

## What's Happening to the Audition System?

by Elaine Douvas, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra

*[Editor's Note: The following article was submitted at the beginning of the year. Unfortunately, space constraints prevented a more timely publication. As a result, some reporting on the state of U.S. oboe auditions is no longer current.]*

It looked like a great year for oboe players, with nine fantastic jobs to try out for: principal in San Diego, Los Angeles Opera, Atlanta, Cincinnati, Rochester, and National; second in Minnesota; English horn in San Francisco and Buffalo; and several smaller ones too! But hope is turning to despair for the 60 or 70 players on the audition circuit, as seven of the nine auditions have already been held, but only three positions have been filled. In some cases a winner was chosen, but the job was not awarded. Instead, orchestras decide to stall—give “trial weeks,” hit the rumor mill, and beat the bushes for possible candidates who didn't go to the audition. In fact, some orchestras now want to preview the field before the audition, or before the opening even occurs. It doesn't seem right.

I play in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. We try to run the fairest auditions in the business, defined as follows: The screen stays up until the end. We are not allowed to talk to each other at all, thus barring attempts to influence others or assert one's taste over another's. Anyone may get a hearing, though some first hearings will be by CD. We do not invite a bunch of people to the finals, so as to have a few “in the bag,” as human nature dictates that people will judge the preliminaries more attentively if you have not already “skimmed off the cream.” The decision is made after hearing a 10-minute preliminary and 15-minute semi and final rounds. If you win the audition, you get the job—no questions asked, no trial weeks, no “nobody was good enough.”

How can I prove to you that this works, without naming names? “What if you get a real weirdo?” you might ask. “What if you get someone who can't blend in tone, personality, or ensemble skills?” There are two answers: You would be amazed how much you can tell about a person just from his playing, if you really listen in detail. Moreover, that is the purpose of the two-year probation period. Maybe you think, “They're in the pit; they don't need the same degree of soloism, creativity, or leadership that we do.” Wrong again. The Met plays symphonic and chamber concerts in addition to opera, and we value these qualities as much as any orchestra!

The Met has hired the young, the old, male and female, the small and the large, and (yes) the legally blind. Many of these great players were available to us because they had been passed over by other orchestras for non-musical reasons, or because an orchestra wouldn't hire anyone even though said musician had won an audition. We judge only by what we hear, and the majority vote rules. It usually works out fine—more than fine. Perhaps you know some of the players hired at our blind auditions who have gone on to international fame. I shudder to think how many of our amazing players might not have survived a trial week, the committee of 100,

or the rumor mill. Instant compatibility is not a fair test. You remove the player from the context of the dozens he out-played and put him in the chair for 100 orchestra members to search for flaws; often the result is a failure to appoint anyone. On the other hand, you could put him in the chair for two years and support him; more often than not he will perform better than at the audition.

“Doesn't it bother you to have only one vote out of 12, even when the opening is for your instrument?” No, it doesn't. Often, I did not vote for the winner, but experience has taught me that it will work out well. I trust and respect the system and the taste of the 12 judges, who all play the most closely related instruments. The other woodwinds have as much right to the decision as I do. Music Director James Levine respects the system too. He takes one vote out of 13, if his schedule allows him to come at all. He knows we will get him a fine player, and he is confident of his ability as a conductor to ask for what he wants.

Many of our audition winners were hired fresh out of school. Experience has its points, but when a young player can beat the competition while in his/her early 20s, imagine how far that musician can get by the age of 30! Regardless of age, it can take any newcomer some time to understand the conductor's philosophy and the taste of his new colleagues.

Maybe you are saying, “We should take all the time we want; why should we try to be fair to auditioners?” Because taking that time won't yield a better result than going with what you heard at the audition. Prolonging the process by inviting somebody's friend or protégé will not get you a better player. This will be proven later when your winner gets an even better job! If you don't hire from the audition, you encourage people to boycott auditions and try to slip in by the side door of politics. This is not in the best interest of your orchestra or our profession. It undermines the entire system and damages the morale of the group. Mutual respect is inherent when everyone gets in by the same fair procedure.

A common complaint by those who don't win is that auditions only produce note-getters with no special personality. Well, only if the majority so chooses! Do you know anyone who would choose a note-getter who lacked artistry? I don't. It's your vote, your taste, and your fault if you vote for such. Obviously, both artistry and instrumental mastery are required; there will plenty of overlap from which to choose.

Another argument I have heard is that how you play is only one of many qualifications for the job. “We need people who can give a speech, work the room at a donor dinner, go on the radio, or be an entertainer at a school concert.” To this, I would point out that there are many eloquent musicians who totally lack social skills but provide the greatest possible inspiration to their colleagues and to

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## Travels

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Here is a fact about the future of classical music: Last year, the genre of music that saw the greatest increase in downloads, an increase of over 22%, was classical music! That's right—the rumors of the death of our chosen art form have been greatly exaggerated.

I write often of my early years as a musician, where I was playing all kinds of music in all kinds of settings, some glorious and some unsavory. I was surrounded by mentors. There were sane and mundane people, crazy and brilliant people, and they all offered me an education into the world of music. I listened and I learned; and I heard all kinds of music imaginable.

But there was something else I first heard back then: the myth of the graying audience. I was told, back in 1979 when I started, that the audience for classical music would soon be dead.

And yet, when I look out at audiences today, I see the same faces I saw then. I see the young and the old, the well dressed and the sartorially challenged. I was thrilled on a recent visit to Avery Fisher Hall to see the youth that dominated the lobby at a New York Philharmonic concert. It made me feel a bit old! I left the concert that evening and wandered the streets of Manhattan, pondering how we might change the concert experience to insure that symphonic music continues to appeal to the older generation.

The playwright Eugene Ionesco wrote, "A work is not a series of answers, it is a series of questions...it is not the answer that enlightens, but the question." Maybe that is what I have learned in my travels. Maybe it isn't the answer that is as important as the question. I'm reminded of that Harry Chapin song, where he sang "It's got to be the going, not the getting there, that's good."

We must remember that this we did with our lives for a reason. I read a great article in a Victoria, Canada, newspaper recently in which there was this quote: "A civilization is not judged by its ability to generate income."

It is our job as artists to remember that. We must rely on our managements to present the other truth, the real truth, that the arts do indeed generate income for everyone in a community. Where our managers are not promoting that message, we must point out the tremendous opportunities presented to them by just how impressive our musicians are, both as artists and as human beings. The good managers will hear our message and thrive. The others will fail. This we assert without hesitation: It is a new day for symphonic music in America. ICSOM is spreading a different message. It is a message of hope. It is a message of the most profound community service.

Over 40,000 miles have I traveled, and over 40 years has ICSOM persevered. But, we've barely begun. Opportunity awaits, and the message must be spread. When I grow weary, I am comforted by the knowledge that there is a generation of friends performing on the same night, at the same moment, as I. There are mentors that went before me, and generations that will follow.

As *The New York Times* reported just last year, this can be classical music's golden age. In a world that is weary with conflict and hostility, we can serve as a beacon, a beacon that has every opportunity to grow brighter with every note we play, and through every life we touch. Some of the orchestras I have visited have generously said that ICSOM's presence has been inspirational. But, to those orchestras, I would say that ICSOM, and I, owe them our thanks. I have been inspired by every musician I've met and every orchestra I've heard. We exist because of our members, and, on all-night flights back to North Carolina, I am never alone. I hear their music, and I carry the strength of our community of musicians with me everywhere I go.

## Auditions

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the audience. Music is a language unto itself, and pure musical values are something we should fight to uphold in this era driven by glitz, glamour, and surface appeal. There will always be someone to give the speech.

So, I urge you in your role as judges: Don't be so insecure! Listen carefully and trust what you hear! Respect the majority vote, even when you don't agree, and trust that it is rare for anyone to play his or her best at an audition. Don't wait to copy the result from other orchestras. Don't withhold experience that the winner has earned and deserves. Banish the idea that there is one perfect person for the job, a god or goddess who will spring full-grown from the head of Zeus! There are many with the potential to be fine artists and leaders, if they are given the opportunity they earned by winning the audition. Don't drag it out for years, draining time and money from the auditioners and undermining everyone's confidence in a fair deal. Trial weeks put the whole thing into the political arena and increase the number of opinions exponentially.

I have watched the level of musical accomplishment rise dramatically in the past 30 years. There are lots of polished and imaginative players ready to fill the jobs. They shouldn't have to try out three times for the same orchestra. Put the winners in the chairs and let them fulfill their destiny to be music's next stars.

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