

# Sailing

The seas are rough, but classical music is no sinking ship. Orchestras are confronting changing lifestyles, young artists are thrilling audiences, and fresh ideas, creative actions, and optimism are pervasive in the industry.



# into the FUTURE

By Eugenia Zukerman

“Get off the Titanic and into the lifeboat! Do your interviews on the Internet!” a friend urged me some years ago when CBS News’ *Sunday Morning* began to shy away from airing segments on classical music. That exhortation led me to start my own Internet company, ClassicalGenie.com, and to look for alternate ways to report on the art I adore. I’m hardly alone in my recovery and reinvention attempts, and despite the gloom and doom of much press coverage, classical music is no sinking ship. The seas are certainly rough, but look around and you’ll see energy and enthusiasm, rethinking and restructuring in every corner of the industry.

Let’s set sail by checking in with a beleaguered area of the art—American orchestras. They’re not sitting in dry dock waiting to be bailed out. Symphonies have embraced the new technologies and social networks. They’re investing in community, offering more services, creating cutting-edge outreach, cultivating new audiences, and actively advocating for funds.

“There’s a growing realization that every orchestra situation is unique, and therefore orchestras are more responsive to constituencies in their own cities and metro areas,” says Mark Volpe, CEO of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. “Thirty years ago we had subscriptions in 800 households in which two or three people attended 25 concerts yearly. It was something they did as ritual. But lifestyles have changed and there are so many options. Now we have many more attendees who may not come 25 times a year, but they come four or five times.” Another positive Volpe sees is that, with the declining commitment of schools to music education, orchestras are filling the void. He also



With the declining commitment of schools to music education, orchestras are filling the void, says Boston Symphony CEO Mark Volpe. Photo: Michael Lutch/BSO.

points out that orchestras are learning to make the case that they are part of the health of the economy. For example, when the BSO is at its summer Tanglewood residence, it becomes an engine that bolsters the economic strength of the entire Berkshire region. “I never miss an opportunity to address our state government representatives on this subject,” says Volpe.

Russian-born violinist and conductor Dimitry Sitkovetsky has made changes in his orchestra through an innovative



**Conductor Dimitry Sitkovetsky's Greensboro Symphony players were energized by performing chamber music with major soloists, and audiences have grown.** Photo: J. Henry Fair.

chamber-music program. In 2002 he became music director of the Greensboro Symphony and was determined to break down barriers between audience and orchestra. "In chamber music, everything you contribute matters," Sitkovetsky says. "You're involved in the whole process. It's an exchange of ideas, it's listening, it's not just playing the right notes at the same time." By asking each of his esteemed soloists to participate—for no extra fee—in a one-hour chamber-music concert with members of the orchestra, Sitkovetsky created a program that generated excitement. For the orchestra players, having the opportunity to perform chamber music with great soloists energized them. For the audience, it offered an intimate way to connect with the musicians. After each chamber-music concert there's a traditional gathering at the O'Henry Hotel with free food, drink, and conversation. One audience member who owns a car dealership was so taken with the entire experience that he offered to sponsor the concerts. With that support, the orchestra members (but not the soloists) now receive a small fee for their performances. Sitkovetsky has been made a visiting professor at UNC Greensboro, which he does gratis. Meanwhile, the audience attendance at the Greensboro Symphony has gone up. With a supportive board of directors, Sitkovetsky says he has great hope for the future. "Positive signs have to come from all elements," he says. "Everybody has to forget about their sense of entitlement. We

are in difficult times. We just have to adjust, compromise, and create a different model."

Farther south a very different orchestra model can be found: "The only musician-owned and collaboratively managed professional symphony in the United States," states its Web site. The Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra was founded in 1991 by musicians from the former New Orleans Symphony. "There's enthusiasm, growth, and a subscriber base larger than it was pre-Katrina," says the orchestra's CEO, Babs Mollere. "The artistic side is very vibrant, very



**The musician-owned, collaboratively managed Louisiana Philharmonic has an energetic spirit of survival, says CEO Babs Mollere.** Photo: Carlton Mickle.

positive, but to pretend that the economic problems are not significant and challenging is foolish." Mollere believes that because of its sense of pride and ownership, the orchestra is prepared to approach the difficulties with entrepreneurial energy and the spirit of survival. "We play 100-plus concerts a year. And to offer more value to the community we embrace technology to share what we do. We want to reflect the best tradition of what New Orleans has always meant musically." Led by Music Director Carlos Miguel Prieto, the members of the LPO are as dedicated as they are invested. With guest artists like violinists Joshua Bell and Vadim Gluzman, and pianist Gabriella Montera, "Something electric happens

onstage,” says Babs Mollere. “We are small but feisty, with a phenomenally deep and vibrant artistic personality.”

Personality has always been a major factor in the fate of a career in classical music. Interesting programming is essential, but now, when connoisseurship is minimal, much of a concert’s allure has to do with the charm and chops of the players. It’s the goose-bump factor that makes listeners want to return for more. Are there young artists coming up who have the stuff to raise the hair on the back of necks and thrill audiences?

“The quality of playing has gone through the roof,” says pianist and radio personality Christopher O’Riley, who is the host and piper of *From the Top*, a national radio show that features teenage talent from every corner of the U.S. “We’re seeing a number of our kids going on to extraordinary professional careers,” O’Riley says. “And we have a roster of kids who’ve been on the show who are taking the bull by the horns, going into the schools themselves with outreach programs they’ve devised. The message they bring—that you can do anything if you work hard at it—is powerful, especially coming from a peer.” O’Riley believes kids are “...making their own way. They’re enterprising, enthusiastic, they’re stretching genres, and many are creating vibrant ensembles that have a strong local following and will be able to branch out.” Are kids worried about making a living? “They’re too busy to be discouraged,” says O’Riley. “They’re always looking for new things, checking out new music, pushing the envelope. They’re not waiting around to be discovered.”

The old paradigm for a young virtuoso to be discovered was to win a competition, which led to a record contract and management. Today, for most players, that scenario is pie in the sky, and to figure out plan B is baffling.

Even for the most gifted, most accomplished, most charismatic new soloists and ensembles, finding management is a struggle. Some artists and ensembles are successfully self managing. But there are also new enthusiasts taking on the difficult task of trying to launch and/or maintain artists’ careers. Established agencies continue to work hard for their clients, but there are also many newcomers who seem to be finding their corner of the market.

One of the most interesting is Reggie Bahl, an ebullient young man from New Delhi, who came to the States with little knowledge of classical music. In 2004 he heard a performance by a piano trio with whom he’d made friends, and he was jokingly introduced as their manager. The jest made him ponder such a possibility, and he quit his lucrative marketing job in the shipping industry to begin a new career. This pushed him to think like a struggling artist. He took a crash course in classical-music appreciation and management. During the first two years he succeeded in getting more than 100 concerts for his sole group, Manhattan Piano Trio. “I traveled with them and met every presenter, building relationships, meeting new people who would guide me to other presenters.



Young musicians are “enterprising, enthusiastic, and stretching genres—they’re too busy to be discouraged,” says maverick pianist Christopher O’Riley. Photo: Wendy Lynch.

I really struggled to get attention from the big presenters, so if a major venue in a town was lukewarm in interest, I’d pursue a smaller site. I shared my ideas, and made sure the concerts were well attended by contacting local papers, schools, retirement communities, etc. Three years into my music management, I had a good clientele and so I started working with other groups.” Bahl is having continued success and likes that he’s “living the Bohemian musician lifestyle.” The artists he represents are doing a lot of outreach and music-education projects. “Classical music has a great future,” he predicts. And so, it seems, do the artists he’s representing.

Being entrepreneurial and creative are essential for success. Conservatories like the Manhattan School, New England



Bitten by the music bug, artist rep Reggie Bahl quit a lucrative marketing job and believes that “classical music has a great future.” Photo: Surbhi.



(left to right) Galina Zhdanova (violin), Erik Peterson (viola), Emily Ondracek-Peterson (violin), and Adrian Daurov (cello) of the Voxare Quartet. “Trends in new music are exciting and positive,” says violist Erik Peterson. “We’re not afraid to take risks.” Photo: Greg Kessler.

Conservatory, and others are adding entrepreneurial studies to their curriculums. Strategies can be learned, but getting noticed in a crowded market requires thinking out of the box, along with a dollop of luck and a lot of determination.

The Voxare String Quartet was founded just as the recession hit in 2008. Started by two couples—violinist Erik Peterson and violinist Emily Ondracek-Peterson, violinist Galina Zhdanova and cellist Adrian Daurov—the four of them went to school together, and becoming a quartet “just sort of happened.” By 2010 they had won prestigious awards and started a new-music series at Columbia University’s Teachers College called “Dig It.” But they needed visibility. A strategic decision they made in 2010 paid off. They watched all the silent Russian films they could find from 1929 and went through a huge chunk of modernist Soviet repertoire. “We had a feeling a concert with silent-film footage might lead to a nice review,” says violist Erik Peterson. “And luckily, the *New York Times* came to the concert and loved it.” The Quartet also transcribes popular and rock music and plays it in alternate venues. Stretching their reach into contemporary music, they are part of an international computer conference at Dartmouth that is assimilating electronic and acoustic music. “Trends in new music are exciting and positive,” says Peterson. “And those musicians

who are doing well have a real enthusiasm for all kinds of music. We’re looking forward to the future. We’re not afraid to take risks.”

Twenty-two-year-old composer Armand Ranjbaran is another risk taker. Along with two operatic baritones, Tobias Greenhalgh and John Brancy, the three created an educational outreach program (“Justice Outreach”) with support from the Juilliard Mentoring Program that exposes students of all ages to classical music through the fun and familiar guise of superheroes. It helps students discover what they enjoy doing

Composer Armand Ranjbaran (center), flanked by two opera singer friends, John Brancy (left) and Tobias Greenhalgh (right). Together, with help from Juilliard’s Mentoring Program, they created an educational outreach program to reach wider audiences. Photo: Philip Dorn/221 Creative Studio.



by equating the word “superpower” to “talent.” Ranjbaran grew up loving superheroes and comic books. Composing is his “main thing,” but once he met “two guys who looked like superheroes and sang like superheroes,” he thought, “We should create a classical-music piece that might reach a wide audience.” Written in 2008, *Justice* is a two-movement song cycle. “I got 75 of my closest friends to come together to record it, along with Tobias and John, and we presented it to George Stelluto, conductor of the Peoria Symphony. He suggested we try it out in Peoria.” In the spring of 2011, the pilot project reached 3,400 students in seven school visits. It was a huge success. “The kids immediately ‘got’ that if you’re good at something, like playing soccer, that’s your super power. The idea inspired them.” Ranjbaran is continuing to compose, and the two baritones are pursuing their operatic interests, but “Justice Outreach” has become the centerpiece of their career paths. “We’re doing other things,” says Ranjbaran, “But this outreach program is really at the core of our hearts.”

Reaching out is at the core of superstar crossover artist David Garrett’s heart.

He studied violin with Itzhak Perlman (among others) and composition with Eric Erwazen. At age 30, he fills stadiums in Europe and Asia with concerts that mix Michael Jackson’s *Smooth Criminal* with Mozart’s *Turkish March*, and he plays the traditional classical masters with style and prowess. As a result of his sold-out crossover shows, he says he’s begun to see more young people at his classical concerts. “I came to New York at 18 to study. I had virtually no support,” he says. “I learned not to search for success, but to try to find my true self. I believe it’s my obligation to reach out to the people who are not exposed to classical music. It’s such a strong language, that once you break down the walls, people see the joy, feel the energy, the passion.”

“It’s a problem of packaging more than content that disassociates the young from classical music,” says David Handler, a violinist/composer who, along with cellist Justin Kantor founded a very successful concert series at Le Poisson Rouge in New York City’s Greenwich Village. “When you consider that premieres in classical and Romantic music took place in spaces where there was a social component—flirtation, vibrance, revelry, drinking—you realize we’ve lost the spontaneity with which the art was once invested.” Handler and Kantor, then recent graduates of the Manhattan School of Music, found a place that was conducive to food and drink and adventurous programming performed by superb artists. “We came into this with tremendous faith in the curiosity of young listeners,” says Handler. “With technology being the enabler that it is, music of all genres is being disseminated. We discovered that people are even more ready than we thought to find the correlation between the driving distortions of death metal and Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, or the voices in Bill Evans and Debussy or Ravel. The music business is struggling to remain viable, but I believe music as an activity has never been healthier. The vital signs are very strong.”

**Superstar David Garrett’s crossover concerts mix Michael Jackson with Mozart. He plays the classics with style and prowess, and he believes “it’s my obligation to reach out to the people who are not exposed to classical music.”** Photo: Philipp Mueller/Decca.



**David Handler, co-founder of New York’s popular Le Poisson Rouge, emphasizes the “social component—flirtation, vibrance, revelry, drinking”—of the concert experience in attracting young listeners. “I believe music as an activity has never been healthier,” he says.** Photo: L. Ordovery.

Other entrepreneurs agree. David Spelman is a conservatory-trained musician who is founder and artistic director of the New York Guitar Festival. A publicist, record producer, film/TV music supervisor, and guest curator for performing-arts centers around the globe, he also loves the Jersey shore, and now lives with his wife in Ocean Grove. “I see the potential for presenting great work in underused locations close to our home,” he says. “I’ve started an arts collective called The Sonic Garden. It’s my aim to curate programs in bars, cafés, derelict buildings, and on the beach that rise to lofty goals.” One of his projects is to have the Flux Quartet perform Morton Feldman’s String Quartet No. 2, which is



Conservatory-trained renaissance entrepreneur David Spelman’s arts collective The Sonic Garden aims to present programs with “lofty goals” in bars, cafés, derelict buildings, and on the beach. Photo: Vasilio Sfinarolakis.

about six hours long, in a crumbling building the size of an airplane hangar on the Asbury Park boardwalk. “The space is mysterious and magical, and frequently attracts buskers and graffiti artists,” says Spelman. “I can’t think of a better place to present a free concert.”

Most concerts cannot be free, but elevated ticket prices are certainly a major deterrent to attendance. An independently produced new festival based on “the gospel of inventive

**Canny industry leaders David Foster, Mary Lou Falcone, and Thomas Morris banded together to create Spring for Music, a series of seven inventive programs by lesser-known orchestras at Carnegie Hall that garnered critical raves and enthusiastic audiences—for only \$25 a ticket.** Photo: Henry Grossman.



programming and calculated risk taking” (James Oestreich, the *New York Times*) addressed this issue effectively. With knockout programs from seven lesser-known American orchestras performed in ten days at Carnegie Hall this past May, Spring for Music offered \$25 tickets for any seat in the house, first come, first served. The three who designed the critically praised festival—Thomas W. Morris, David V. Foster, and Mary Lou Falcone—showed, according to Barbara Jepson in the *Wall Street Journal*, “what can happen when industry insiders act creatively.”

Fresh ideas, creative actions, and optimism are keys to the industry’s future stability. Efforts to rethink, restructure, and revitalize are everywhere, and with concerted energies from insiders and outsiders, there’s hope ahead for calm seas and prosperous voyages. ●

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