

# Two Orchestras: Can They Live?

By DONAL HENAHAN

THE American Symphony Orchestra and the Symphony of the New World are a couple of peculiar fish, swimming upstream against the currents of this country's musical history. Both of them deserve to make it, and both of them need a lot of help. What the past strongly suggests about symphony orchestras is that their success and lasting power depend on two things: identification with a city or other culturally cohesive area, and a famous, preferably glamorous, conductor. As it happens, neither the American Symphony Orchestra nor the Symphony of the New World can qualify on either count at the moment.

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Some orchestras do manage to survive without one or both of those assets: the Little Orchestra Society, for one, has lasted more than a quarter century, and others come to mind as well, including the Clarion Concerts Orchestra and the Musica Aeterna Orchestra. But it does seem that unless an orchestra sinks its roots in a fairly identifiable community, it faces trouble. Few cities of any pretension, that is, will let their symphony orchestras go under, simply

out of civic pride and a vague sense of commitment to Culture, whether or not the citizenry cares much about music.

The obituary list of orchestras that have failed to establish an identity, however, is too long and painful to read. There was, most famously, the Symphony of the Air, which tried to make a go of it as a player-managed orchestra in the fifties, after the death of Toscanini. Many problems entered into the death of that organization, but the chief one probably was that people simply thought of it as Toscanini's orchestra. And Toscanini was dead. In more recent seasons, the toll has included Thomas Dunn's Festival Orchestra and Anshel Brusilow's Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia, neither of which managed to marshal enough financial or popular support. Although both had designs on special, fairly sophisticated audiences and offered something that seemed needed, real community identity was never established.

All this litanizing over the dead is not meant to prove that groups such as the American Symphony Orchestra and the Symphony of the

New World cannot succeed; they can offer 10 and 7 years of existence, respectively, in denial of any such proposition. But the pressing need to rally a well-defined, reasonably well-heeled and culturally cohesive community is a problem to be surmounted, and everyone associated with these orchestras must know it.

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The Symphony of the New World, which was organized as a racially integrated orchestra in 1965, has had no complete break in operations, but its 1971-72 season had to be interrupted while several factions fought for control. Benjamin Steinberg, one of the founders, resigned as music director when some members accused him of trying to change the objectives of the orchestra. At the moment, the Symphony of the New World has the black composer and conductor Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson as its acting artistic director, and relies on a series of guests to occupy the podium.

Although the dispute was not entirely a black-and-white issue, a strong movement did develop among the younger and more militant blacks to force the white players and board members

to resign. This, of course, would have completely changed the integrated basis on which the orchestra was founded, and at this state in history, perhaps, an all-black symphony orchestra might indeed be a justifiable venture. There is little in American fund-raising history to suggest, however, that such a transformation would encourage a rush of private and governmental funds.

And yet, the Symphony of the New World as currently constituted (at any one concert the orchestra will include a third or more blacks) is one of the more valuable musical experiments going on in this country or any other country. Under good conductors such as James DePreist or George Byrd or Everett Lee, the SNW has sounded very big-time indeed, in spite of the lack of rehearsal time that all such groups must face. Why then, the continual financial problem? Why have foundations been something less than magnanimous and why have private donors been so slow to support this extraordinarily worthwhile venture?

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Foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts have offered relatively small grants to the SNW, of course, and the state arts council has been a help. But only last month the orchestra was forced to concede that it was unable to match a one-one offer by the Endowment that would have meant \$75,000 in the bank. A few days before the June 30 deadline, the orchestra's manager, Lucille Dixon, said the orchestra had been able to attract only \$2,500 of the required \$35,000 from private sources. "We just haven't been able to reach the corporations yet," Miss Dixon remarked. "The \$35,000 goes back into the United States Treasury."

Nevertheless, this was the orchestra's busiest season so far, Miss Dixon says. There were four subscription concerts in Philharmonic Hall, three Black History Week programs in the same hall, four school concerts for the Board of Education, and one children's program at the Apollo Theater. Miss Dixon's aim is to take the orchestra more and more out into the community, because she

feels there are audiences that "relate much more to the music there" than in the regular concert halls. But since such programs are free, they must be entirely funded, and that is why any orchestra that wants to do school or community work must have its hand out continually to every passing foundation executive or arts council representative. Even so, it is worth pointing out how really little goes into the Symphony of the New World from all sources: last season the over-all budget was only \$200,000.

The American Symphony Orchestra, with a projected budget of about \$500,000 for next season, is in a slightly larger but similarly shaky boat. It has come back into existence, after a year's hiatus, as a player-managed orchestra, and plans five Monday evening programs at Carnegie Hall as well as five free concerts on Sunday afternoons at Hunter College that will be broadcast live on FM by WBAL. In place of its founder and music director, Leopold Stokowski, who resigned in the spring of 1972 to move to England, the ASO is being controlled by a five-member committee of musicians.

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Stokowski, who is 91 or some such improbable age, was invited to return and conduct a benefit concert in May, but that possibility does not seem a likely one. Whether he does or not, the American Symphony Orchestra realizes that it can no longer rely on Stokowski's ageless glamour, and its members have chosen as their new music director a relatively unknown Japanese, Kasuyoshi Akiyama. That may turn out to be a clever stroke: Akiyama made a strong impression on the musicians when he conducted here in 1969 and 1970, and the reviews were outright raves. But the New York audience will have to discover the 33-year-old maestro for itself, and that will take a little time. Meanwhile, the American Symphony Orchestra will have to shed its image, summed up in the common identifying phrase, "Stoky's old orchestra," and get on with the business of establishing

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its own reason for existing.

Both the Symphony of the New World and the American Symphony Orchestra might disappear without causing great waves on the surface of the nation's musical culture. We would still have, after all, our "Big Five" or "Big Seven" or whatever is the current number of orchestras whose annual budgets exceed the cost of paying off one Watergate burglar; but music in New York, at least, would lose a dimension.

Every large city, after all, has its Philharmonic or reasonable close facsimile. What has always made New York more interesting than the others is its cultural variety—profligacy, you might say—and its ability not only to spawn little artistic fish but to find ways to keep them alive. So, if the American Symphony and the Symphony of the New World must swim against history's current, this is a good place in which to do it. But it shouldn't be quite so hard. It really shouldn't.

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