

CHIT-CHAT CLUB

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“Is There A Crisis In the Performing Arts? The Case of Opera and Symphony Orchestras”

Gentlemen, I want to talk tonight about the state of opera and symphony orchestras, here and in other United States cities. Both operas and symphonies have encountered some significant challenges in recent years, and as a long-time attender of both, I thought that for my first paper to the Chit Chat Club it would be useful to assess the health and future prospects of these important cultural institutions.

Before doing so, I wanted to give you a little background about my own experiences with these art forms. Like many other people in mid-century America,^[1] I had my first exposure to opera through the radio broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera that for many years were sponsored by Texaco. One of my earlier childhood memories is of my mother doing some dusting in our living room in Saratoga late on a Saturday morning, while she listened to whatever opera the Met was broadcasting that day. She also listened to opera records on old 78s, and even coaxed my father to go with her to one or two productions in San Francisco. Years later, when I had started work as a young lawyer, I remember going to a tailor's shop and also a shoe repair shop where the proprietors of these small businesses – one an Italian, the other a Czech – listened to Met broadcasts on the radio.

The first opera I attended was “Carmen,” which my mother took me and my sister to when I was 14. I found parts of it very dull and, in the grand tradition of male first-time opera-goers everywhere, managed to fall asleep during the first or second act. But I still liked the art form enough that I watched both Beethoven's “Fidelio” and Moussorsky's “Boris Goudonov” when they were broadcast in Sunday afternoon productions on NBC television during the early 1960s. “Fidelio” has never really engaged me, but I try not to miss any performance of “Boris,” even seeing one in Venice that was sung in Italian!

My serious opera-going began in my mid-20s, not long after I had begun working as a lawyer in New York. My new, attractive and rather socially-ambitious girlfriend had decided to buy season tickets to the Met, and I estimate that I saw four or five productions in the Fall of 1973. The girlfriend and I soon broke up, but I went back to the Met even after we did, and when I returned to San Francisco in 1974, I started attending productions here (an early one was “Tristan and Isolde” with Birgit Nillson and Jess Thomas).

There is a purpose to this long introduction: I think my personal experience is consistent with several recent studies showing that early exposure to an art form increases the odds that people will study and enjoy that art form later in life.^[2] I am living proof of this conclusion: not only did I have a good introduction to opera and classical music through my mother (who was a frustrated music teacher), but also a good introduction to classical and Renaissance art in the 7th grade in the Saratoga public schools. After that introduction was reinforced by a good art history course in college, I became a consistent and devoted museum and gallery-goer, as well.

The Finances of Modern Opera Companies

Before we discuss the artistic problems of modern-day opera companies, it helps to put their financial situation in context.

As some of you probably know, Joseph Volpe recently retired as the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, a job he held for 16 years. Volpe's tenure is all the more impressive because he started at the Met as an assistant carpenter, building and putting up sets, in 1964. Since his retirement, Volpe has joined Rudy Giuliani's consulting firm and written his autobiography.^[3] In the autobiography, Volpe notes that in 2005-06, the Met had a budget of \$221 million, which is roughly equivalent to the combined budgets of the next five largest opera companies in the United States, including San Francisco. (Volpe, p. 250.) Here is what he says about the sources for this large budget:

“Where does the Met get the money to pay for all this? Box office revenue covers 46 percent of the expenses -- \$101 million. The Met's endowment, which currently totals \$300 million, contributes \$18 million. The Met's share of the all-important Lincoln Center garage and other common revenues brings in \$10 million. When it's all added up, we still come up short – to the tune of about \$92 million. That's a lot of cash to raise every year, especially in light of the fact that support from federal, state, and city agencies is negligible -- \$375,000, or less than one-fourth of 1 percent of the Met's total expenses . . . Foundations contribute \$5 million; corporate giving comes to \$7 million.

“That still leaves a very large hole. To fill it, the Met turns to its far-flung ‘family’ – at last count, some 125,000 private donors, whose annual gifts range from \$60 to more than \$500,000, and who provide almost \$80 million, or 85 percent of total contributions . . . Two-thirds of Met donors live outside the New York metropolitan area. Somehow, the Met, in its 123-year history, has gone from being a plaything of the rich to a real grassroots organization.” (Volpe, p. 251.)

Although it is on a smaller scale, the financial picture for the San Francisco Opera is not dissimilar. Out of a total annual budget of about \$45-50 million (and a much shorter season than New York's), ticket sales contribute less than half the revenue needed to run the company. The rest comes largely from private donations, some from foundations, and very little from business or government (including the Hotel Tax Fund). Although her tenure as General Manager San Francisco Opera was controversial in many respects, one of the good things Pamela Rosenberg did was to face up to the fact that for many years, SF Opera had been living beyond its means by dipping into capital (as well as praying for very large bequests), and that this practice must cease. However, even with this change, the bottom line for San Francisco Opera, as those of you who get their seemingly endless fund appeals know, is that opera in this city, like most others in America, is always in a pretty precarious financial state.

The Challenge of Attracting Audiences in the New Century

In his autobiography, Joe Volpe not only addresses the financial challenges facing the Met's future, but the challenges of audience development as well. The following passage encapsulates, in a nutshell, one of the principal challenges facing all American opera companies in the 21st Century:

“There's no doubt that the Met, like all other American opera companies, ballet companies, symphony orchestras, and concert halls, is audience-challenged. Many people are fond of calling the situation a 'crisis,' but I'll stick with challenge. The situation is serious but I don't believe it's beyond fixing. Still, it's not going to be a quick fix.

“In stark terms, the Met is attracting fewer patrons today than it did before the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Before then, the Met's box office had been selling at a rate of slightly more than 90 percent each season since 1990. The 2001-2002 season's box office plummeted to 82 percent. Since then, the drop has been less dramatic. The 2004-2005 box office sold at a level of 79 percent.

“One of the chief reasons for the decline in ticket sales, of course, is the decline in tourism in New York, post-9/11 – a trend that's been encouraged by the incessant drumbeat about terrorism coming out of Washington and by ongoing anxieties about the American economy. People just aren't going out as much as they used to. Before 9/11, 8 percent of the Met's patrons were Japanese tourists. After 9/11, the Japanese stayed home – as did the Italians, the French, the Germans, the Dutch, the Scandinavians, the Spanish, the British, the Australians, the South Americans, and many North Americans who live beyond the Boston-New York-Washington corridor. But the problem didn't start with the destruction of the Twin Towers. And it won't end when tourists return to the Big Apple.” (Volpe, pp. 261-262.)

Other contributing factors to the audience decline that Volpe identifies include a sharp fall-off in season subscriptions and much more last-minute ticket buying. In Rudolph Bing's time -- and I'm sure most of us remember him because of his fights with Maria Callas -- subscription sales accounted for 75% of the Met's ticket sales; today they account for less than 50%. Volpe also notes that many people who used to go to New York to see the Met now stay home because they have a local opera company to support, raising the issue of whether the supply of opera is beginning to exceed demand. Finally, Volpe puts a good part of the blame on what he terms “the general abandonment of music education, not just in the schools but also in the media.” Opera is now seen as an “otherworldly entertainment” by people “obsessed . . . with pop culture at the expense of knowing anything about their roots in an older, deeper culture.” (Volpe, pp. 262-64.)

Not all of the problems Volpe identifies apply in San Francisco, but many of them do. Even though we have never been quite the opera tourist mecca that New York is, San Franciscans have had a nationally-recognized opera company since the 1930s. There is no question, however, that attendance at the War Memorial Opera House has declined noticeably in recent years, and that Bay Area people are staying home a good deal more than they used to. As a result, all forms of higher cultural performance in the Bay Area have suffered, especially post 9/11.

Another aspect of the problem is that classical music in general and opera in particular are less prominent mediums than they used to be. Volpe points out that 30 to 40 years ago, many opera singers' careers were helped by the large number of records they sold. Today, only a handful of top artists have significant recording contracts. Opera singers are much less well known to the public now. In the 1970s Beverly Sills substituted for Johnny Carson on the "Tonight Show", but it's difficult to imagine even stars like Placido Domingo, Renee Fleming or Anna Netrebko being asked to do that today. Even Rudolph Bing was a prominent figure in the 1950s (largely because of his fights with Callas), but general managers today are anonymous – unless they write entertaining, tell-all books like Volpe's!

Current Solutions to the Problem of Audience-Building

Although Volpe seems to argue that there is cause for concern but not panic -- because opera is an artform that has always attracted an older audience (the average Met subscriber is 66)^[4] -- there is enough concern about where future audiences will come from that both the Met and the San Francisco Opera have recently begun to try very new forms of audience-building. As you may have read, under the leadership of new General Director David Gockley, the San Francisco company presented several free simulcasts of performances in places like Stanford's Frost Amphitheater this past season. Gockely has been encouraged by the results and plans to continue. He has also continued San Francisco Opera's long-standing outreach programs to schools.

The Met, under Volpe's successor Peter Gelb, has presented simulcasts in movie theaters around the U.S. It charges \$18 for tickets to these simulcasts, of which six were broadcast this past season. The first one played to 21,000 people on 98 screens on December 30; the last played to 48,000 people who watched in front of 248 screens. Gelb says that next season, he expects the number of people who watch these simulcasts here and abroad to approach 800,000, about the same number who attend live Met performances. Gelb even expects to turn a profit next season! According to the *The New York Times*, the Met's experiment was Topic A at the recent meeting of Opera America, the trade association for opera companies, and people there wondered whether the simulcasts will be seen as the 21st Century equivalent of the radio broadcasts that began in the 1930s.^[5]

Although I personally think Volpe is right about the demographics of opera audiences, one would have to be a fool not to try new methods of interesting young audiences, given all the competition there is from pop culture, other forms of high culture, and the increasing pressures to "cocoon." After all, the young person you intrigue today may come back to hear live opera at the opera house after the children are grown!

The Situation of Symphonies and the Coming Tide of Young Chinese Performers

At least in my experience, symphony orchestras face a somewhat less acute set of challenges than do opera companies. But this is not to say they are non-existent: after all, San

Jose, about 10 miles from my home, had the dubious distinction of seeing its symphony orchestra fold a few years ago, although a successor company seems to be doing fairly well.

The San Francisco Symphony, by contrast, appears to have weathered the storms of the past decade quite well. I think the Symphony has been singularly fortunate to have Michael Tilson Thomas as its conductor during this period. He is a dynamic and attractive personality who, along with presenting the traditional war-horses, is willing to expose audiences to new material. He is also, along with Wynton Marsalis, the closest thing we have today to the kind of popular, dynamic musical educator that Leonard Bernstein was for my generation. But as many commentators have noted, the challenges facing classical music today are much greater than they were in the postwar period, and an important reason for that is the neglect of music and arts education in American public schools.

That is apparently not the problem in China. A recent article in *The New York Times* noted that while American and European recording executives worry about an aging fan base and declining record sales – a trend they blame on the decline in music education in public schools -- the opposite is true in China:

“China, with an estimated 30 million piano students and 10 million violin students, is on an opposite trajectory. Comprehensive tests to enter the top conservatories now attract nearly 200,000 students a year, compared with a few thousand annually in the 1980s, according to the Chinese Musicians Association.

“The hardware side has also exploded. As of 2003, 87 factories made Western musical instruments. By last year, the number had grown to 142, producing 370,000 pianos, one millions violins and six million guitars. China dominates world production of all three.”^[6]

However, even though millions of young people are studying western classical music in China, that does not mean there is always an audience commensurate with the students’ interest. The same *New York Times* article points out that the Chinese Communist party has wasted large amounts of money on “white elephant” concert halls for reasons of prestige, and that some Chinese feel the government has not yet made an adequate investment in music education for the general population. Moreover, while China’s rapidly growing upper middle class is willing to pay top dollar to hear famous western artists, they are not willing to attend often equally-expensive concerts featuring home-grown artists.

So where are all the Chinese conservatory students going? Increasingly, they are coming to the United States to study at our top conservatories. Another article in the *New York Times* series I have been discussing notes that all of the top conservatories now recruit heavily in China, and that the most promising Chinese students feel that the most elite training is to be had in western conservatories. The Times article quotes Lang Lang, the 24 year-old pianist who is the hottest thing in classical music at the moment, as follows:

“‘America has everybody coming from the world,’ said Lang Lang, who studied with Gary Graffman, the former president of the Curtis Institute. ‘You can find

every style in New York. I wouldn't have a career like this in China. China is great for fundamentals, for children. We are very disciplined. We have great traditions. But we don't have this kind of tradition that we have in Julliard and Curtis. Piano is not just talent. It's also tradition.””^[1]

The numbers certainly seem to bear him out. The same article notes that at Curtis, the great Philadelphia conservatory where Graffman still teaches, four of his five students were born in China, and that seven of a total of 20 piano students at the conservatory were born there. The article also notes the growing impact of Chinese conductors, many of whom work in Europe, but one of whom – Xian Zhang – was recently named the associate conductor of the New York Philharmonic.

So in 20 years time, we may see in American concert halls an audience that is as international as today's players. And from my perspective, that is certainly preferable to not having enough live classical music at all!

^[1] In his memoirs, Clark Clifford notes that he first met Harry Truman (who was then a Senator) at the home of James K. Vardaman, Jr., a St. Louis businessman who was a founder – along with Clifford's wife, Marny – of the Grand Opera Guild of St. Louis. In the early years, the Guild members gathered at Vardaman's home to listen to the Met broadcasts on the radio. Within three months after Truman became President in 1945, Vardaman had brought Clifford to Washington. Clark Clifford (with Richard Holbrooke), *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), pp. 45-49.

^[2] Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras and Arthur Brooks, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*, (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2005).

^[3] Joseph Volpe (with Charles Michener), *The Toughest Show on Earth: My Rise and Reign at the Metropolitan Opera* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) (hereinafter “Volpe”).

^[4] On the age of Met audiences, see Volpe at pp. 260, 263-65. Volpe argues that it is unrealistic to expect significant attendance at the Met by people in their 20s, 30s and 40s, because they are busy raising children, advancing their careers, and setting aside money for their children's education. Volpe seems more worried by the fact that the ranks of upwardly-mobile middle management, from which a large percentage of future Met patrons used to come, are “increasingly occupied by hardworking Asians who have no grounding in Western opera. Getting them into the house requires a substantial education process . . .” (Id. at 263-64.)

^[5] Daniel J. Wakin, “Met Opera to Expand Simulcasts in Theaters,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2007, p. B-1.

^[6] Joseph Kahn and Daniel J. Wakin, “Classical Music Looks Toward China With Hope,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2007, p. A-1.

^[7] Daniel J. Wakin, “Increasingly in the West, the Players Are From the East,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2007, p. B-1.

