

# Arts

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## MUSIC

**And the Band Played On.** In hard-hit Detroit, a symphony orchestra survives by reinventing itself

**A little river music** Concertgoers enjoy a Detroit Symphony Orchestra performance on the city's waterfront

BY DANIEL OKRENT

ON A RECENT EVENING, CONDUCTOR LEONARD Slatkin lifted his baton and signaled the downbeat for that unflinchingly lovable Baroque chestnut, Pachelbel's *Canon in D*. The music, played by 21 members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, was far less surprising than the venue—but that would have been the case even if they had launched into a Lady Gaga medley.

The site of this concert was the Matrix Human Services Center, a former church

Photograph by Mike Sinclair for TIME



in northeastern Detroit; the audience was a collection of some 70 residents of one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, all of them African American, many of them confronted with classical music for the first time. If it seemed like an awfully small audience for a performance led by one of the U.S.'s best-known conductors, the loud clapping and hearty cheering suggested that such music might have a future in Detroit after all—even with the city's excellent orchestra drowning in debt, its labor contract up in the air, its corporate donors largely tapped out and its government support reduced to nickels.

The DSO is suffering the same hard times plaguing many of the nation's other symphonic ensembles (*see opposite page*). As one attendee at a recent League of American Orchestras meeting in Atlanta tweeted, "Anyone else at #Orch2010 catch the irony of including a performance of the Verdi *Requiem* in the conference?" But everything related to the economy is magnified in Michigan, where the unemployment rate is a stomach-churning 13.6%. Other local cultural institutions are struggling too. The Michigan Opera Theater is staggering under \$20 million in debt. The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History is tightening its belt for the fourth straight year. The Detroit Institute of Arts, the city's most widely renowned cultural jewel, is audaciously—and riskily—planning to ask the region's voters to add what may turn out to be as little as a fraction of a penny to the property-tax rate to keep its doors open. But in southeastern Michigan these days, even so tiny a tax increase can look enormous.

### Detroit's Golden Age

SINCE THE ORCHESTRA WAS FOUNDED IN the 1910s, its fortunes have paralleled the city's. As one of a chain of orchestras that, with other public institutions, lent cultural cachet to the booming Midwestern cities of the early 20th century, the DSO was a vibrant presence at the center of southeastern Michigan's public life. But as the economy took a sharp dip in the early 1990s, a cash-flow pinch almost brought the organization to its knees. By the beginning of the new century it had come roaring back, putting together a strong run that culminated in 2003 in the \$60 million renova-



tion of the Max M. Fisher Music Center, a multipurpose facility wrapped around the DSO's 90-year-old jewel box, Orchestra Hall. In 2008 it lured Slatkin to Detroit from his 12-year tenure with the National Symphony in Washington. It commissioned original compositions rooted in the city's DNA, among them *MotorCity Triptych*, a robust, brightly colored orchestral suite by Michael Daugherty, and a sprawling oratorio of substantial power, *Dear Mrs. Parks*, by the jazz-classical hybridist Hannibal Lokumbe.

But Slatkin had barely picked up his baton when the economy crashed. Corporate contributions dived 52% from 2008 to 2009, which helped precipitate a \$4 million raid on the DSO's postcrash endowment. From March to October of last year, Anne Parsons, the DSO's president and CEO, conducted three separate rounds of layoffs. This year the orchestra's operating deficit could reach \$5 million—and that doesn't include the \$2.5 million annual debt service on the renovation, under a loan whose

terms the DSO is trying to renegotiate. Nearly 10 years ago, the orchestra received a \$1.6 million grant from the Michigan council for arts and cultural affairs; this year the state check amounted to \$20,000.

### A New Kind of Music

BUT IT'S UNLIKELY THAT THE 85 MEMBERS of the orchestra will be forced to pack up their instruments. For one thing, Bank of America and the DSO's four other lenders aren't particularly interested in owning a concert facility in midtown Detroit. More than that, though, Slatkin, Parsons and the DSO's players are working to reinvent

**The DSO's players are working to reinvent what it means to be a symphony orchestra in 21st century America**



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DONALD DIETZ—DETROIT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

## Low Notes. Tough times for top brass

### BALTIMORE

Musicians' salaries are being reduced from \$81,000 in 2008 to \$67,000 by 2013

### NASHVILLE

Musicians agreed to an extension of last year's wage freeze because of dire financial problems

### CHARLESTON, S.C.

A lack of funds forced the symphony to cancel the remainder of its 2010 season

### PHILADELPHIA

Even this member of the "Big Five" orchestras flirted with bankruptcy in early 2010

### All together now

Conductor Slatkin took a pay cut along with the rest of the orchestra—~~staff~~

what it means to be a symphony orchestra in 21st century America, convincing new audiences that such an institution is an essential part of a city's personality.

Thus, for instance, a June 18 concert at Orchestra Hall that had the DSO playing Bernard Herrmann's nightmarish score for *Psycho*. As a wildly mixed audience of T-shirted kids, goateed hipsters and larking baby boomers watched Janet Leigh's shower scene, the orchestra's string section provided the movie's signature series of jagged shrieks with a way-better-than-Dolby vividness. Or take Classical Roots, a program celebrating the work of African-American composers, which occupies a central position on the orchestra's calendar. And despite the DSO's financial troubles, its commitment to its 700-member Civic Youth Ensemble program has not flagged.

But concerts like the one at the Matrix Center are more indicative of where Slatkin and Parsons want to take the orchestra—to those new audiences that, they hope, will come to see that a sympho-

ny orchestra is worth not just saving but cultivating. "It's kind of a delivery van," says Slatkin, whose musicians have played everywhere from high school auditoriums in blue collar suburbs to a Salvation Army rehab center on the city's southwest side. Slatkin was similarly adventurous when he was music director of the St. Louis Symphony in the 1980s, but in Detroit, adventure has become necessity.

Slatkin also imagines a musical future in which the very role of a musician is redefined. "My job," he says, "is to increase the orchestra's revenue." He suggests that the ability and willingness to promote the orchestra and its music might someday be part of the hiring process for musicians. He even wants to offer public-speaking classes to orchestra members.

Among other things, public relations in Detroit means contending with the city's enduring predicament: race relations. In a city whose population is 90% African American, only three of the DSO's musicians are black. Rick Robinson, an

African-American double bassist who grew up in the inner-city enclave of Highland Park, calls it "the elephant in the room"—the dilemma of nurturing and promoting what remains a largely white art form.

When Robinson joined the DSO in 1989 and refused to attribute its overwhelmingly white complexion to racism, then mayor Coleman Young cruelly called him an Uncle Tom. But Robinson, whose own compositions meld classical, jazz and blues idioms, perseveres. He sees music as a potential healer in a region disfigured by racially inflicted scars. Promoting classical music, he says, can help him become "a pillar on the bridge between black and white"—a bridge he believes is necessary to his city's very survival.

### From "Keep Away" to "Come On In"

MANY PEOPLE IN MICHIGAN ARGUE THAT when a city's school system has collapsed, you can hardly make the case that public money should be spent on an orchestra. Advocates for public subsidies must also contend with the free-market argument that inevitably attaches itself to debates about government support of cultural activities. "Art subsidies rob Peter to pay Paul," says Michael D. LaFaive at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, Mich. "Who is to say your favorite art is more worthy of my tax dollars than my favorite art?" Pro-funding advocates say high culture is a necessary municipal benefit, providing jobs and luring talented professionals. Parsons (who, like Slatkin and the rest of the DSO staff, took a salary cut in the recent budget cutting) argues that "a healthy symphony orchestra makes businesses and people want to live in a city." Another way of putting it: losing its symphony orchestra would be a sure indicator of a city's decline, a signpost reading "Keep away."

Essentially, it's an economic argument, which is the kind that resonates most compellingly in Michigan these days. John Bracey, who directs the state arts council, will be handing out just \$1.3 million in state money to cultural institutions this year, compared with \$25 million 10 years ago. "We understand the value of a spot welder in an auto factory, but it's difficult to get policymakers to understand the value of a soundman for a symphony orchestra," Bracey says. "His job is just as important to his family—and to the state's economy." And, arts advocates maintain, it makes the state a better, more harmonious place to live. —WITH REPORTING BY KAREN DYBIS AND KRISTY ERDODI/DETROIT ■