

GREGSANDOW

Serious stuff on the right, mostly lighter things here (my newsletter, issue five)

For those who haven't gotten my newsletter before:

I send it out from time to time. Maybe more often in the future. It goes to a wide mailing list, including people who've subscribed to my book updates, and of course people I've emailed with, or otherwise done business with.

I hope you find it stimulating. If you don't want it, go [here](#) to unsubscribe. But if you're seeing this without being a subscriber, or if a friend wants to subscribe, [here's where you go](#) to sign up.

Enough formalities. On to...

Some of my blog posts:

- *The cost squeeze:* More on the financial squeeze in classical music, as revenues fall and expenses rise. You'll see that I've mentioned the same thing on the right, in my thoughts about the Philadelphia Orchestra. But these posts take a broader look, focusing -- after some [general thoughts](#) -- on [falling donations](#), [falling ticket sales](#), [rising expenses](#), and [loss of interest in classical music](#).
- *Mahler's Ninth:* One of my touchstone classical pieces,

Tipping further

My headline last time was "A Tipping Point?" And now I feel that classical music is tipping even further in new directions, toward dramatic change.

First, the Philadelphia Orchestra bankruptcy -- old news, by now.

But still it's very serious. Yes, the orchestra is trying to move forward, with a [recovery plan](#) that at least points in some of the right directions (involvement with the community, for instance). But this is the first time an orchestra this big -- this old, this honored, a household name both in its city and around the world -- has said it can't sustain itself.

Which I think shows the classical music crisis growing more intense. Internal problems played a part in what happened, and so did the bad economy. But can we imagine the Philadelphia Orchestra going bankrupt in past decades, when classical music had unquestioned primacy in our culture?

Could this have happened in 1968, for instance, when ([according to a budget document I've seen](#)) the orchestra spent hardly anything on marketing or raising funds? It didn't have to! Because in those days ticket sales and funding -- at least compared to how things work now -- more or less took care of themselves.

And other orchestras (even if they don't talk about this publicly) have the same problems Philadelphia did. Expenses rising, income falling. So does the bankruptcy suggest that classical music -- at least as we've known it up to now -- might not be sustainable?

Visits I've made

I visited England, this spring, and also the New England

but I was irked by not knowing it through and through, as I know Beethoven. So I listened. And listened. And posted [here](#) and [here](#) about how Mahler escapes the pain of death only in a wistful but very sad fantasy.

- Plus, discussed and linked on the right: major posts on the internal culture of orchestras, and how they don't play as well as they might.

Some quotes:

- "We are treated like high-end audio equipment; we are just a vessel for the creative thoughts of others." (*From one of the students in my Juilliard graduate course about the future of classical music, who thinks music students are forced to be uncreative. On the right, under "Orchestra Culture," you'll find another student who says the same thing.*)
- "Where Journey or Clapton would place their power ballad, we place 'The Alcotts' from Ives' Concord Sonata." (*From another student, who puts on shows shaped like rock concerts, but which include classical works.*)

Plus these gems, from [Jonathan Fields](#):

- "Everyone wants better. No one wants change."
- "Everyone wants to own the result, nobody wants to own the process. Especially when it involves change or disruption to the patterns around which they've grown accustomed."
- "A leader is someone who is willing to own not just the

Conservatory.

NEC:

They have a crusading president, [Tony Woodcock, an apostle of change](#). (Follow the link, and read his blog, if you haven't. And remember that he used to be a successful orchestra manager, most recently at the Minnesota Orchestra. He knows what he's talking about.)

And they have a new program in [Entrepreneurial Musicianship](#), encouraging students to make careers in new ways, and working to mentor them as they do it.

I was honored with an invitation to speak to graduating students. You can [listen to my talk](#) (about 30 minutes), and read a transcript (which I've smoothed out a bit) of the end of it, [where I challenged the students to make their playing more vivid, and more individual](#).

And you can [read my blog post about my visit](#).

England:

I took part in a debate at Cambridge University, the topic being: This House believes that classical music is irrelevant to today's youth. I was one of four people asked to defend that thought, while four others attacked it.

My side lost. Of course it did -- the opposition said, more or less, "Oh, but just listen to [fill in the name of your favorite classical masterpiece]. How can you say young people shouldn't hear anything so beautiful?"

Which is exactly the trouble with many of these discussions. I say that -- right now, in actual fact -- classical music doesn't mean much to young people. (As of course it doesn't). And then someone rebutting me says, "Oh, but young people *should* like it!" Even though these are two distinct thoughts, which ought to be talked about separately.

The debate got enormous publicity, and one participant was a huge British celebrity, [Stephen Fry](#). On my side was a dance DJ, who taught Fry how to do mashups.

I have to thank John Eatwell, aka Lord Eatwell, the president of Queens' College at Cambridge, and Lady Eatwell, aka [Suzi Digby](#) (a serious choral conductor, with [a major get-younger-people-involved-with-classical-music project under way](#)).

result, but the process."

(All of which hits classical music institutions especially hard.)

Sounds and words:

- [An ovation](#) captured on the live recording of Stephen Sondheim's *Follies*, performed in concert by the New York Philharmonic. The audience doesn't just clap. It shouts and screams. Click and listen. To learn more, go [here](#).
- [An escalator](#) at the Archives stop on the Washington Metro, recorded on my iPhone. The escalator sings, the way a thoughtful animal might, if animals sang.
- *An album*: Todd Reynolds, *Outerborough*. A [double CD](#), if you don't buy [downloads](#), but anyway, an album in two halves. Todd -- a striking indie-classical violinist -- plays other composers, and then his own thoughtful music. Mostly with a beat. Never takes itself for granted.
- *A book*: [The Bear Comes Home](#), by Rafi Zabor. About a bear who plays jazz. Not a children's book. A serious/funny novel about an artist with an extra reason for feeling like an outsider. With some of the best writing you'll ever read on how jazz musicians think while they play. (Warning: explicit bear/woman sex. Vividly imagined, with perfect biological, psychological, and romantic insight.)

They very kindly put me up in the President's Lodge at Queens, where I slept in the Queen Mum's bedroom. Where the Queen Mum herself slept, right up to the year she died, at age 101. Have to admit it: I was impressed.

You can [watch an archived stream of the debate](#) (argued with spirit, on both sides). You can [read my blog post about it](#). And you can read about some other things I found in England:

- [Indie classical programming by the London Symphony](#) (they're miles ahead of any major American orchestra in doing programs that really do reach a large young audience -- like [a huge festival, featuring Steve Reich and countless composers he influenced](#)).
- The [Guildhall School](#), where classical music students learn to improvise, and work with actors on their stage presence.
- [The Roundhouse](#), an arts center focused on pop music, which in that context puts on serious classical concerts, and reaches a new audience.

These things were revelations to me. Re the London Symphony and the Roundhouse: You can't just dream that you'll bring younger people to classical concerts. You have to enter their world, either by being part of it already (like the Roundhouse) or by playing music they already care about.

Orchestra culture

A big subject.

In June and July, I wrote 11 blog posts about the internal culture of orchestras. Meaning, for the most part, larger US orchestras.

What got me going was [a cartoon that appeared on Drew McManus's Adaptistration blog](#), lampooning me for something I said when I was interviewed about the Philly bankruptcy, [by an Australian newspaper](#). I said that a new orchestra, with young musicians, might play with a lot of excitement, and wow people who are used to the more restrained playing of established groups. (That's an expansion of what I said, making my meaning clear.)

I loved the cartoon, and asked for a copy of it signed by the cartoonist. (Which he was happy to send me.) But I thought I might say a little more on the topic, and discuss why

orchestras don't -- in my view -- play as well as they might.

So -- eleven blog posts. If you [email to ask me](#), I'll be happy to send you a PDF file of all eleven, somewhat smoothed out for easier reading. Or you can read what I wrote on my blog. I won't take space here to link all the posts, but if you [go to the last of them](#), you'll find links to all the others at the end.

And I can't stress enough how important I think this subject is. I tried to state some truths that aren't aired very often:

- That [there's very little discussion, either inside orchestras, or outside, about how well orchestras really play.](#) (I listed [detailed criteria](#) that might be applied, in public or private, but that we don't hear much about.)
- That -- as a rule -- [no one's in charge artistically](#). No one, not even the music director, sets the artistic direction of an orchestra, or is the authority of last resort when an orchestra doesn't play well enough.
- [That the musicians talk about the quality of their playing only in atomized ways, privately, or in very small groups](#). Orchestras as a whole don't discuss these questions, or try to fix problems.
- And, finally, that the internal culture of orchestras doesn't lend itself to impassioned, creative playing. I quoted one of my Juilliard students, who wrote that [her playing has to be "precise, mechanical, robotic" when she takes orchestra auditions](#), because not making mistakes is more important than playing musically. (She went further, and said that she almost never has any chance to play the way she'd like to.) I quoted studies of orchestral musicians, and their dissatisfaction with their jobs. ([Here](#), and [here](#).) And I quoted musicians I've talked to, [some of whom explicitly say they don't dare be creative](#).

(Look at that! I've given you links to most of these posts, even though I said I wouldn't.)

As I said, this is a big subject. Musicians, in [one of the studies I quoted](#), rank supremely high in their commitment to their jobs, but not high in how satisfied they are. Which leads to a touching contradiction. Some musicians oppose what I say, quite honestly telling me how hard they work to play as well as they can. Reflecting, in other words, the supreme commitment the studies show that orchestra musicians have. And then, if you talk to them privately, many of them complain

(reflecting the dissatisfaction the surveys report) that most conductors are bad. Which would mean -- contradicting their objections to what I say -- that they themselves can't possibly think that their orchestra plays as well as it might.

This is one of the secret truths about classical music, as it functions right now. The public face of the field says that everything -- musically -- is supremely wonderful, artistic, rapt with beauty, untouchable. While in private we've gotten more than a little stuck.

Which is just as bad for us as falling ticket sales. And in fact is one reason why ticket sales are falling. There's very little sense of presence, excitement, or surprise at most classical concerts. And I miss the caring, the commitment -- plainly visible, and easy to hear -- that even average pop bands had, when I was a pop music critic late in the '80s.

A strong statement, I know. But we have to learn how classical music looks from the outside.

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