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On the difficult situation of Symphony Orchestras and what can be done about it.

Text of a 6 minutes talk given at the 2nd FIM International Orchestra Conference 7-9 March in Amsterdam.

(FIM stands for Fédération Internationale des Musiciens.)

Hans Abbing, 06-03-2011

- In many countries the situation of live symphony music and of symphony orchestras is indeed grave. In the coming years there is the threat and the chance of a loss of employment not of some percentages but of tens of percentages. Orchestras will stop to exist and/or they will have to merge and all the time there will be a considerable decrease in employment. Musicians will lose their jobs. If this threat does not yet exist in your country it will in the near future.

- At the moment in several countries the immediate cause of the threat is cuts in subsidies. Undoubtedly the financial crisis is an additional argument, but that does not make the situation less severe. The cuts will be irreversible.

For the decades to come public funding will remain important and orchestras can try to make their products more attractive again for central and local governments and that may slow down the reduction in subsidies, but a restoration of the old situation is impossible and the situation will remain severe.

- In the present severe situations everybody is now looking for an increase in sponsoring and donations in the private sector. In the short run this can bring some relief. However, if nothing else changes, the extra funding will be very limited and may easily disappear again. If the own product is not attractive for large audiences, in due time it will not only be unattractive to governments but also to sponsors and donors.

- What can bring relief however is more private funding through the sale of tickets and therefore through the development of products that are attractive for larger audiences and/or for audiences which are willing to pay higher ticket prices.

The fact that at present in a country like the Netherlands the average ticket price of pop concerts is 50% higher than that of classical concerts should be a matter of much concern.

One needs to convince audiences that when anno 2011 there are 75 people on the stage serving an audience of often less than 2000 people this implies that they get an extra-ordinarily rich product. Where else can this still be found.

- Moreover, it is absolutely necessary to develop new products parallel to the existing which will attract new and if possible younger audiences. It is my view that concerts in which there is less ceremony and protocol, in which the atmosphere is more informal and the audience has more freedom to move and in which there is a more personal and intimate contact with the conductor and soloists, will in the long run be the most successful line of additional products.

- Finally, it is inevitable to look into costs, production techniques and the size of orchestras. The production technique of the symphony orchestra is a nineteenth century technique. In that century labour was still cheap. But especially after the Second World War the cost of production of the large orchestras has grown much and much faster than corresponds with the rate of inflation. Up till the eighties governments were still prepared to cover the additional costs by providing ever higher

subsidies, but this is no longer the case. If ticket prices cannot become much higher this implies that costs will need to be reduced. This can be done by the application of new and unusual techniques and/or by playing more often in smaller formations for instance with smaller satellite orchestras and/or by more flexible contracts. In all these case there will be a loss in employment (and possibly also a worsening of the legal position of the musicians in the orchestras) but the loss in employment will be less than in the case of whole orchestra's disappearing.