

"The Fall of the American Orchestra" documented

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Cadenza Work, the online operating platform and opportunity directory designed for musicians, issued a report in May that documented what it described as the “structural collapse” of the symphony orchestra.

In June, moreover, the website took note of Elon Musk’s becoming the first trillionaire to return to the miserable state of America’s orchestras and make some telling comparisons. We will quote generously from both pieces.

The state of the symphony orchestra is no small matter. The performance of some of the greatest music of the past and present is vital to the general cultural, intellectual and moral life of a country. The symphony orchestra in the US is associated with immortal names: Gustav Mahler, Leopold Stokowski, Arturo Toscanini, George Szell, Fritz Reiner, Eugene Ormandy, Serge Koussevitzky, George Solti, Leonard Bernstein and many others.

What does it say about American capitalism, corrupt and rotting where it stands, and presided over by a reactionary imbecile-swindler, that it cannot sustain such cultural institutions?

In May, “The Fall of the American Orchestra” on *Cadenza Work* asserted bluntly that the “American symphony orchestra is, in 2026, the most institutionally distressed cultural form in the country.”

Cadenza sought to disturb its readers, arguing that the aim of the article was not to

predict the collapse of the American symphony orchestra. It documents the collapse already happening. ... The orchestras you grew up with may not exist in their current form by 2035. Several of them may not exist at all.

It notes the orchestras that have closed in recent years, including the Honolulu, Syracuse, New Mexico, San Antonio, American Youth Symphony and Boston Philharmonic. The Philadelphia Orchestra declared bankruptcy in 2011. The Detroit Symphony underwent a bitter strike in 2010-11, with musicians’ wages being cut 25 percent. The Minnesota Orchestra locked out its musicians for 16 months in 2012-2014. Problems abound at the Metropolitan Opera, Boston Symphony, San Francisco Symphony and National Symphony Orchestra at the beleaguered Kennedy Center in Washington.

The *Cadenza* report noted that the symphony orchestra in the US was the “only major classical-music institutional model in the developed world that operates as a predominantly private-philanthropy entity. Every other major Western country underwrites its major orchestras with substantial public funding, either at the national or municipal level or both. The American exception is not partial. It is structural, and it is enormous.”

After adding up the financing derived from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), state and local arts councils and charitable tax exemptions, public funding amounts to the derisory total of 13 cents on

the revenue dollar. The remaining 87 cents is derived from ticket sales (40 cents), private contributions (43 cents) and endowment income (4-5 cents).

An American orchestra of any size relies on private philanthropy and ticket revenue for nearly nine in ten dollars of operating income. If either drops, the orchestra is in immediate operating trouble. If both drop — which is what happened during the 2020–21 closures, and what is happening now in cities where subscription bases are eroding — the institution cannot survive without either drawing down endowment principal or cutting musician compensation.

The NEA distributed a grand total of \$4.82 million to orchestras in 2022, which included the one-time American Rescue Plan pandemic-relief grants. The recurring federal grant figure is closer therefore to \$2.25 million.

A country of 333 million people funded its symphony orchestra sector at federal level, in the most recent year of stable NEA operation, at less than five million dollars total—and less than three million dollars in recurring grants outside one-time pandemic support.

The May article observed that the Berlin Philharmonic, currently itself undergoing budget cuts, received a municipal subsidy of approximately 110 euros a seat (\$US 125). In other words,

a single Berlin Philharmonic ticket received roughly the same direct public support as twenty per cent of the NEA’s annual orchestra budget per seat. The math is not in the same universe.

The *Cadenza* piece goes on to note that the audiences for classical concerts were aging and that “the customer base is dying faster than it is being replaced.” There has been a 29 percent decline in classical music audiences since 2002. Only four percent of US adults attended a classical performance in 2022. But, of course, this is itself an indictment of the ruling elite, its war on culture, its devastation of arts and music education, its encouragement and glorification of every ounce of backwardness. The decline in the audience is in line with the general crisis in cultural and intellectual life. It is *entirely reversible*, but not by American capitalism.

The report refers, somewhat gingerly, to the increasing dependence of

cultural institutions on the wealthy, what we have referred to as the “aristocratic principle.”

The American symphony orchestra’s funding model produces a specific structural vulnerability that the European model does not have to the same degree: dependence on private mega-gifts from a small number of named benefactors, most of whom are in the last decades of their giving lives.

The structural risk in this model is concentration: when ten per cent or more of an orchestra’s annual operating revenue depends on a single family’s annual giving, the orchestra’s viability is tied to that family’s circumstances.

Cadenza remarks that orchestras rely on “the willingness of approximately one hundred named donor families nationwide” to continue providing major financial support.

Another factor in the orchestras’ difficulties, not often discussed, is the disappearance of

a substantive recording-industry contribution. The Boston Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Chicago Symphony, and New York Philharmonic each maintained long-running recording contracts with major labels ... through the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The contracts produced earned revenue, individual-musician royalties or session pay, and—perhaps more importantly—a global reputational platform that supported touring, subscriber acquisition, and donor confidence in the institutional brand.

That recording revenue has now collapsed.

The overall picture the *Cadenza* authors draw is bleak. The “structural fix” they identify is increased public funding, but

The political conditions for that restoration ... are absent. The NEA has been eliminated. The state arts councils mirror the federal posture. The Republican policy framework treats classical-music funding as an elite priority not warranting taxpayer support. The Democratic policy framework has not, in any administration of the last three decades, made cultural funding restoration a top-twenty priority. The political fix is therefore the most effective intervention and the least likely to occur.

The authors don’t dare to state it, but the conclusion stares the more politically vigilant reader in the face: parasitic, speculation-driven, crisis-ridden American capitalism is incompatible with healthy, thriving and meaningful cultural life. The accumulation of unimaginably vast fortunes occurs *on the same plane* as the devastation and destruction of the arts.

The June 17 *Cadenza* article provoked by the news that Elon Musk had become the world’s first trillionaire presented a series of striking and, once again, shocking figures and comparisons.

Musk’s fortune is about 1,088 times the combined annual budget of the twenty biggest U.S. orchestras. It could fund all of them, in full, every year until the year 3114 — or the Los Angeles Philharmonic alone until the year 8274. In the half hour it takes to

play Beethoven’s Fifth, his wealth grew by about seventeen times the LA Phil’s entire annual budget.

Furthermore,

Every second, Musk gained about 10.5 years of a top orchestra musician’s entire salary. To earn just [Musk’s] single day’s \$165 billion gain, that musician would need about 910,000 years.

The annual gap between what the Houston Symphony takes in and what it needs is the kind of number—a few million dollars—that Musk’s fortune now generates in the time it takes to read this sentence. The Baltimore Symphony’s entire negative-net-asset hole could be erased with the loose change of a single second of a good trading day.

Musk’s net worth could fund the National Endowment for the Arts, at its current level, for more than 6,000 years. It is worth about 236 times everything the NEA has granted in its entire history—across sixty years and more than 150,000 grants. A routine 1% move in his net worth, the kind that happens on an ordinary Tuesday, is about \$13 billion—sixty-three times the NEA’s entire annual budget, gained or lost before lunch.

Obviously, *Cadenza* notes, “The money exists” to fund orchestras and the arts. “The orchestras are not failing because the country is poor.” Less obviously, however, is the political-revolutionary essence of the matter: the life-and-death need to shatter the stranglehold of the financial oligarchy over every important aspect of life.

All of this material *powerfully and unequivocally vindicates* the positions outlined in the 2010 program of the Socialist Equality Party:

Access to art and culture is a basic component of a healthy society. Yet, like everything else, it is under relentless attack. American culture—film, television, music—was once a pole of attraction because of its innovation and powerful democratic and humanistic spirit. The subordination of culture to the profit motive has led to an immense degeneration....

To enable all working people to have full access to art and culture requires massive public funding and the creation of new schools and centers for music, dance, drama and art, either at a nominal fee or for free. Decisions on subsidies and grants for the arts must be taken out of the hands of the politicians and bureaucrats and placed under the control of committees of artists, musicians and other cultural workers.



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