not), what really seems to attract audience goes to concerts isn't the orchestra sound, or even principal players in the orchestra, but the conductor. The biggest example of that is what Maestro Peter Bay<sup>10</sup> recently described to me as, "The Dudamel Effect," after the wildly popular Gustavo Dudamel, conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Dudamel is the crown jewel of Venezuela's groundbreaking El Sistema<sup>11</sup> program and has led a resurgence of audiences and interest in the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and according to Bay, "every orchestra now wants a Dudamel." People don't go to the L.A. Phil to hear their "sound" – they go to see Dudamel! A similar phenomenon is taking place in Chicago, where their Maestro Riccardo Muti is invigorating audiences and concert attendance.<sup>12</sup> If you want to invigorate your orchestra audiences, the conclusion seems to

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<sup>8</sup> "Discordant sounds of an orchestra Cuts will destroy artistry, 'Philly Sound'": The Inquirer, July 20, 2004. [http://articles.philly.com/2004-07-20/news/25371011\\_1\\_fund-raising-philadelphia-sound-musicians](http://articles.philly.com/2004-07-20/news/25371011_1_fund-raising-philadelphia-sound-musicians)

<sup>9</sup> Historical Review of Pennsylvania, 1759.

<sup>10</sup> Maestro Peter Bay is the Artistic Director of the Austin Symphony Orchestra in Texas. From a conversation on November 25, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> El Sistema: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El\\_Sistema](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Sistema)

<sup>12</sup> Arts Journal: "Muti Mania Breaks All Records in Chicago."

<http://www.artsjournal.com/slippeddisc/2013/10/muti-mania-breaks-all-records-in-chicago.html>

be to get a Dudamel, or a Muti. Apparently the audiences are watching the maestro, and not the orchestra musicians.

All of these issues are solvable, but require significant institutional changes and ways of thinking within the orchestra musician supply chain. Here are some ideas:

**Leadership:** Musicians need to learn both leadership and followership. Passivity at a young age leads to passivity as professionals. Labor unrest and strikes don't solve orchestra problems, leadership does. If orchestra musicians want a seat at the table where the future of their employment is strategized, then they will need to get more involved than merely showing up and playing the music on their stand. Even more than that, they will need to help *drive* their orchestra towards success, not just wait and hope that someone else does that for them. They need to be taught leadership at an early age. A remarkable young musician leadership program is "YellowCello Young Artists"<sup>13</sup> led by visionary Wyatt Sutherland.

**Music Schools:** To begin with, why do we need to graduate 12-14,000 music performance graduates every year? Is there really that kind of demand in the marketplace for classical musicians? How do we justify the enormous college expenses that parents must bear when we know that their sons and daughters don't stand a chance at finding full time employment in their chosen field? If you are going to major in philosophy, the clear expectation is that you will either teach philosophy or go into another field – there are no Chief Philosophy Officers in the Fortune 500. Yet we blindly pour out music performance majors into the marketplace with little or no opportunities for them to obtain fulltime employment as performers. Getting into a music performance program should be made much more difficult. Accepting a student solely because they are good enough to get into a music college but without the expectation of a professional career is both immoral and irresponsible.

Next, why is music performance education so singularly focused on preparing musicians for careers as orchestra musicians when there are so few full time orchestra jobs? This should be dropped from juries, and musicians should be both taught and reassured that there are other avenues for sharing their art besides playing in an orchestra. It gets worse if you are a wind or percussion player, as most schools warehouse these players in concert bands because there are always too many wind players than can fit in orchestras. They are relegated to obtaining their ensemble experience in bands, of which there is absolutely no career path unless you want to join the military, and I cannot believe that the mission of music higher education is to help fill military bands. Instead, they need to be encouraged "to create meaningful and compelling product offerings for people like you and me,"<sup>14</sup> as Dr. Moon said, and that means preparing them for performance careers other than playing in orchestras. If performance faculty cannot adjust to this kind of thinking then they should be replaced with faculty that can. If music students insist on being prepared for orchestra careers, then their education needs to include subjects such as governance, outreach, marketing, and sales – all things that they can use to help drive the success of their future orchestral employer.

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<sup>13</sup> YellowCello Young Artists: <http://www.yellowcello.com/yya/YYA.html>

<sup>14</sup> Youngme Moon: *Different: Escaping the Competitive Herd*: Crown Business, P. x.

Last, since virtually every music performance major ends up teaching private lessons at some point in their career, then they need to be taught pedagogy and repertoire, something completely missing from the undergraduate music performance curricula. Why do we not prepare performance majors for teaching? Music schools need to become both practical and relevant, otherwise they risk insignificance in the future.

**Bring Back Artistry to Orchestras:** If orchestra musicians want to create demand for their talents, then they need to “find their voice” and become both soloists and ensemble players. Yes, they do need to blend into the ensemble most of the time, but they need to soar above the orchestra when they have a solo and move us with their expressiveness. We need to move away from the scourge of “sameness” plaguing even our best American symphony orchestras. The alternative is boring orchestras that suffer declining attendance, resulting in budget shortfalls, shortened seasons and more bankruptcies. Audition by committee needs to be replaced by a system that favors the John Bruce Yeh’s of the world, rather than passing them over in favor of bland players that can appeal to an entire committee. There is no shortage of these bland players around, which means that they can be easily replaced by other bland players, which is a problem when it comes time to negotiate salary and contract. How can you make demands for your services when what you do is virtually undistinguishable from the next guy? Distinctive soloistic players are a rarer commodity – their unique voices are a competitive differentiator, using business school terminology, which means that they are much harder to replace. We need to eliminate the John Yeh Effect. This means that there needs to be ways to bypass these audition committees. The John Yeh Effect *should be* like the Dudamel effect – highly expressive players need to become just as effective at attracting audiences instead of ceding that responsibility to the conductor.

**Show Audiences Why We Need Orchestra Musicians:** I recently attended a concert of the New York Philharmonic and discovered that it was a “pops” concert. I could also see that they chose to staff the orchestra with their assistant principals and subs because this was not considered “serious” music. Ironically, the entire concert hall was packed. I was stunned that the New York Philharmonic would choose to *not* take the opportunity to show what makes them a great orchestra when faced with a full house. In contrast, I attended a concert of the Brooklyn Philharmonic with R&B artist Erykah Badu, and that concert was sold out for two days. In addition to accompanying the talented Ms. Badu, the orchestra had ample opportunities to display the things that they can do that rock bands cannot. Plus I have never seen such an engaged audience! Instead of sending subs or b-players, orchestra musicians should clamor for the opportunity to do more Brooklyn-style concerts in order to reach new audiences. At Austin’s *South by Southwest* music festival<sup>15</sup>, which showcases emerging rock bands, a string quartet from Brooklyn performed a movement of Bartok in a dive bar, and the audience loved it. I don’t think that playing all four movements would have kept the audience’s attention, but the point being made is that you need to reach out and develop new audiences by communicating to them *in the language that they understand*, and you can still take that opportunity to share why it is that you love classical music, and people will respond.

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<sup>15</sup> I ran their *Classical Crossover* showcase for two seasons for them, featuring bands with members that were classically trained and “crossed over” into the mainstream. [http://www.drapkininstitute.org/?page\\_id=586](http://www.drapkininstitute.org/?page_id=586)

In conclusion, if orchestra musicians don't want to become highly replaceable commodities with little say about their employment and/or future, their fundamental education and approaches to music and orchestras need to change. They need to be taught leadership and not expect or depend on others to facilitate their careers. In their formative years, they need to be encouraged to look at all types of music performance careers besides just with orchestras. Should they choose to go into orchestra playing, their education should include the development of business skills that will allow them to help grow and promote their ensembles. They need to be encouraged to become expressive and distinctive artists, and there needs to be a way for them to attain principal positions in the orchestra without being screened out by audition committees. Finally, they need to encourage our orchestras to *lead* the arts by finding common ground with our larger society while helping our youth to understand what orchestras can do and why they are needed. Without these changes, we will continue to oversupply the market with unemployable musicians and create orchestra musicians that are increasingly marginalized as their symphony orchestra employers continue to disappear.