

Houston Philosophical Society

643<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting

Cohen House

March 17, 2011

Under the leadership of President Herb Ward, the Society gathered for a reception and dinner meeting.

Following dinner and the introduction of guests at each table, President Ward introduced the speaker of the evening, Marc Hanson, Executive Director and CEO of the Houston Symphony since May 2010. The Houston Symphony is a \$25 million organization that annually performs 400 concerts throughout Houston, including 252 education and community engagement services that touched the lives of more than 112,000 people, many of them children. Overseeing it is a natural step in Mr. Hanson's career.

A native of Boston with academic parents, Mr. Hanson was introduced to the cello at the age of four by a mother who wanted to complete a family trio with herself as pianist and his sister on the violin. He learned from this experience and his ability to study [music](#) throughout childhood that placing instruments in the hands of children inspires a love of music.

Mr. Hanson began his undergraduate studies as a cello performance major at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY. After transferring to and graduating from Harvard University with a bachelor's degree in social studies, he participated in the League of American Orchestras' Orchestra Management Fellowship Program that included a year-long leadership training program in three cities, including Houston. There he discovered the profession of non-profit management. And, as interim program engineer under Christof Eschenbach, he learned about the delicate relationship that exists between the orchestra, staff, and board of a symphony. This proved to be of help to him this year in learning how to orchestrate a new contract [with Houston Symphony musicians](#) ahead of schedule this summer.

Originally hired as marketing director for the Milwaukee Symphony, Mr. Hanson learned the importance of nimbleness when Milwaukee was searching for a new music director, a search that led to a career switch. He went on to become the Executive Director of the Rockford, Illinois and Knoxville, Tennessee Symphony Orchestras before returning as President & Executive Director of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra (MSO).

Mr. Hanson pointed out that, as it approaches its centennial season in 2013-14, the Houston Symphony is at a unique and exciting moment of artistic and organizational transition. Music Director Hans Graf has announced his decision to step down at the conclusion of the

2012-13 season. A search committee consisting of musicians, board members and administrators is seeking out his successor. Most important criteria for the search is the chemistry between the conductor and the orchestra. Without this shared bond of chemistry with the orchestra, the audience will be disappointed. It is also important to expand the donor base, to build the audience in the community, and to spread the symphony's reputation abroad. Thus, during this period of artistic leadership transition, the Houston Symphony is endeavoring to grow its audience, community reach, funding base, and reputation. Mr. Hanson's presentation focused on the strategies being employed or under consideration to achieve growth, including new concert format, innovative concert enhancements, multi-media performances, satellite performance venues, community partnerships, leveraged investments, and social media.

The most critical goal is a larger audience. Thirty-six percent of the Symphony's general budget is earned income, which is at the mean. The rest of Symphony's revenue is derived from contributions. Because the entire annual fund is derived from contributions, a larger audience should translate into a larger contribution pool and therefore a larger annual fund. Last year the Symphony had only 3200 donors. Therefore, a critical strategy is to increase both the audience and the donor base.

To help achieve these ends, interactive concerts on Friday evenings will be hosted by Miles Hoffman from NPR. These will begin at 7:00 p.m., instead of at 8:00 p.m.; and, at 90 minutes, will be shorter. The objective is to enrich the concert experience and help attract new people. Mr. Hanson stated that he loves to hear applause between movements because it means either that the applause could not be contained or that new people were attracted to the symphony.

Mr. Hanson is also initiating a drive to engage, innovate, and involve. This has included a concert series featuring close-up video images, such as a sound and vision concert that projected stories of holocaust survivors. Such innovation allows more creativity than was possible formerly. He has also invited questions and answers in an attempt to make the experience more meaningful and to break down barriers. Fort Bend County concerts are evidence of the belief that many people will enjoy the symphony if it is made easier for them to attend. Thus, the Houston Symphony will seek to launch more performances in satellite venues such as the Sugarland Baptist Church, which has sanctuary performance facilities.

Audience building also involves investing in larger scale art works, such as a performance of the "The Planets" and one of "Orbit" on February 18, 2012, in which images and music will be spun together to create land and sky, and a companion educational disc will be produced. This type of work has the potential to inspire and to educate. Business strategy will involve licensing out performances of "The Planets," and soon "Orbit," to orchestras as far away as Sydney, Australia.

Facebook, Twitter, You-Tube and other media innovations require that for the first time symphony staff has to be involved in social media. Facebook and Twitter have both enjoyed tremendous growth. These applications are downloaded in more than 50 countries. You-tube videos likewise enjoy huge numbers of viewings. WiFi loaded onto a Blackberry allows people to see what is coming up, to order tickets, and to discuss anything.

This past summer, Miller Outdoor Theater invited the audience to text in their favorite of three or four possible encores passed out on fans. The conductor announced the winner. The next night, a staff member sent out tweets throughout the performance. These consisted of comments that occurred to the conductor as the orchestra was performing about what he was thinking, how the orchestra was performing, or anything else he wanted to communicate.

As another example of the importance of social media, Mr. Hanson pointed to a core micro-site that allows fans to follow the orchestra on tour so that they can view the concert halls, experience haggis, or otherwise participate in the tour.

Mr. Hanson concluded with the observation that the cultural media are becoming a very important tool for the orchestra. He then took questions from the floor.

To a question from the audience regarding the high price of tickets, Mr. Hanson replied that -the orchestra tries to balance the need to support the orchestra with the desire to broaden the base. Thus all concerts have seats for low prices, starting at \$25.

Mr. Hanson replied to another question, seeking the common denominator for orchestras that have failed, with the statement that the common denominator is insufficient money to match the ambition of the audience as a whole or of one particular constituency. Detroit, for example, pays for a symphony that the community cannot support. It has gone from 25,000 donors to 4,000, partly reflecting the health of the community. In Houston, the donor base might be broadened by re-evaluating pricing strategies and communications so people will support the annual fund. Student performances are already subsidized.

Mr. Hanson stated that, in 100 years, an orchestra like Houston's can grow to world class from very humble beginnings, but it must be always pushing to get more money and stretching. One thing that helps Houston is that the Shepherd School of Music at Rice is at the top of the American conservatory system. By contrast, its \$60 million endowment is at the low end for top orchestras. The endowment needs to be at least \$100 million, which requires a larger audience base. Those who grow up with the symphony as part of life are more likely to leave a legacy gift. The symphony is also now trying to meet the Houston Endowment Challenge.

Robert Yekovich ~~The Dean of the Rice University of the Shepherd School of Music stood~~ up to observed that 38 percent of the Houston Symphony is represented at the Shepherd School and also that the Houston Symphony is surviving the economy downturn and has kept its budget in the black for the last two or three years, in part due to the efforts of Mr. Hanson.

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Mr. Hanson remarked that orchestras are clearly resilient. Denver, New Orleans, and others have come back and are doing quite well in somewhat different forms to satisfy the cultural needs of the community.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:30p.m.

Evelyn V. Keyes