

JOHN DEMAIN RESPONDS TO TERRY TEACHOUT OF THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The author is right. You don't just have an orchestra for civic pride. You have it because of what it brings to the community, and I'm not talking about going to concerts now. I really believe it's not just concert attendance that creates the case for regional orchestras. The Madison Symphony Orchestra thrives because of our relationship with the community and how important we think it is to give back.

First of all, the Symphony attracts first-class musicians who benefit the community in innumerable ways. The symphony sets a very high standard for classical music. Our professional musicians live and work in the community, they teach in our schools and universities, they give private lessons. There is a continuous proximity, closeness, a dialogue taking place. This results in more people being able to appreciate the performances and the art form.

When the great soloists like Pinchas Zukerman and Andre Watts come to Madison to play with the symphony, they do more than just give three performances. They go out into the community and teach master classes at the university, or visit high schools to talk to students about their passion for music.

The Madison Symphony Orchestra is there for the young people who are studying: look at our Up Close & Musical Program, which takes a quartet of MSO musicians into the schools to teach kids how to listen to this music; look at all the opportunities our young artists have to perform with the symphony, both for their peers and for a wider audience, with our Bolz Young Artist Competition & the Final Forte. Look at how many lives are enriched with our HeartStrings program, which brings music into healthcare and residential facilities. That's the reason this program has received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the International Society for the Arts in Healthcare and Johnson & Johnson.

Apart from what we do for our audiences, it is our educational mission that makes this regional orchestra so valuable to the community. Our education and community engagement programs really put us on the map nationally. Our director of education and community engagement, Michelle Kaebisch, is currently serving on the League of American Orchestra's Education and Community Engagement Leadership Committee, alongside the education directors of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the National Symphony and Kennedy Center, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.

As for following trends that try to dumb the music down, we don't do that here in Madison. The MSO doesn't do pops concerts. We have to keep the programming rich and varied and engaging. Sure, we play beloved works by Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, but we're always exploring new works as well. That's not dumbing it down; it's celebrating the beauty of a living, breathing art form.

I don't think the demise of arts organizations is limited to symphony orchestras. In this current financial crisis there have been countless victims, including regular businesses and theatre companies; just look at what happened to our Madison Repertory Theatre.

There are a lot of different reasons why they don't survive; sometimes it has to do with mismanagement, or underestimation of the audience, or too much duplication of product. For instance, Teachout writes about trouble with the Pasadena Symphony. Pasadena is about five miles from downtown Los Angeles, where people have access to the LA Philharmonic. You can see how that would be a problem.

Here, the nearest symphonies are 90 miles away in Milwaukee and 140 miles away in Chicago. Are you going to say that only those who live in larger cities should have a chance to hear great performances of live music, and the rest of us will just have to travel or miss out? I think this music is something we're all entitled to experience.

And it is possible to have a fiscally responsible arts organization. The Madison Symphony Orchestra is a shining example of that. We've just finished our 84th season in the black, and that in spite of a projected budget deficit last season.

One could argue that you don't have to go to the museum any more either, that you could see works of art online on your big screen at home. The difference is that when you go to a museum, you are seeing the art in a three-dimensional space; you can actually see the texture of the paint. Why go to a live theatre performance when you can watch a movie at home? To be close to human beings in a live theatrical situation is a very different experience.

I maintain that listening to classical on your fabulous sound system is not the ideal way to experience this music. People turn on the music and do something else, whether it's driving or washing the dishes or walking. In a live concert with hundreds of other people in a concert hall, there are no distractions. Your eye and your ear and your intellect are fully engaged in the experience. I'm suggesting that we probably don't listen with the same intensity outside of the hall.

Our audiences are being charged and excited; they stand and yell at the end of performances. They're not going to do that in their car. To me, this is about giving access, so the community can touch this up close. We're in the business of enlightenment, trying to make sure that everyone can have a fuller and richer experience on this earth.

We have to work as hard as we can to keep ourselves fully engaged in life and near to each other. Evolution and economics and invention may be pushing us in the direction of living in a virtual world, but do we really want virtual lives? We may be terribly sorry in a hundred years if we lose all this beauty. We're not holding onto this because we should. At concerts, people are having a real emotional experience, and it moves their spiritual beings. And they didn't have to go to Chicago to get it.

