

The Carnegie Hall-New York Philharmonic merger and the state of classical music

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The proposed merger between Carnegie Hall and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra made headlines when it was announced last month. For the first time in almost 40 years, the world-famous orchestra will return to its former home. A growth in audiences and influence is predicted for both partners when the merger is completed, by 2006.

Several reasons were advanced for the proposed alliance. The current home of the Philharmonic, Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center, is known for its poor acoustics. A planned renovation of Avery Fisher, the latest of several that have taken place since it opened more than 40 years ago, was expected to cost at least \$260 million, and would force the Philharmonic to find a temporary home for several years.

Carnegie Hall, saved at the last minute from demolition plans in the 1960s, has since established a higher profile than ever in the world classical music scene, and is renowned for its sound quality as well as the quality of the orchestras, ensembles and soloists who perform on its stage. The most recent example is that of pianist Daniel Barenboim, who is also the conductor of the Chicago Symphony and the Deutsche Staatsoper of Berlin, and has just completed a series of eight recitals at Carnegie performing the entire cycle of 32 Beethoven piano sonatas.

While Carnegie Hall has never enjoyed greater prestige, Lincoln Center is facing problems. The New York City Opera has also announced that it is considering leaving its home at the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center. The Metropolitan Opera remains, but the departure of the Philharmonic and the possible departure of the City Opera mean the massive performing arts complex on Manhattan's West Side will need a new long-range strategy for its own future development.

There are reasons other than the strictly artistic for the planned merger. Fundraising and marketing considerations were undoubtedly crucial in the behind-the-scenes deliberations. Avery Fisher and Carnegie Hall, each with about 2,800 seats, compete for the same audiences and patronage support, under conditions of a decline in tourism and signs of dwindling audiences for classical music. With the return of New York's major orchestra to its world-famous home for many decades before the 1960s, both the Philharmonic and Carnegie hope to reap financial benefits in terms of bigger audiences and prominence.

The relatively bright prospects of the New York Philharmonic have to be seen, however, in the context of serious financial crisis for many musical institutions. This raises questions that go far beyond New York City. Orchestras around the country are facing drastic budget crises, worsened by the economic slump and the consequent downturn

in attendance as well as in corporate support. In recent weeks, the San Antonio Symphony and the Florida Philharmonic declared bankruptcy, musicians have taken pay cuts or freezes in Milwaukee and Oregon, and the Chicago Symphony, one of the country's most prominent, has announced a serious budget shortfall.

Government support, never even minimally adequate, has fallen even lower in recent years. Corporate support, upon which most arts institutions have very heavily relied, is also drying up in many areas. This is exemplified by the recent announcement by oil and energy giant Texaco (now ChevronTexaco) that, after 63 years, it is canceling its sponsorship of the radio broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera heard by millions around the world.

In the face of these long-range issues, the decision on the merger of Carnegie and the Philharmonic was made by just a handful of very wealthy people. Although Carnegie Hall is owned by New York City, and although both institutions are the custodians of precious and essentially public cultural resources, it is taken for granted that there is no public control of these resources.

The main architect of the merger was Sanford Weill, the chairman of Carnegie Hall. Weill is also chairman of Citigroup, one of the world's largest banking empires.

However devoted Mr. Weill and his nearly-as-wealthy colleagues may be to their vision of classical music performance, and even assuming that there is no conflict of interest involved in any of the many business decisions that they must make in the course of their stewardship of Carnegie Hall and similar institutions, their decisions are inevitably shaped by their social position.

The boards of Carnegie Hall and the Philharmonic, as well as those of less prominent orchestras and performance venues around the country, cannot conceive of classical music without wealthy patrons, little or no government support, and high ticket prices. This means, as well, programming that stresses the "tried and true"; that seldom if ever ventures into serious and adventurous new works; and that caters to wealthy benefactors and listeners who in many cases see their season subscriptions as something that is expected of them or as part of the cost of doing business with clients and colleagues.

A climate of stifling complacency and elitism permeates much of the classical music scene, and there are social and economic reasons for it. Of course, philanthropy and patronage have always played a primary role under capitalism, and even earlier. Carnegie Hall itself takes its name from steel and railroad tycoon Andrew Carnegie, reputedly the world's richest man in his day.

Nonetheless, in the first half of the 20th century a broader audience existed for classical music. The atmosphere is different today. The economic and political trends of the past several decades have left

their mark. Commercial influence and the grip of wealthy patrons are obtrusive and obvious. It is now routine for the super-rich to be rewarded directly by having auditoriums and halls named for them. Half of the printed program at both Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera consists of long lists of individual or corporate patrons.

The recent “un-naming” of the Grand Tier at the Metropolitan Opera is a concrete expression of the impact of money on music today. A few years ago, at the peak of the stock market boom, Cuban-born financier Alberto Vilar, spending freely on the Metropolitan Opera as well as other institutions, was the toast of the town. He had his name attached to the Grand Tier, the third floor of the Lincoln Center opera house, in 1998. In the wake of the stock bust of the last several years, however, Vilar has missed many of his commitments. The Opera announced last month that it had taken down the foot-high letters honoring its patron. And Placido Domingo, the famous tenor who is also the director of the Washington Opera and the Los Angeles Opera, then revealed that he had written to Vilar eight months earlier about missed commitments, but that Vilar had not responded.

Rather than seeking a broader audience and public subsidies for the development of music following the collapse of the stock market and high-tech bubble, all of the major institutions continue as before, trying to convince the wealthy to come to the rescue. This catering to the rich even finds its way into such events as the annual free summer concerts of the New York Philharmonic in the city’s parks.

The announcement of this summer’s events on the orchestra’s web site highlights “official picnic baskets” that are available.

Appropriating the titles of various famous musical compositions for its marketing purposes, the Philharmonic advertises its “Fanfare for the Common Man.” This picnic for two is named after the piece by Aaron Copland. For \$75 you get “a selection of soft drinks, chilled soups, salads and desserts.” If you’d like to spend \$500, you can order the “Ode to Joy,” which provides, in addition to the above, a choice of cocktails, luxury sandwiches, iced or hot coffee or tea, plus lawn chairs, a free CD, two T-shirts and a membership in the Friends of the Philharmonic.

Finally, for the sum of \$3,000, the name of Hector Berlioz’s *Symphony Fantastique* is attached to “a deluxe basket, delivered to the park and presented to your guests by a server provided for the occasion.” This package comes with VIP seating so that the elegant diners are not disturbed by the great unwashed.

Alongside this very conspicuous consumption, the *New York Times* has just reported that arts education in the city’s schools is often virtually nonexistent. It is safe to say that most schools are like the one described in the Washington Heights neighborhood, where “the art teacher hauls her supplies from classroom to classroom in shopping bags or on a cart because there is no art room. The school’s instruments lie silent in their cases because there is no band teacher. And the students use pencils to plunk their gap-toothed xylophones because there are not enough proper mallets to go around.” Many leading cultural figures wring their hands and pledge various outreach efforts to attract new and younger audiences, but little is done. A few of the huge gaps in the arts programs have been filled by assistance provided by various cultural organizations, but even these programs are in some cases jeopardized by the current budget cuts.

While the present climate undoubtedly discourages many potential listeners, the oft-predicted death of classical music is without doubt an exaggeration. The musical history of the past four centuries and more is not going to simply disappear, and there are new generations of

listeners as well as performers. There are definite signs of potential, when interesting programming or reasonable prices attract new audiences. The San Francisco Symphony under conductor Michael Tilson Thomas has become particularly well known for its combination of seriousness, quality and contemporary music. It has resisted the call for “dumbing down” of programs as well as the conservative approach of programming only works of the 18th or 19th centuries, even though we have already entered the 21st.

There are other examples as well, including, in the New York City area, the programming at Columbia University’s Miller Theater and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music; the work of Leon Botstein and his American Symphony Orchestra and Bard Music Festival; some of the younger chamber music groups such as the Brentano Quartet; and the tireless efforts of Joel Sachs of the Julliard School to encourage contemporary music and find an audience for it.

Audiences are also attracted to free and low-cost concerts, including a recent series of four free recitals at New York’s Town Hall, featuring such performers as violin and piano duos Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg and Anne-Marie McDermott, and Joshua Bell and Simon Mulligan.

These efforts only scratch the surface, however. For the most part, ticket prices remain either beyond the reach of, or discouragingly expensive for, ordinary workers and youth. The only affordable prices for the Philharmonic or Metropolitan Opera are generally in the upper reaches of their auditoriums.

The question of how to expand audiences for classical music and the future of classical music itself as a living art form are topics that are beyond the scope of this article. The current state of arts education in the schools, as well as ticket prices and programming, are not the only reasons for the relative narrowness of the current audience. The difficulties are also bound up with the problems of the crisis of cultural and intellectual life more generally in 21st century capitalist society, and particularly in the United States. This finds its expression in what is being composed, what is being programmed and performed, and what the audience is prepared to hear.

There is no simple solution to this crisis. It is certainly necessary to call for affordable prices, for arts education, and for increased public subsidies for the arts in general. The current climate raises the need for more than a few improvements, however. What is required is a struggle for a political and cultural reawakening that will lead to the creation of new works of music and new audiences, and this in turn is bound up with the fight for a truly democratic economic, social and cultural life.



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