

The high cost of beauty

When the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun was discovered in 1922, the world went agog over the dazzling beauty of the artifacts that had been hidden since his death some 3,300 years earlier. There were large pieces of gilded furniture, ornate masks, jewelry, and lots of hieroglyphics and paintings. The level of craftsmanship was bewildering, given the degree of antiquity. Other members of Egyptian royalty were buried in similarly grand circumstances, in tombs located under the great pyramids. And who built the pyramids? Slaves.

Big-time personal money always has and always will be part of the arts world. If there had been no Medici dynasty, we wouldn't have had Michelangelo, Leonardo, Brunelleschi, and Donatello, to name just a few. How did the Medici make their money? They were bankers, the wealthiest family in Europe. They parlayed their wealth into political influence, and many family members became important politicians. The family even produced four popes in the sixteenth century. If that implies it was possible to purchase a papacy, I'm surprised that Silvio Berlusconi didn't try it. A family tree I found online shows more than twenty generations of Medici between 1360 and about 1725.

We've learned a lot about the ethics of banking and investment in recent years, where executives use their clients' money to leverage their own fortunes, bring down institutions, and go home with bonuses that equal the annual wages of hundreds of normal workers. I'm not setting about a researched dissertation on the source of the Medici's money, but I'm willing to bet that much of it came at the expense of others.

Heavy metal

The Carnegie Steel Company was one of the country's first major producers of steel, and in the late 1880s and early 1890s, it developed important improvements in the manufacturing process, including open-hearth smelting and installation of advanced material handling systems like overhead cranes and hoists. The result was higher production levels using increasingly less skilled labor, and the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers struck against the Homestead Steel Works. There were various waves of strikes, and at first the union prevailed.

Henry Clay Frick ran the Carnegie Steel Company for his eponymous partner. He announced on April 30, 1892, that he would keep negotiations open with the union for thirty days, and on June 29, he locked down the plant and the union announced a strike. Frick engaged the Pinkerton National Detective Agency to provide security, and more than three hundred armed Pinkerton agents were involved in bloody battles with striking workers. The Pinkerton force surrendered, and the governor sent in the State Militia and declared martial law. There was a failed assassination attempt against Frick. The union was broken and collapsed about ten years later.

It was important to Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick to beat down the union because they had their lifestyles to maintain. Carnegie built a majestic home on Fifth Avenue at 91st Street in New York (now the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum) in which he installed a large Aeolian pipe organ. He paid about \$65,000 for the organ at the time when workers in the Aeolian factory earned about \$600 a year. Hmmm. The organ cost as much as the annual wages of more than a hundred workers. Not as bad as King Tut, but sounds about right.



Andrew Carnegie's house on Fifth Avenue

Henry Clay Frick installed a large Aeolian in his gracious home on Fifth Avenue at 70th Street (now housing the Frick Collection, commonly known as "The Frick"). These guys really knew how to build houses. Hank and Andy must have warmed each other's hearts living just twenty blocks apart—an easy twenty-minute walk, just long enough to smoke a hundred-dollar cigar (six weeks for that Aeolian worker). Frick also built a tremendous Aeolian in his summer home at Manchester-by-the-Sea in Massachusetts and gave a four-manual job to Princeton University. That's four big pipe organs built on the backs of striking steel workers.

Three years before the Homestead Strike, Andrew Carnegie paid about \$1,000,000 to buy the land and construct the venerable Manhattan concert hall that bears his name. The place was owned by the Carnegie family until 1925 when they sold it to a real estate developer.

I'm giving Mr. Carnegie a hard time, because at least some of his business practices were mighty ruthless, and the mind-boggling wealth that he accumulated was not a reflection on his largess. But it's important to remember that he was also an important philanthropist and the foundation that was founded on his fortune is still a major source of grants for all sorts of educational programs, scientific research, and artistic endeavors. Visit the website at www.carnegie.org.

I served a church in Cleveland as music director for about ten years, where a four-manual Austin was installed as a gift from the Carnegie Foundation in 1917. The Bach scholar Albert Riemenschneider of Baldwin-Wallace College was organist there when the instrument was installed—the perfect organ for a performance of Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*.

Among many other projects, Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie Foundation installed more than 8,800 pipe organs in America's churches and founded more than 2,500 public libraries. That's important.

Moving musical chairs.

On Thursday, October 3, 2013, Wendy and I attended a concert of the American Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall to hear Stephen Tharp play the *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra* of Aaron Copland. Until about three o'clock that afternoon it was doubtful that the concert would happen because Carnegie Hall's stagehands had struck the night before, causing the cancellation of the concert on October 2. They were striking over the rules for soon-to-be-opened educational spaces above the hall, claiming that they should have the same jurisdiction as in the great hall itself. Carnegie Hall's management took the position that as it would be an educational venue, Local 1 of the International Alliance of

Theatrical Stage Employees should not have such control. It's probably not this simple, but should Theatrical Stage people control educational spaces?

The *New York Times* reported that Carnegie Hall employs five full-time stagehands with average annual compensations of more than \$400,000 a year, with additional part-time union members brought in as needed. I know a lot of organbuilders who would make great stagehands, and Wendy was quick to say that I missed my calling.

The strike was settled in time for us to hear Stephen play with the American Symphony Orchestra. The *New York Times* reported that the union backed off, as it seemed ridiculous to almost anyone that a teenaged music student would not be allowed to move a music stand. You can read about that strike in the *New York Times* at: www.nytimes.com/2013/10/05/arts/music/carnegie-hall-and-stagehands-settle-strike.html.

It's an exquisite irony that the October 2 concert cancelled because of the strike was to be a gala celebratory fundraiser for the Philadelphia Orchestra, recently revitalized after years of labor disputes. Yannick Nézet-Séguin was to open his second season as music director in what was billed as the triumphant return of that great orchestra to its role as a national leader.

Vänskä-daddle

On October 3, 2013, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reported that Osmo Vänskä had resigned from his position as music director of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra. His action was anticipated. The musicians had been locked out by the Board of Directors for more than a year in a dispute that pitted the player's requests for salary increases against the board's decision to spend \$52,000,000 renovating the concert hall while claiming there were no funds to increase salaries.

The orchestra had long planned to play a series of concerts at Carnegie Hall in New York during the fall of 2013. Ironically, Vänskä was widely celebrated for having brought the MSO into new prominence with several seasons of brilliant performances and celebrated recordings, and the Carnegie Hall concerts were to celebrate the MSO's bursting into the upper echelons of American symphony orchestras. Vänskä had announced that the dispute must be settled so rehearsals for those concerts could begin on September 30. If not, he would resign. It wasn't, and he did. Former Senator George Mitchell, famous for negotiating settlements of disputes in Northern Ireland and steroid use in Major League Baseball, had been enlisted to help with the MSO negotiations—turned out that Northern Ireland had nothing on the MSO.



Joseph Pulitzer's house on 73rd Street

In the past several years, a number of important orchestras have suffered serious financial stress leading to labor disputes, including the orchestras in Philadelphia, Atlanta, San Francisco, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Chicago.

Eerily, on September 30, 2013, the same drop-dead-date for Vänskä's resignation, Norman Ebrecht of *ArtsJournalBlogs* reported that players in one hundred German orchestras struck simultaneously to draw attention to the increasing number of orchestras closing because of dwindling government support. There were 168 orchestras in Germany at the time of reunification in 1991, and there are 131 today. It's a big deal to lose nearly forty orchestras in twenty years.

Do the numbers.

I love to do goofy math. In the 1970s when I lived on a farm outside Oberlin, Ohio, I wondered how much corn might grow in a day. I measured a couple dozen plants in the morning, then again in the evening, and came up with an average amount of growth. I measured and multiplied to get the number of plants in an acre, then again by the number of acres on the farm. Of course I can't remember the numbers, but I know it added up to many miles of growth in a day. You could almost hear it while lying in bed at night.

I did that recently with the economics of a symphony orchestra. I found a list online of American orchestras with the largest operating budgets. Los Angeles tops that list at \$97,000,000. Boston is second at \$84,000,000. I stuck with Boston because it's home, and I got the rest of the information I needed. The BSO plays about a hundred concerts a year—that's \$840,000 each. Symphony Hall seats about 2,600 people. The average ticket price is around \$75, so ticket revenue for a full house is about \$195,000. That's a shortfall of \$645,000 per concert that must be made up by private and corporate donations, campaigns, bar and restaurant revenues, and heaven knows what else—if they sell out each concert. Read the program booklet of the BSO and you'll be surprised how many of the orchestra's chairs are "fully funded in perpetuity," named for their donors. Three cheers for them.

I know very well that this is bogus math. There are many variables that I've overlooked, and doubtless many of which I am not aware—but I think it's a reasonable off-the-cuff illustration of the challenges of large-scale music-making in modern society. You can buy a pretty snazzy new pipe organ for the \$645,000 that's missing for each BSO concert after ticket sales.

While I was surfing about looking for those numbers, I learned that the starting salary for a musician in the Boston Symphony Orchestra is about \$135,000. That's pretty good when compared to the



Henry Clay Frick's house

Alabama Symphony Orchestra where the starting salary is more like \$48,000. I suppose that senior members of the BSO must earn over \$200,000. In the business world, concertmaster Malcolm Lowe would qualify as an Executive Vice President and head of a department—worth \$250,000 or \$300,000, I'd say. But not as much as a stagehand.

I guess I'm laboring under an old-fashioned concept that the artistic content should be worth more than the support staff. Big-time stagehands are hardworking people with important jobs. It's not just anyone who can be trusted to fling high-end harps around a stage. But how many church choir directors would like to have someone else available to set up the chairs?

If the cost of operating a symphony orchestra seems high, get a load of the Metropolitan Opera. I found an article in the *New York Times* published on October 1, 2011, that put the Met's annual budget at \$325,000,000, of which \$182,000,000 is from private donations. The Met had just passed New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art as the arts organization with the largest budget. (Counting baseball, New York City has three Mets.)

I found a page on the Met (opera) website that listed the administrative staff, which includes the General Manager (Peter Gelb), Musical Director (James Levine), and Principal Conductor (Fabio Luisi), along with twenty-five assistant general managers, artistic management, design, production, finance, development, human resources, house management, stage directors, stage management, carpenters, electricians—a total of more than three hundred administrative employees. Add a symphony orchestra, costumes, make-up, custodians, ticket sellers, and—oh yes—singers, and you wind up with a whopping payroll.

Since I'm not a stagehand, I pretended I was going to buy one ticket online. I chose a performance of *La Bohème* on Saturday, March 22, 2014, at 8:00 p.m. I couldn't choose between a seat in Row B of the Orchestra (down front, near the stage) for \$300, or one in Orchestra Row U for \$250. And nearly half of the operating budget is funded by donations. If you take a date and have a nice dinner and a glass of wine at intermission, that's pretty much a thousand-dollar night, something stagehands could afford if they could get the night off.

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The source of much of the money that has funded the arts over many centuries is questionable, and it's especially difficult to accept how much of has been the product of slavery. But scary as that is, I'm sure glad we had the Medicis and hundreds of others like them. It would be a barren world without the art and architecture

that they funded. I have to admit that when I'm standing in a museum looking at a work of art, I'm not fretting about the suffering involved in its production.

Today's system seems more just—concert-goers buy tickets, and corporate and individual sponsors theoretically make up the rest. That works as long as costs are reasonably controlled, and donors can be kept happy. The problem with that is how it can affect programming.

If you listen regularly to a commercial classical radio station anywhere in the country, you would be able to list society's favorite pieces of music: Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, Beethoven's 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 9th, Mozart's 40th Symphony and 23rd Piano Concerto, Respighi's *Ancient Airs and Dances*—you get the idea. Organists know how hard it is to get a bride to choose something other than the *Tac-Bell Canon*, or *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*.

Lots of serious classical music ensembles, from local choruses to major symphony orchestras, adjust their programming to please their patrons. The box office at Boston Symphony Hall has a long-standing tradition allowing people to pass on their subscription seats to friends. When James Levine came to town as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, he increased dramatically the amount of contemporary music on the programs, and friends of ours who had long held great seats on the balcony above the stage asked if we wanted to take them over because they couldn't take all the modern music. We did.

And, in a related matter, the players of the BSO made public the extra workload brought on by Levine's energetic and imaginative programming. On March 17, 2005, the *Boston Globe* reported that orchestra players were concerned about longer concerts, extra rehearsals, and programming of exceptionally difficult music. You can read it online at www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2005/03/17/levines_pace_proves_hard_on_bso?pg=full. They cited aggravation of injuries and increased stress and negotiated with Levine to alter some of the planned programs. And the BSO Trustees created a special fund to support the cost of the extra rehearsal time. But smaller institutions with limited resources would not be able to do the same. So it's back to the crowd-pleasing favorites at the cost of innovation.

I've often repeated a story about an experience Wendy and I had with artistic patronage. An exceptionally wealthy friend, now deceased, was well known in his community as a generous supporter of the arts. He lived in a city that is home to a nationally prominent repertory theater company that was mounting the premiere production of Paula Vogel's *The Long Christmas Ride Home*. The play tells the story of a family's gay son contracting AIDS, with the main dialogue

happening in the family car driving home from a holiday celebration. The production was to include larger-than-life *bunraku* puppets that would provide the action less suited for the stage, conceived by the playwright, to be constructed by a New York-based puppeteer. Our friend was asked to fund the puppets, which were to cost nearly a hundred thousand dollars. He told us the story over dinner, saying that he hated the idea, was uncomfortable with the subject, but thought he should provide the funds because he knew it was important.

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Recently organist David Enlow and harpist Grace Cloutier performed a recital at David's home church, Church of the Resurrection in Manhattan, where the Organ Clearing House installed an instrument a couple years ago. At dinner after the concert, we were discussing the instruments we play, and I noted that with the exception of pianos and high-end violins, the harp is probably one of the most expensive instruments that musicians typically own privately. Organists have to rely on the institutions for which they work to provide them with an instrument to play. And they sure have gotten expensive.

I've always felt that a three-manual organ with forty or fifty stops is just about right for a prominent suburban church with a sanctuary seating five hundred people or more. But a first quality organ of that size will push, and easily exceed, \$1,000,000. It's pretty hard for many parishes to justify such a whopping expenditure. I grew up in the era when it was all the rage for churches to replace fifty-year-old electro-pneumatic organs with new trackers, and many organists fell into the habit of getting what they asked for. Those days are largely over, because now that we really know how to build good organs of any description, we also know what they cost! We have to remember what a big deal it is for a church to order a new instrument.

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I'm troubled by the striking stagehands. I believe in the concept of the



labor union. They were formed to confront real injustice, and in the strange and shaky state of our economy, injustices are still firmly in place. But this is a time when they've gone too far. That kind of labor organizing can threaten the future of live music in concert halls.

The Organ Clearing House uses Bank of America because we work all across the country, and it's convenient to be able to get to a bank pretty much anywhere we go. But we were not bursting with pride when *Time* magazine reported on November 9, 2013, that the bank was to be fined \$865,000,000 for mortgage fraud related to the Countrywide Financial scandal. At the same time, our bank is a Global Sponsor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Alvin Ailey Dancers, and the Metropolitan Opera HD Broadcasts in public schools. We thank them for all that.

Bank of America is also a "Season Sponsor" for Carnegie Hall, supporting the Hall's mission "to present extraordinary music and musicians on the three stages of the legendary hall, to bring the transformative power of music to the widest possible audience, to provide visionary education programs, and to foster the future of music through the cultivation of new works, artists, and audiences," as stated on Carnegie Hall's website.

So the concert hall that was built on the backs of striking steel workers, whose schedule was recently interrupted by striking six-figure stagehands, is now supported largely by a bank guilty of major mortgage fraud.

May the music keep playing. Sure hope it does. The stakes are high. ■

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