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## **Michael Morgan's Rx for Orchestra Health**

*An Interview with Michael Morgan by Melanie Beene*

2007 Grantmakers in the Arts Conference:  
*Taos Journey*

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The design of GIA's 2007 conference is based on one used in 1993 for a conference in La Jolla, when papers published as the book *Alternative Futures* fostered lively discussion. We've invited back two authors from that 1993 publication, consultant M. Melanie Beene and conductor Michael Morgan, to revisit themes from their earlier pieces. We reconnected these two particular writers with their shared story in mind. In the late 1980s, Beene led a team that analyzed the factors contributing to the demise of the Oakland Symphony (the predecessor to Michael's current orchestra) and published the case study *Autopsy of an Orchestra* (1988), still in demand today. In the meantime, under Morgan's leadership, the Oakland East Bay Symphony has taken the approach of transforming its players into "citizen musicians," who, with Maestro Morgan, spend hours every week in schools and other settings that bring them close to the people of Oakland. Their conversation looks at the story of an arts organization that came back after an autopsy, and the vision it sustains.

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## Michael Morgan's Rx for Orchestra Health:

**Engage authentically  
Have more fun  
Find your "Inner Caribbean Woman"**

*Beene: It's been nearly fifteen years since we were together in La Jolla. So, looking back, how has the world changed – or the music industry or the orchestra business – over those years, from your perspective?*

Morgan: I think a lot of the orchestras are now caught up with the idea that you have to program in a way that reflects your audience and its diverse tastes, and that doesn't in any way compromise the mission of the symphony orchestra. It's not playing down to anybody, it's just part of the deal, part of the heritage of the country!

So, for example, when I first came here, we had to convince people that things like our "Let Us Break Bread" concert should be on a subscription series. And now there's no question about things like that being on subscription.

*That's the concert with local gospel choirs?*

Right, with four choirs, one of which is a gospel choir.

*Now it's one of your most popular concerts.*

Yeah, exactly! And seen as something we would, of course, have on the subscription series, much like our "American Masterworks," which we're doing over the next four years with Gershwin and Sondheim and, you know, Bernstein Mass and all these things; they go on subscription because they are great pieces of art!

*Do you think the orchestra business is more hidebound than some of the other genres of art? Is that why there is this whole thing about playing the same pieces over and over all the time? Where did that come from?*

Well, it's only with the latest generation that conservatory training has included the notion of community engagement, audience development, and the business end of the music industry.

Before then, people just played their best and stayed in their practice room until it was time to graduate; then they came out and got an orchestra job. And what did they know about audience engagement? It wasn't something they'd thought about until they got to the orchestra and saw the empty seats. And then they had to think about it.

Now, they come out of school having thought about it, and that already changes the business.

And we've had so many bankruptcies, turnarounds, the shutting downs and all of these things, that we really have stopped seeing a job in a symphony orchestra as a birth-right because you graduated from Juilliard.

*I'm thinking about particularly the idea of the music that the people from that generation play. They're in that practice room, but they're also only playing a certain set of music, not music being written in their lifetime the way they might now. And it seems like now you see more musicians crossing genres, classical musicians doing other things. Is that true?*

You do see more classical musicians doing other things; you do see people coming out of school feeling much closer to composers and to new music. You see an involvement...well, it's true both with new music and with community engagement – you see involvement in both of those areas as being normal, you don't see it as being outside the ordinary at all now.

*Do you think the audience has led that?*

No, the lack of an audience has led to that, actually. The audience has led it by their absence.

*I have friends around the country who are season-ticket holders at various orchestras, and they've complained to me that they don't get to hear enough new music, that their orchestras play too many chestnuts.*

It takes, of course, a committed music director and a committed orchestra to make the notion of new music part of the culture, to make that really a central theme of the orchestra.

And it takes any orchestra having a marketing department that has some imagination. I mean the marketing of music

is what's actually killing the art form now. The notion of marketing in many an orchestra is the marketing person wanting you to just program things that they think will sell themselves; instead of figuring out how to sell what an orchestra does, they really want you to just program the chestnuts. So that they don't have to do any work just to sell what the orchestra does.

It's a vicious cycle, because if you program those things to sell themselves, it makes the orchestra look like something that only plays nineteenth-century warhorses, and therefore doesn't

engage any new audience, and actually bores some of the old audience because it's just a dead thing that the orchestra is; it's just repeating itself.

*The marketing of music is what's actually killing the art form now.*

*There was a time when I heard people complain that the orchestra players didn't want to play the new music either. Is that your sense now?*

No, I think everybody is pretty much on board with new music. There are always new pieces that we like more than others. Everyone does. I don't know when I've been to an orchestra where there was any sort of real opposition to new music. That's over; that really is over.

Plus, a full-time orchestra – not that we have tons and tons of them anymore – eventually has to get it that there are only four Brahms symphonies and you can only play them so often. There are never going to be more than four, and so you need to play something else in order just not to be bored to death playing admittedly really great music, over and over again! Because even with the greatest music, it would be like having the greatest meal over and over again! It's just not interesting anymore.

*Your article talked about multiculturalism, and I'm wondering if you're seeing any more minority artists in orchestras, on the podiums, in the audiences as you go around the country?*

It comes and goes. Singing used to be one of the obvious points of entry [for minority artists]. There was a period at the Met when there were a lot of singers of color onstage, and now not so much. It goes in cycles. I don't think it's because anyone was purged, it's just that things seem to be cyclical.

And amongst the performers, they are emerging – you know, Tai Murray, and the pianist Stewart Goodyear. There are people like that coming along who are exciting young artists, performer types. And there are some conductors coming along.

But it's not as though that problem is solved. I think the question becomes how much diversity is necessary and then how much does diversity actually matter to both orchestra and community? Because, you know, there are communities where diversity on the stage doesn't really matter, and that's fine! If that orchestra reflects that community, that's fine!

*It's more of a contextual thing?*

Yes. And I also think that people have finally got it that orchestras cannot just magically fill their ranks with artists of color just by going, "Okay, we need some more...whatever." As there are no quotas, there is no affirmative action in this field in that way.

With the artists that are engaged on a one-time basis – that is to say soloists, conductors, et cetera – it would be nice to see more diversity. But it's, I suppose, better than it used to be, even if it's not up to what it could be.

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*In your article you said, "The real question is not how to make orchestral music more multicultural, but rather how to make more obvious the inclusive rather than the exclusive history of the art form." Do you think inroads have been made on that?*

I think orchestras have seen that they need to diversify their repertory just to be more interesting for everyone involved, including the players. But there's always room for more of that.

And we certainly have all gotten used to the notion of the crossover artist. We all know who Il Divo is, and so we're accustomed to that. [Il Divo is an international operatic pop vocal group created by pop impresario Simon Cowell and signed to Sony Records.]

Everyone does more of more things just to make their own lives more interesting. I think it started out as a way to diversify the audience and to deal with audience engagement, and then orchestras realized that it actually made things more interesting for everybody, including the traditional audience.

*Even for the marketing department?*

Even the marketing department, because they have something to talk about! If your orchestra is playing a Beethoven symphony, there is nothing that is going to interest a newspaper beyond the obvious. The music critic isn't going to get any extra space to write about the symphony playing a Beethoven symphony.

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*I don't know what's going to interest the newspapers these days; that's a whole other issue.*

Well, right now it is the crossover, the unusual, it's some of those who are engaging in concert hall stagings of things. It is in fact doing something that is unusual, not just in terms of new music but even with old music. If there's a human-interest angle that an ordinary person, a civilian, someone not in the music business can identify with, you can still get classical music written about in the newspaper.

It's not Western classical music, but look at how much attention Tyler Thompson, the black kid who sings Chinese opera, has gotten here in Oakland. In fact,

Tyler is headed east to sing. He's been invited by the State Department to sing at a thing for Condoleezza Rice. He gets everywhere, he's famous in China, and he's done very well for himself.

*How did he get into that?*

We had Charlene Chew here in our Oakland Public Schools, teaching everybody traditional Chinese music, regardless of who they were! And so this black kid starts singing in Mandarin, and as a result of that has become really famous! He's been on all manner of national television – the *Tonight Show* or Letterman – I can't remember which, but he's been on lots and lots of things just because who expects that? And that to me is an example of a human-interest story that someone who is a civilian can still appreciate.

*Going back to your earlier article, you start out listing society's ills – now remember this is 1993 – and you talk about “the pervasive selfishness, the collapsing infrastructure, discredited government and law enforcement, media portraying little other than violence, guns everywhere, failing education system, the move to close our borders to most new immigration.”*

My, how the times change! (*Laughter*)

*You end the article being very hopeful, and I guess I wondered whether your hopes bore out, since this sounds so familiar!*

Well, actually, my hopes have borne out, but not because of the generation I was writing for in 1993. I've been doing school visits since the 1980s and you get to see the generations change as they go along. I just gave a commencement address on this very subject at Holy Names University. This current generation is the first one in the last three that I have seen that seems to be less selfish than the previous generation. So to me that is a *major* change.

*The ones who are graduating this year? How long is this generation, in your mind? Twenty years? Ten years?*

I came of age in the 1970s, and I always compare us to the generation of the 1960s. That was a really great generation that we knew we couldn't match, and so we didn't even try to match it. But we at least were old enough to know that the world had not always been the same as it was when we were coming up. By the 1980s, that generation thought that the world had always been like this and that all these problems had always been

solved, and so they just became totally self-absorbed and selfish. And then in the nineties it got, if anything, even worse, just totally inward-looking.

And now to me – and I have said this in public a couple times now – there is a silver lining to the war in Iraq, and people go, “What is it?” And it's that, in fact, this generation has started to look outward more than the previous generations. The opposition to that war has focused their minds in a way that nothing has since Vietnam! And in fact my commencement address was about productions of *Hair* and how many of them there are all over the place now, because everyone's pulling out their Vietnam-era performance art, because here we are again.

But it means that this generation has actually started to look out at things other than themselves. You know, they actually think twice about going halfway around the world and dropping bombs on a bunch of people. And we haven't had that for two generations.

*Well that makes me feel hopeful because I've found it curious that there haven't been more antiwar demonstrations compared to my era in the sixties. When I look at how many people demonstrated for immigration, it seemed like the focus was more there than on the war!*

This generation coming of age now is very aware of the suffering that other people are doing on their behalf, or in their name. That's caused them to actually look outward more than the eighties or the nineties generation did, because the eighties and nineties generation, they were just getting worse and worse! You could see the kids getting less and less impressive as time went by!

And now you find kids that are actually more impressive than the previous generation, and so you think, okay, maybe there's a possibility of the thing turning itself, and that gives us that silver lining of the war and terrorism and all the rest of it.

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*Anything else you're feeling hopeful about?*

Today I was in a middle school – granted it was a middle school in the [affluent Oakland] hills, but it was still a middle school that has two orchestras, two bands, a chorus, and each of the bands is like sixty kids. And, you know, it's a middle school! The kids show up and hang out in the music room like I used to when I was in school, so the fact that that's going on *anywhere* is really a hopeful sign.

One thing that's definitely changed in Oakland since 1993 was that we've had for four years now an annual orchestra festival in the public schools – a Public School Orchestra Festival.

*There are enough orchestras in the public schools?*

There are. We all get together at the end [of the festival] and we put the kids in one ginormous orchestra – must be two or three hundred kids there – and I conduct the last piece. And by that time, we're outnumbering the audience. It's up at Skyline High School, and we don't just use a stage, we use a stage and the area in front of the stage. It is very inspiring, very inspiring.

I didn't get to String Fest this year because I was too tired, but we had String Fest, which is for the little kids, and that too did not exist back then. And that's where the little kids all play their solos. But it's meant to be a multi-school, cross-city festival that we have. A lot of this has been spearheaded by a combination of the school district working with the symphony to keep all these things going.

*When you talk about those kids in the middle school, playing like you used to do, it reminds me of something I read in your bio. How does a D.C. kid in the public schools get to start conducting at age twelve?*

Actually, when I came up in the D.C. public schools, every junior high school had an orchestra. Every high school had an orchestra. There were orchestras all over the place.

*And you got to conduct, too?*

Yeah! That was just a matter of having been lucky enough to have the sort of teacher and circumstance where you went into a teacher to ask about learning to be a conductor and the teacher took it seriously. I think that's the case with a lot of people in a lot of fields. That first teacher, who takes what you say you want to be seriously is the one who changes the direction of everything. It could

very well be that they, like everyone else, don't believe for a moment you will ever actually achieve that thing that you are setting out to do, but the fact that they respond in such a way as to make you think that it is an option for you is what makes the difference!

It's great if kids can get it at home too, which I did; whatever I wanted to be was okay. But that teacher, that outside person, whoever the first one is that says, "Okay, we'll put you on the path to doing that," makes a big difference.

*And you were already intrigued with conducting at age twelve?*

I was intrigued by the third grade. My elementary school didn't have an orchestra but my junior high school did.

There was music in my elementary school – I started out taking after-school piano lessons in the third grade in my elementary school – but the conducting and the orchestra and all of that didn't happen until middle school.

*Do you think there are similar opportunities today for a kid in Oakland?*

I think there are, but he or she would have to land at the right school. The chances are not as great. But then again, I also had to land at the right school in Washington.

*It's almost like we should be training teachers how to validate children's aspirations.*

We should. I talk a lot in schools to children about how if there's something they want to be, they need to tell everybody, they need to tell every teacher, people who don't believe it. I tell them based on the notion that everything is related to everything else, and so if a teacher knows what you're interested in, they can make whatever subject they're teaching more interesting to you.

*Oh, how smart!*

And it changes their attitude toward you when they're teaching a course you're not interested in. Because for a teacher who only sees you – I have explained this to *many* middle and high school students especially, because they understand the notion of seeing a different teacher every hour – for a teacher who only sees you for an hour in a subject you're not interested in, that teacher thinks you're just not interested in anything! If that teacher knows that there's something else you're interested in, they have a very different attitude toward your *lack* of interest in *their* subject. And they don't take it as personally because they

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know you're not one of those kids that's just not paying attention to anything, but there is something that you're interested in.

The good teachers will find a way to make that course you're in more interesting to you; they will show you how that course you're in is related to the thing you are interested in doing. So I always tell the kids to do that, to tell *everybody*.

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*Your article had the word "multicultural" in the title. Does that word still have resonance? What kind of new language are we going to come up with when the minority is the majority?*

*I talk to children about how if there's something they want to be, they need to tell everybody, they need to tell every teacher. If a teacher knows what you're interested in, they can make whatever subject they're teaching more interesting to you.*

I think the whole notion of multiculturalism has changed, certainly. It's very different here. In Oakland you can't even think of it as being multicultural, it's just how we are.

*Young people don't seem to use the word "multicultural," it's not even a thing that they think about.*

Exactly. This is the other great hope I have for the next generation. The next generation, they look at things like multiculturalism and racial divide and who marries whom, and they just don't care! All these people do different things, and they're used to them doing different things. I've watched even in middle schools and high schools how much diversity there is in every way now.

*Do you think this is more of a California experience?*

It could very well be. I'm sure there are places you can go in the Midwest where there's not *nearly* the level of diversity.

But the thing about even the Midwest is that, especially any place where you have an economy based on farming, there is also diversity because there are people who work in that sector who are at the very *least* dealing with the whole immigration issue and foreigners coming in to do basic labor.

*I just flew back from the Midwest last week, from Minnesota, and all my cab drivers there were Sudanese. And there is a big Hmong community there.*

It's creeping into everything, and all but the most ostrich-like are seeing that. You can build a wall if you want, but it doesn't matter. When so many people have already breached the wall, what are you building a wall for, really?

*It's almost like our culture is going to catch up with science, like there isn't really a concept of race, it's something that we applied for whatever reason. I remember running across some statistic not long ago that said, I think, one in four people born in Santa Clara County is multiracial. So the notion of what you are [racially] is just going to have less and less importance.*

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*Going back to our articles: My piece was about the relationship between the funder and the organization, the grantee, and I wondered, from your perspective have you experienced any*

*change in the dynamic between the grantee and the grantor? Is that transaction any more sophisticated or honest than it was before?*

I would have to say that I see a lot more reasonableness on

the part of grantors in terms of ongoing projects and ongoing needs, as opposed to constantly getting people to invent new things. But you still get timed out of the rotation for some programs that go on forever.

We have a problem here in that there are some really great funders with whom we just have run our course, but we've still got children to teach. So we have to find other funders or get back in the line or whatever we have to do, because that program they've been funding for all those years, on their timeline, they have to stop for a moment. But we've got kids to teach, and we can't take a break while they go off and do something else; we have to figure out some other way of funding the thing.

But I do find that there does seem to be less of the sort of feeling that you need to jump through hoops and reinvent the wheel in order to get a grant. And you do have to understand that we have to show results for the work you are doing.

But I feel like there is a little more flexibility in terms of rewarding what you're already doing well, and helping you do it even better.

*It's been about twenty years since the bankruptcy of the Oakland Symphony. I know you weren't around during the bankruptcy, but in looking back are there two or three things you could pull out that contributed to the demise? And can you point to a handful of things that you think are really the key factors that make the Oakland East Bay Symphony the success it is today?*

I think the big factor is programming. If your programming is sort of "we-know-what's-good-for-you," then you start to lose touch with your community.

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*Eat-your-spinach music.*

Another thing that takes it down is when you feel compelled to hire outside stars. Let's say you do something like the "Porgy and Bess" which we just did. To me it's a waste of money to hire some Broadway or television star to do "Porgy and Bess," a piece that is going to sell itself even if they've never *heard* of whoever is singing it. I think we've figured that out now.

There are only a few household names in the classical music business, and people are coming out to hear the Tchaikovsky piano concerto and they don't much care who it is playing it. Now if someone world-famous is there to play it, yes there will be some people who come for that reason, and that will give you an extra bump.

But we've figured it out now that that sort of playing from above and waiting for the people to come doesn't really work. On the other hand, playing what reflects your community's interest as you really look at your community and figure out what they are interested in, that is what an orchestra can do. That's what causes the orchestra to take off.

I think another thing that has caused smaller orchestras to have somewhat better footing than they might otherwise have is there's getting to be a more sophisticated approach to labor relations than there used to be. You have a good deal less, especially at the regional orchestra level, of orchestras acting like Teamsters. We've all figured it out now that we're not providing what society at this point deems a viable service, so the notion of acting like we're the same people who deliver the food is gone. Now that we understand that's not the case, then we can talk more rationally about what it is we're doing.

*I know back when I was looking at the orchestra that went bankrupt, there was a divide among the players around what their aspirations were. There was a younger group that wanted a more full-time kind of gig, as unrealistic as it was, and people who had other jobs and wanted it as more of an avocational thing.*

And there is still some of that, but I think that is pretty much resolved. There may be some players who still think that you can transform one of these regional orchestras overnight into a full-time job, but I'm not seeing that. I think people understand that you do what the Sacramento Philharmonic, my other orchestra, is doing right now: you combine with the opera season and some ballet and then some other kind of concerts, to get more and more

work. But the full-time thing is not coming back. People are just more realistic about that.

And then we look at the struggles of the orchestras that are full-time and are having to cut back or take pay cuts, and they understand that this is what it is, and it's limited in what it can be. In Sacramento we've discussed the notion of moving to something like a very small full-time corps, but not a full-time symphony orchestra because there's just no need. There's no market for it.

*Our little orchestra with a short season and no money is viewed affectionately by people for whom an orchestra was previously a completely useless enterprise.*

*Your tenure at the Oakland East Bay Symphony has been really unusual – seventeen years. It's almost like a successful long-term marriage, whereas some of the relationships*

*conductors have with orchestras are more like speed-dating. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how important that continuity has been.*

Well, I just happen to like [the community] where I am. I think if someone doesn't like where they are, the orchestra is almost secondary, because you've got great orchestras and great musicians everywhere. But if you're in a *place* that you really like to be, that is the community of which the orchestra should be a reflection anyway, that's what actually keeps you.

And then, people manage their styles very differently. The orchestra plays very well at the moment and we have some very good times in rehearsals. You know, after seventeen years my orchestra and I shouldn't even be speaking any more. You don't get along with everybody anywhere, but for the most part, we are actually happy to be together.

*There was something that really struck me in your article when you were talking about the Oakland Symphony. You said, "Our little orchestra with a short season and no money is viewed affectionately by people for whom an orchestra was previously a completely useless enterprise." I wonder if you could say a little bit more about the role of affection? That seemed to me really important.*

I think it's important, certainly, in sustaining a regional orchestra or an orchestra that doesn't have a huge endowment. If you have a bazillion-dollar endowment, you don't care what anybody thinks. And especially a regional orchestra, the fact that you can go to a far-flung part of Oakland, talk to somebody who never comes to concerts, who are fans of some other kind of music altogether, but they know the Oakland East Bay Symphony is doing stuff in the schools, they feel that the orchestra is doing some good for someone besides themselves.

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So there's community goodwill.

Exactly! From people who don't even attend. I mean, if you can achieve that, you're doing very, very well.

And do you think that was one of the things that was missing before?

Oh, I'm sure, because you wouldn't have had a large orchestra like that go bankrupt almost without anyone noticing if that were the case. If our orchestra gets in any sort of financial trouble, we put the word out and people are genuinely worried. Every orchestra has its ups and downs financially, and people are generally concerned and want to step up and see what they can do about it.

Why did it come back so fast though? It seemed like within a year or two.

I think we had a corps of players who were in a place they didn't want to leave. We had an audience who also were in a place they didn't want to leave; they didn't want to have to go over to San Francisco to see a concert. That sort of history of the orchestra players being a part of this community and having been so for a long time is what causes people to rally and get it back on its feet. It was undercapitalized when it got back on its feet, so the first years were very difficult, but still we had enthusiasm for it, and then you tie that with the orchestra's community engagement and you have something that's poised to at least do okay.

*I remember when we were interviewing for the Autopsy [Beene's 1998 case study on the demise of the Oakland Symphony] that there were people who actually needed grief counseling. I worried people wouldn't talk to me when I was doing my interviews, but then they wouldn't stop talking to me and they would call me up and they'd want to keep talking; it was like a limb had been cut off! For some people – those who had been intimately involved – the idea of not having an orchestra in their community was very painful.*

*But it seemed like the OEBS came back in a better way. I was wondering, what was lost by having to go through the bankruptcy? And was something gained by having to reinvent it?*

Of course you lose something. A lot of the infrastructure is gone. On the other hand, so are the traditions that you can't [otherwise] broach. That's the upside; get rid of all the old traditions and you can actually start to program and do things the way an orchestra in this community

ought to, as opposed to models based on something that started somewhere else.

*How many other music directors do you think in America are actually in their schools a hundred times a year?*

Well, I don't know if I'm in a hundred anymore because I'm getting old...

*You're not that old!*

*When we were interviewing for the 1998 case study on the demise of the Oakland Symphony, there were people who actually needed grief counseling.*

Fifty is a good number for me now. There's a whole set of us who do community engagement all the time. There are some of us – the more jet-setting conductors

– who think that community engagements, school appearances, et cetera, are not worth their time. Or, more likely, actually, the staff thinks it's not worth the conductor's time.

*So you were talking about being in the schools, but, more broadly, it seems like one of the things you did was redefine how the symphony was going to operate in this community, and put your stamp on it, in a way.*

Well, I actually put the community's stamp on it, because if you try to be an active listener and try to come up with what makes sense in that particular community, then ideas will just come to you as you get to know the community.

*Is there something special about this community that's different as a musical place than other places?*

I think that we have extraordinary diversity in terms of musical organizations and artistic organizations in the East Bay. That is really extraordinary. There are all kinds of music and dance and tiny little groups of people who are very, very good at some small corner of world music. The notion of a symphony orchestra trying to tie together as much of that as possible is really different than symphony orchestras that are above it all, and all of those things we're supposed to look up to in a symphony.

People *do* look up to it, because they understand the level of training that goes into being a symphony player, and in fact the symphony does have stature in the community. But the orchestra itself is looking for ways to tie together all those smaller groups that are very, very good.

*How do you do that?*

Well, you find ways of collaborating, you find ways of inspiring collaboration amongst the groups, and where



there can't be collaboration you still encourage them to do what they do.

*Do you think you actually have to be educated to like classical music?*

I'm on the board of the American Symphony Orchestra League and, during its strategic planning process, someone asked the question, "Well, what if they just don't like the music?" And the room just sort of fell silent because a lot of people hadn't thought about that – people just not liking the music.

And I didn't say anything because it was so obvious! I go into everything *assuming* they think they don't like the music, and that you have to show them that there are parts of the music they like, not to mention there is classical music I don't like! So I understand if they don't like all of it. There's no kind of music that I think I like all of.

And so if you go into situations just *assuming* that everybody thinks they don't like it, then you can point out to them the things that maybe they do, and that they won't like everything, and that you can then start to have some sort of a connection. But I thought it was just so obvious that I didn't say anything.

*Just saying it that way, you actually give people permission to say, "I can like some of it."*

Yeah, exactly! When people don't like a new piece, well that's fine, that's why we do a variety of pieces on every concert, so that everybody is served somewhere along the way during the program!

You know, in terms of idiotic things said about a piece of music, you get just as much from people who have been going to concerts for fifty years as you do from people who just walked in the door for the first time. And your job as the music director or the leader of the organization is just to smile and nod and say, okay, that's a perfectly valid opinion that you have, that's fine. Everybody does not have to like everything.

*So, I see you recently got an award from the ASCAP [American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers] for Adventurous Programming.*

The reason we weren't getting ASCAP awards [earlier] is because we were so busy keeping this place running that we weren't applying for them! There's an application you

have to put in for it, and the first year that we actually got the application in, we got the award.

What was kind of funny at the presentation was that we *won* in our category against two other orchestras. Everyone else listed every scrap of twentieth-century music they had; if they played "A Fanfare" from *Star Wars*, they listed that amongst their adventurous programming. We only listed our commissioned pieces and the new works that we played on our subscription series, that's all we listed. Our list was a tiny little list next to the second- and third-place orchestras with these *enormous* lists of pieces that they had played.

It was like the ASCAP was just waiting for an excuse to give us the award because

they knew what we were already doing!

*And also they probably knew you did it regularly even if you hadn't applied.*

Yes, they knew we had been doing it for years, because I've done a lot of work at ASCAP.

It's almost gotten to be like that with the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts]. If you don't have extra staff to actually do the NEA application for the dollar and fifty cents you're going to *get* from the NEA, it's not even worth your time! But you do want the NEA's imprimatur on your program, so people go through this enormous, cumbersome, pointless process.

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*When I saw you'd been to South America recently I wondered if you had been in Venezuela, where they have that amazing countryside youth [music] program. I wondered if that sort of universal orchestral education could ever happen here? I was so taken with the piece 60 Minutes did on it some years ago. Could you ever have every kid in your community playing in an orchestra? Or do you think it caught on there because there was nothing else to do?*

There's an element of that, of there being less to do, and so fewer distractions. And it would be hard for it to catch on in any sort of big way in America because we so overschedule our children that they wouldn't have time to practice anyway, because they're running from this to that to that to this, anything to keep from actually stopping and thinking for a minute.

*Or having a childhood.*

Having a childhood, exactly. Just staring off into space, you can't have them doing that, and if they stare off into space, someone's going to give them a drug to stop them from staring off into space.

On the other hand, every once in awhile I go to a place like the public elementary school here in Oakland named for [industrialist] Henry J. Kaiser. At Kaiser Elementary, every fourth- and fifth-grader plays an instrument. That's just part of the deal. If you're in the fourth or fifth grade, you play an instrument. Nobody thinks it's unusual, nobody thinks it's being weird, that's what you do. It's part of your school day. Musical, nonmusical, the interested, the not interested, everyone does it.

You could actually expand that out into a real sort of feeder system that would give you orchestras and all that sort of thing. But it's hard to do here, because we are so over-scheduled and we are bombarded with so much electronic information.

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*You know there have been all those critics and pundits, and stuff written about the future of the symphony orchestra. Do you follow any of that?*

Yes, I read it with amusement from time to time about the death of this, the end of that. Well, the sky has been falling for a century now, so if it's going to fall it should have fallen by now. But the thing that everyone has noticed is that our aging audience does seem to keep replacing itself. And so if you're in an art form that people seem to come to a little bit later, just be a little bit patient and let them come to you instead of thinking the sky is falling.

You do have to get out there and show them when they are young that coming to the art form later is an option. And I think that's the real thing for symphony orchestras, and not so much that everything we do should immediately "take" with young people, and immediately make them subscribers the next year; that's not going to happen. But you do have to plant the seeds when they are young enough that they see that it is an option later on.

*Well, it seems like with the baby boomers – this huge demographic bulge – entering their senior years, this should be good for symphony orchestras!*

It will be, except the problem is that some of the boomers came through schools with no music. And that's the other thing: if you've never really been exposed to it, there's really no reason why you would come to it later.

Grantmakers in the Arts Reader

*What do you make of this experiment with Joshua Bell playing in the subway and no one noticing?*

I saw it on ABC. Anyone who is actually in a subway system at rush hour is not there because they needed to smell the roses; they're there because they need to get from point A to point B. If I see someone playing in the subway, if it's someone who is really, really good, I still probably don't have time to stop and listen. I will give them some money because they clearly took the trouble to acquire a skill. But I still don't have time to sit and listen to them! That's just not going to happen!

*So it didn't really prove anything.*

It didn't prove anything. Josh is close to

being [a star], or as much of one as pretty much anybody these days, and, still he is not a household name. It's not like him being there would especially attract people.

*No, I was thinking the quality of the playing might have made some people stop.*

"Wow, that's really pretty good...I gotta go!" That's what they're going to do.

*But the number of people who even stopped wasn't very many.*

It's the rush hour in Washington, D.C. Who is in a subway at that hour with time on their hands?

*But you know, I've always felt the subways in Washington, D.C., were really dead places. I bet if you had a subway somewhere else you might get more people turning around.*

You might. There is the basic premise that in New York pretty much anything will draw a crowd, and that's just not the case in Washington.

I thought it was good for someone like Joshua Bell, a performer, to have that sort of experience. It's good for all of us to have that sort of brush with reality.

*Like confronting: "How important are you?"*

Yeah, exactly. How important are you in the grand scheme of things? I mean, I think about that with what I do all the time. I have some colleagues who are running around conducting *much* bigger orchestras, *much* more famous than I am, but at the end of the day, have they set any lives on a new path? You know, can they point to kids that are doing something entirely different because of something that they did? And I think, well no, so this is actually, you

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know, more lasting work than being *famous*-famous for whatever reason.

*That's a good way of looking at it.*

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*So in general, what's on your mind these days? What are you thinking about? What keeps you awake at night?*

I don't think anything much keeps me awake at night. I think when I see someone railing against the notion of global warming, claiming that global warming is a myth, it's not coming, there's nothing to it, I think to myself, well okay, I'm about to turn fifty, I won't be here when the end comes anyway, so really...you people just have at it, if you really think it's not a problem. So things like that are not worrying me.

I do look at the orchestra business and I think for me there's one big thing that I would love to see us address, particularly American orchestras; it's about the concert ritual, which I probably talked about in that paper too in ninety...whenever it was.

But it's not the part of the concert ritual that says "Don't clap in between movements," because all but the most dogmatic of us have sort of understood that while we would prefer, perhaps, silence between movements, it's hardly a crime if there's not, and it's this twentieth-century conceit, anyway, since when most of the music was written people would have clapped any time they felt like it. So that part of the concert ritual, what people wear, any of that, it doesn't bother me.

But what does bother me is that American orchestras put a premium on the orchestra itself, on the members of the orchestra, playing with as little movement, obvious engagement, emotional attachment, physical-emotional attachment as possible. And these same musicians, who do not play this way when they play chamber music, do not play this way when they play solos. They just sit there. If you do, for example, the Bernstein Mass, which is an amazing experience for everybody in the building, the dullest thing about it is the orchestra. Because we've actually put a premium on a player sitting there and not drawing any attention to him or herself, and not showing any obvious reaction.

*Why is that, do you think?*

I don't know what it is.

*Can you release these people? Can you say, "Imagine you're playing this as a chamber work?"*

Well, I don't know, you'd actually have to sit and talk to people; it would not change overnight by any means. You'd have to actually *talk* to people about the notion of why is it that we sit and we do this.

You know, because there are some people who are going to think it's a distraction if people move around too much. The Berlin Philharmonic moves around like a chamber group and they aren't distracting, and they are a truly great orchestra. It's engaging to be in the room while they're playing music, in a way that it rarely is for other orchestras. The Vienna Philharmonic, there's actually quite a bit of movement when they play music.

*Well, you feel music in your body; one should move.*

Yeah, you should move. If you don't, it cuts off your connection to the music. There is a concept that I use all the time that [will be recognizable] to anyone who has certainly rehearsed anything for more than about five minutes that had anything to do with rhythm. I talk all the time about people's "Inner Caribbean Woman," and everyone's got one. With one's "Inner Caribbean Woman," the point of it is that rhythm, your rhythm, is not in your head, it's not something you count one-two-three-four. Rhythm is really in your hips. And if you let it be there, so those parts of your body are still engaged, your rhythm is much more internalized, it's much more natural, it's much more organic. Sitting still and not showing any reaction thwarts that. That alone is a reason for not sitting there during an orchestra concert like it's Madame Tussaud's.

*Do you think you can start a movement to change this?*

I don't know! I've always wondered if I could actually write and talk about this without orchestras feeling like I was insulting them for being dull. But they are dull!

*I've talked about the orchestra experience being dull because it's visually flat. That's why some people like chamber music so much better.*

Right! Because people are obviously engaged. And this actually also goes back to our labor-relations question, because if you're enjoying yourself that much, why should we pay you any more? There is some of that going

on, too. If you don't look like you like it, then clearly you need to be paid to be here because you're being forced to do this thing.

*Pay can only go for something that's miserable?*

Exactly. Why should we be paying you if you're obviously having such a good time?

*On that whole good-time issue, do you think musicians are happier than they were a decade ago? Remember those studies done on job satisfaction? I think symphony orchestra musicians were down there at the very bottom, below cab drivers.*

I think it varies wildly from orchestra to orchestra. I think there are orchestras that have found some way to empower musicians. I mean, again, you cannot program orchestra concerts by committee, and many orchestras have proved it. You can't poll the orchestra for things they'd like to play.

I'm sure it's been since 1994 that I did a concert with the San Francisco Symphony, a family concert, where I asked for volunteers from the orchestra who would like to play a solo on some instrument other than the one they play in the symphony. I knew I wasn't going to get a flood of things, but I knew I was going to get some.

And boy did I get some interesting ones! I got a bassoonist who sang a baritone aria. I got a bass player who played the Habanera on the accordion with the orchestra. And you know, the audience loved it, and the orchestra loved it. The orchestra just erupted into applause after each of these things, because they had never seen these people do these things. Even if they knew they did it, they had certainly never seen them do it in *front* of the orchestra they normally play in.

*That is brave of them, actually.*

Yes, it is, and it shows a level of engagement that they don't normally get to experience. And the other benefit was for the audience. At the end of each of these pieces, the orchestra was obviously having such a good time watching this happen that it made a difference to the audience; the audience saw the orchestra enjoying itself, and how often do they get to see that?

*I think you should do seminars on having more fun!*

Visibly having more fun. Though I think orchestras actually do enjoy the music they play, they just determined

that they are not going to appear to enjoy what they're doing.

*That reminds me of a phrase that writers use; I'm not sure how it goes, whether it's "pain" or "joy." Something like: "No joy in the writer, no joy in the reader." If you don't appear to be having fun, it's hard for others to have fun with you. That circle of communication gets blocked.*

That's right.

*Well I can see a whole new movement: Finding Your Inner Caribbean Woman! Have you ever heard of your Inner Ethel?*

No.

*There's an Ethel Merman Memorial Choir in San Francisco, and several of my friends sing in it, and they're always talking about finding their Inner Ethel! (Laughter) And when they do you better stand back. When other people hear them, they want to find their Inner Ethel too!*

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*Do you have any idea about what you want to talk about in Taos? These are all grantmakers in the arts. Is there anything you want to tell them so that they can be more effective, or anything you want from them, anything you might want to know?*

I don't know if I was saying this in 1994, but I probably was: you know, there is community engagement and then there's *community engagement*. And I just don't think you can look enough at whether an organization has its heart in it. I'm interested in the whole notion of community engagement and whether some orchestras are just doing it because they think they're supposed to.

An arts organization or an artist that is really trying to connect with community is *very* different from someone who thinks they're supposed to try to connect with a community. And we are finding ways of putting forward examples of, or giving exposure to, people who are *genuinely* interested in feedback and making a connection.

*Are there ways to recognize this?*

Well, it's one of the things that I don't think there will ever be an objective test for. On the other hand, I think it's like pornography: everybody knows it when they see it. And I think it's something that funders need to be willing to make a judgment call about. They need to feel like they can trust their instincts about this, as opposed to feeling

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like they need to line up objective criteria, and if this organization is reaching umpteen billion people, they must be doing good community engagement for all the right reasons.

But it is not! It could be they just have a bigger budget. They can be reaching more people anyway just because they can pay more people to go out and do *something* under the heading of community engagement.

*And some funders too often rely on a lot of paper transactions and some grant department is writing all this language, and that doesn't necessarily mean that something authentic happens.*

Yeah, I would like to actually see more...more heart in the work of the grantors. That is, that they really are not just trying to cover themselves and have a lot of evidence about why something is a good thing or not. Because especially in these days a lot of things seem to be valued based on whether you can hit the right buzzwords in your grant application. I would like to see more grantors look at something and go, "You know, they don't really mean it."

[Then we have] other groups, which maybe aren't as slick, or maybe aren't even doing it as well, according to whatever the rules of the day are, but they really mean it. And we need to encourage them and figure out how to make what they are doing better, because they are actually genuinely interested in doing this.

See, I think the grantors would enjoy what they do so much more, as opposed to when you get the feeling that they just want the safest possible thing that they can

point to and say, "I have these ten reasons written out on this piece of paper as to why this person got this grant." Instead of, "I really liked what they were trying to do. I mean, I can't even say why I liked it, I just liked it."

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