Orchestra Programming

A Survey of American Symphony Orchestra Programming for the 2003-04 Season

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Abstract

Studies conducted in the twentieth century showed that large orchestras tended to program conservatively, with relatively few composers dominating the majority of concert programming. In this study I examined music programming for the 2003-04 season through a random sample of five orchestras from each of eight categories (N=40) defined by the American Symphony Orchestra League (ASOL). Analysis revealed that American symphonic programming favors the Romantic style period, and that the number of concerts for the 2003-04 season differed significantly across orchestra categories (p<.05), though concert lengths were statistically similar. A Friedman ANOVA used to test the rank order of program time devoted to music of each of the four most recent style periods (Modern, Romantic, Classical, and Baroque) across the eight orchestra categories revealed a significantly similar ranking (p<.0001). A one-way ANOVA showed that the programmed Modern music works tended to be shorter than works from other style periods (p<.0001). This study took into account eight orchestra categories, something not done in earlier studies. Style period analysis is recommended for the entire history of American symphonic programming.

A Survey of American Symphony Orchestra

Programming for the 2003-04 Season

Some of the most important administrative decisions for orchestral organizations of all sizes relate to the programming of subscription concerts. Programming decisions often result from a dialectic between the musical ideals of orchestra leadership and the perceived tastes of the orchestra-going public. Farnsworth (1969) suggested that orchestra programming is one measure of musical preference or taste.

The American Symphony Orchestra League (ASOL) has published data on symphonic repertoire annually since 1982 in its *Orchestra Repertoire Report* (e.g., American Symphony Orchestra League, 2003a). This report gives frequencies of works performed by composer, but it contains little analysis of the data. However, various scholars have examined the content of American orchestra programs for the 1842-1994 seasons. The authors of most of these studies used duration of works performed by composer as a dependent variable, and all focused on the largest orchestral organizations (Hall, 1977; Hevner Mueller, 1973; Kinney, Price, & Yarbrough, 1990; Price, 1990).

In the most comprehensive orchestral repertoire study to date, Hevner Mueller (1973) ranked the frequency of music programmed by American symphony orchestras by composer. She took into account only the main subscription series of orchestras classified as "major" by the ASOL (N=27) for concert seasons from 1842 to 1972. In addition to frequency of

programmed works by composer, the researcher took into account the duration of each work. She calculated that more than 50% of the repertoire performed (in minutes) during that period was by 28 composers. Hevner Mueller theorized that compositions go through a developmental life cycle similar to that of human beings.

Building on the work of Hevner Mueller, Price (1990) reported a high correlation (r=.90) between major orchestra programming practices from 1982 to 1987 and Hevner Mueller's findings. He found that 64 composers accounted for more than 83% of programming time during the years he examined.

Fogel (1992) studied the subscription concert programming changes of ten major orchestras for fifty years, from 1942 to 1992. He concluded that audiences over time paid higher ticket prices for shorter concerts, and heard music performed with louder dynamics. Fogel's analysis revealed that music of the Baroque period, which once constituted a major portion of large orchestra programming, had all but disappeared from the concert repertoire of these orchestras. The researcher attributed this phenomenon to the rise of specialized ensembles dedicated solely to the performance of early music, as well as to the appearance of chamber orchestra ensembles that programmed works by Baroque composers. Fogel also noted changes in the types of modern works programmed at different times during the period under study. He did not consider possible changes in audience taste.

E. Christine Hall (1977) examined data from all symphony orchestras classified as "major" by the ASOL (N=20) and six orchestras from the next largest category for the concert seasons 1982-83 through 1993-94. She reported similar results to those from previous studies, including the fact that American symphony orchestras dedicate large amounts of program time to music by a relatively small number of composers. She found that the majority of program time was dedicated to about 20 composers, 16 of whom had been part of that majority since 1910.

Manus (1985) surveyed 30 orchestras from the three largest ASOL membership categories about their programming practices for the 1983-84 season. Seven responded from the "major" category, and six each from the "regional" and "metropolitan" categories. She found slightly lower ticket sales and less financial patronage for concerts that included "contemporary" programming (works written after 1945) in the two largest orchestral categories, but no difference in ticket sales among smaller organizations (N=6) that programmed contemporary works. The results of this study should be interpreted with some caution due to the small number of responding orchestras and lack of a random sample. Moreover, the researcher relied solely on ticket sales instead of ticket stub counts due to lack of response from many orchestral organizations. A count of ticket stubs gives the number of tickets actually used as opposed to ticket sales counts, which indicates only how many tickets were purchased.

A large study sponsored by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation revealed that symphonic orchestra decision makers are increasingly out of touch with potential patrons (Brown, 2002). The researcher concluded that many audience members attend concerts "for reasons other than (or in addition to) the music" (p. 16).

The purpose of the present study was to continue the line of inquiry regarding orchestral programming and to expand it to include the 2003-04 season by: (a) investigating the programming practices of the standard eight categories of American symphony orchestras by musical style period, and (b) comparing the results with those from previous studies.

Method

ASOL member orchestras for the 2003-04 season (N=794) served as the population for this study. ASOL divides its membership into eight standard categories (a-h) based on the size of their annual budgets: (a) more than $13,250,000

Table 1 **Sample orchestras ASOL category (N=40)**

Cat.	Orchestra	Cat.	Orchestra
A	Atlanta Symphony Orchestra	E	Berkeley Symphony Orchestra
	Baltimore Symphony Orchestra		Oakland Symphony Orchestra
	Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra		Roanoke Symphony Orchestra
	Dallas Symphony Orchestra		Santa Barbara Symphony Orchestra
	Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra		South Bend Symphony Orchestra
B	Columbus Symphony Orchestra	F	Akron Symphony Orchestra
	Florida Orchestra		Indiana Hill Symphony Orchestra
	Grand Rapids Symphony Orchestra		Muncie Symphony Orchestra
	Napals Philharmonic		Seattle Philharmonic Orchestra
	San Diego Symphony Orchestra		Stockton Symphony Orchestra
C	Alabama Symphony Orchestra	G	Bronx Symphony Orchestra
	Hartford Symphony Orchestra		Johnson City Symphony Orchestra
	Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra		New Haven Symphony Orchestra
	Omaha Symphony Orchestra		Southern Great Lakes Orchestra
	Virginia Symphony Orchestra		Wenatchee Symphony Orchestra
D	Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra	H	Arkansas Symphony Orchestra
	Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra		Kansas City Symphony Orchestra
	Pasadena Symphony Orchestra		North Penn Symphony Orchestra
	Rapides Symphony Orchestra		Orchard Park Symphony Orchestra
	Santa Rosa Symphony Orchestra		Southeast Iowa Symphony Orchestra

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(N=23), (b) $4,800,000 - $13,250,000 (N=23), (c) $2,400,000 - $4,800,000 (N=28), (d) $1,600,000 - $2,400,000 (N=29), (e) $870,000 - $1,600,000 (N=41), (f) $285,000 - $870,000 (N=100), (g) $60,000 - $385,000 (N=167), and (h) less than $60,000 (N=142) (American Symphony Orchestra League, 2003b). Five orchestras were selected randomly from each category, for a stratified random sample of 40 organizations (see Table 1). ASOL includes pops organizations and those that specialize in unique repertoire, such as The American Composer's Symphony Orchestra and the Music of the Baroque Chorus and Orchestra, in its eight budget categories. There are additional categories for youth and college orchestras as well. All "pops," youth, and specialty orchestras were excluded from this study and replaced with the next randomly selected qualified orchestra from that category (strata).

For the purposes of this study, "program" refers to a single concert. Repeat performances of the same repertoire on other concerts were not counted. A list of works programmed for the 2003-04 orchestral season was obtained for each of the 40 orchestras through listings posted on the internet or by regular post. A total of 1,066 works resulted. The durations for most of the works were taken from *Orchestral Music: A Handbook*, Third Edition (Daniels, 1996). Internet sources were used to determine the duration of most other works. For obscure works or those with unclear listings, the respective symphonic organization was contacted for information about the work's duration. For 18 obscure listings (less than 2% of the total sample) for which durations could not be derived from the aforementioned sources, the known durations of works on the concert on which the obscure works appeared were subtracted from the mean concert time for that particular orchestra.

All programmed works were classified as Baroque, Classical, Romantic, or Modern (Grout, 1960; Swafford, 1992). World premiers were treated as unique events and not analyzed. ASOL reports that there were 109 world premiers during the 2003-04 season. Information about style period categories for major composers was taken from the Vintage Guide to Classical Music: An Indispensable Guide for Understanding and Enjoying Classical Music (Swafford, 1992). Life dates were used for composers not included in this source, minus the first 20 years of each composer's life. All works by a given composer were categorized in the same period (e.g., late Beethoven was categorized as "classical") (e.g., Grout, 1960; Swafford, 1992). Data were also compiled for each composer as to frequency of programmed works and total number of minutes programmed.

The dependent variable in this study was the number of minutes of music programmed for the 2003-04 season main subscription series. Independent variables were ASOL category, musical style period, and composer.

Results

Chi-square analysis revealed that the number of concerts for the 40 orchestras sampled for the 2003-04 season differed significantly by orchestra classification ($X^2 = 22.89$, df=7, p<.05). The mean number of concerts ranged from 20 concerts by orchestras from the largest category (a) to four concerts by orchestras from the two smallest categories ((g) and (h)). The mean concert length was 71 minutes of music (SD=7.04), with a median of 72 and a range of 58-80 (see Table 2). A Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that concert lengths did not differ significantly by

Table 2

Mean number of concerts and minutes of programmed music by orchestra category

Orchestra Category	N	Mean Number of Concerts (SD)	Mean Minutes of Music Per Concert (SD)
(a) More than $13,250,000	5	20 (5.77)	77.0 (.89)
(b) $4,800,000 - $13,250,000	5	9 (2.79)	80.0 (10.69)
(c) $2,400,000 - $4,800,000	5	9 (1.94)	71.6 (5.13)
(d) $1,600,000 - $2,400,000	5	6 (1.52)	68.2 (12.8)
(e) $870,000 - $1,600,000	5	7 (1.92)	65.3 (6.83)
(f) $285,000 - $870,000	5	8 (5.59)	75.2 (5.32)
(g) $60,000 - $385,000	5	4 (1.64)	57.9 (22.47)
(h) less than $60,000	5	4 (1.14)	71.5 (11.34)
Total	40	8.38 (5.10)	70.84 (7.04)

orchestra category (H=7.0, df=7, p<.429). The mean overall percentages based on the number of minutes of music by style periods were Romantic, 45%; Modern, 31%; Classical, 21%; and Baroque 3%.

A Friedman nonparametric two-way ANOVA was used to analyze the rank order of minutes programmed for the four most recent style periods (Modern, Romantic, Classical, Baroque) by orchestra category. There was significant similarity by style period across the eight orchestra categories (?r2=20.25, df=3, p<.0001). Table 3 contains the means and standard deviations for each of the four most recent style periods by orchestra

Table 3

Means and standard deviations table for orchestra category and the four most recent style periods.

Category	Modern Mean (SD)	Romantic Mean (SD)	Classical Mean (SD)	Baroque Mean (SD)	Total Mean (SD)
(a)	31.31 (30.49)	32.22 (29.55)	13.45 (19.67)	2.24 (12.83)	19.81 (12.6)
(b)	25.81 (25.49)	39.36 (36.57)	14.83 (22.23)	2.19 (9.58)	20.55 (13.70)
(c)	28.33 (29.59)	33.04 (30.16)	10.25 (17.62)	7.25 (23.34)	19.72 (11.14)
(d)	27.35 (23.23)	29.04 (26.89)	11.81 (21.71)	3.92 (11.31)	18.03 (10.56)
(e)	17.7 (19.17)	29.37 (23.13)	18.19 (24.72)	.00 (.00)	16.31 (10.51)
(f)	27.19 (24.68)	35.45 (27.53)	12.53 (21.25)	1.21 (5.15)	19.1 (13.19)
(g)	8.62 (12.86)	24.24 (23.41)	25.0 (28.03)	7.29 (26.3)	16.29 (8.35)
(h)	15.95 (19.86)	45.45 (27.15)	10.14 (19.39)	.86 (4.05)	18.1 (16.68)
Total	22.78 (7.80)	33.52 (6.61)	14.53 (4.98)	3.12 (2.63)	18.49 (1.49)

Table 4 *Style period ranks by orchestra category*

Orchestra Category	STYLE PERIOD			
	Romantic	Classical	Baroque	Modern
(a)	2	1	3	4
(b)	2	1	3	4
(c)	2	1	3	4
(d)	2	1	3	4
(e)	3	1	2	4
(f)	2	1	3	4
(g)	3	2	1	4
(h)	2	1	3	4

category. Table 4 displays the rank order of style periods for each orchestra category. As a follow-up to the Friedman analysis, a one-way repeated-measures parametric ANOVA revealed that total program time in minutes differed significantly by style period (F=38.88, df=3, p<.0001). Post hoc analysis (pairwise with Bonferroni adjustment) revealed significant differences ranging from p<.0001-.031 between all style periods (Romantic mean=267.40, SD=29.26; Modern mean=206.05, SD=30.83; Classical mean=111.2, SD=13.43; Baroque mean=24.70, SD=6.53).

The style period categories employed in this study were applied to Price's (1990) list of the top 100 compositions ranked by frequency and total performance time from 1982-87. The order in Price's study was Romantic (59%), Classical (23%), Modern (17%), and Baroque (2%). The top ten composers with the most programmed minutes in the current study all ranked in the top 14 in the Price study (see Table 5).

The data in this study reveal that the ten composers whose works occupied the most overall concert time were Beethoven and Mozart, followed by seven Romantic composers, and finally Prokofiev, the only modern composer to make the top 10 list for the 2003-04 season (see Table 5). Among the total performance time allocated to the top ten composers, 60% was Romantic music, 34% Classical, and only 6% Modern.

A list of composers whose works were performed most frequently for the 2003-04 season is also revealing (Table 6). Interestingly, Stravinsky, Mendelssohn, and Sibelius made the top ten list for frequency of works programmed, but they were not among the top ten in total minutes programmed. This conclusion led to the hypothesis that the programmed Modern works were shorter than those from other style periods. To test this hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA was used. The mean length per piece (Modern = 23.14, Romantic = 31.35, Classical = 28.53, Baroque = 27.25) differed significantly ($F=13.25$, $df=3$, $p<.0001$). Post-hoc tests (Scheffé) showed significant differences between the Modern and Romantic as well as the Modern and Classical periods. This confirmed the hypothesis that the Modern works programmed tended to be shorter than those from other style periods.

Table 5

The most programmed composers (in minutes) for the 1982-87 (Price, 1990) and 2003-04 (present study) seasons

Composer	Price Rank	Present Study Rank
Beethoven	1	1
Mozart	2	2
Brahms	3	3
Tchaikovsky	6	4
Mahler	4	5
Rachmaninoff	13	6
Dvorak	8	7
Berlioz	14	8
Prokofiev	11	9
Bruckner	8	0

Table 6

The most frequently programmed composers for the 2003-04 season

Rank	Composer	Frequency
1.0	Beethoven	75
2.0	Mozart	69
3.0	Tchaikovsky	46
4.0	Brahms	43
5.0	Rachmaninoff	31
6.0	Prokofiev	26
7.5	Dvorak	24
7.5	Stravinsky	24
10.0	Berlioz	21
10.0	Mendelssohn	21
10.0	Sibelius	2

Discussion

The results of this study and others suggest that there was a great deal of consistency in the types of music programmed in the main subscription offerings of American symphony orchestras between the twentieth century and the 2003-04 season.

In the present study, Modern music made a respectable showing (31%), but it occupied considerably less program time than did Romantic music (45%). Classical music (21%) trailed Modern music by ten percentage points. Works from the Baroque style period were programmed once for every 33 works programmed from the other style periods.

In the future, it may be helpful for researchers to correlate style periods programmed with concert attendance. Studies of trends in total numbers of orchestral organizations and how those numbers have changed in American history are needed. Because this study focused on only one symphonic season, it could not detect trends in programming. Style period analysis across orchestra categories needs to be done for the entire history of the American symphony orchestra.

The relatively static trends in American symphonic main subscription series programming could be related to

increasing numbers of "pop" symphonic organizations and "pops" programs by traditional orchestras. An argument could be made that it is the function of the increasingly emergent "pops" organizations and subscription series to cater to those in the orchestra going-public whose tastes are contemporary, but who do not appreciate relatively esoteric compositions of the modern main subscription series repertoire. A comparison of pops and traditional programming by minutes, number of organizations, and type of "pop" music performed over time would provide additional insights into contemporary orchestral programming. Lessons could be learned from careful study of the recent classically styled pop phenomenon popularized by such artists as the "Three Tenors," Josh Groban, and Andrea Bocelli. Analysis of these types of trends related to symphonic music is one of the many suggestions set forth in the Knight Foundation study (Brown, 2002). Systematic research on symphonic programming functions like a mirror that portrays what otherwise might not be understood easily.

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