Aging and the Careers of Symphony Orchestra Musicians

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Abstract

This study is of retired musicians from one of America's great symphony orchestras. The players were interviewed to determine: (1) details of their careers, (2) medical problems arising during the career and threatening it, and (3) attitudes toward music, the orchestra, and their careers.

The subjects, all men, came of age as professional musicians in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s when musical careers were very different from what they are now. Their careers began when they were young and most lasted 40 years or longer. They liked their careers for artistic reasons and because of the current success of the orchestra. Entering skills served well for a lifetime, in contrast to many occupations and professions today.

Medical problems were mentioned, but there is no medical problem endemic among professional orchestra musicians incompatible with playing to an advanced age. Wind and brass players retired in their 60s, earlier than some string players who continued to play into their 70s.

Most of the musicians did not continue to play in retirement, although some could have if they had chosen to do so. The principal reason for this is the high cost of maintaining an acceptable level of playing.

It is well known that symphony orchestra conductors can remain active to advanced ages. Von Karajan turned 80 and Solti turned 76 this year, and Toscanini and Stokowski conducted until they were nearly 90. Some instrumental soloists in classical music remain active until old age—Rubenstein played public concerts into his 90s, and Horowitz, Arrau, Serkin, and Milstein are active today at ages will into their 80s.

Likewise, there are elderly musicians in symphony orchestras, and the present study focuses on these instrumentalists. In contrast to recent papers by Fry[1] and Fishbein et al.,[2] who found high incidences of medical problems in professional symphony orchestra musicians, this study addresses symphony orchestra musicians who survived or were spared medical problems as well as the other hazards of an orchestral career and played long enough to retire. Who are these elderly musicians? How and why did they last so long? What effect did medical problems have on their careers? What were their careers like, and how do they feel about them?

This study concerns the retired players of one of America's great symphony orchestras. There are a few orchestras that are considered great, including those of Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, and Philadelphia. The experiences of players in these long-established elite ensembles are surely different from those of musicians in lesser orchestras and of free-lance players. The study does not include those who left the orchestra voluntarily or involuntarily before retirement.

Subjects and Interviews

The musicians studied were limited to the retired members of the symphony orchestra who still live in the greater metropolitan area where the orchestra is located. The historian of the orchestra, who maintains a roster of all past and present personnel, provided a list of 18 potential subjects. Of these, only two refused to participate in the study, and two more were in such poor health that they could not participate. The remainder (N = 14) were interviewed by the author, who is conversant with classical music and with the history of the orchestra. The interviews were conducted under mutually convenient and agreeable conditions, usually in the musician's home. The interviewees were assured that their names would not be used in publications of the study. A free and wide-ranging conversation was encouraged, although a questionnaire was followed for uniformity of coverage. The interviews, which focused on the above questions and were recorded in addition to notes taken with the subjects' permission, lasted 1 to 2 hours.

Findings

The subjects ranged in age from 57 to 90 years, and all were male. Most were in good health and were living independently in the homes they occupied before retirement. They came of age as musicians in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and saw many changes in the career of the symphony

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orchestra player. Most began their careers during the Great Depression. Most served in World War II, some in musical activities, but some in combat situations where they had little opportunity to play music. Their positions were held for them, and in their absence, women were sometimes employed.

The usual route to a musical career in those days was a high school education, lessons with a prominent teacher whose help was essential in entering professional music, a brief period in a lesser orchestra, and early entry into the great orchestra. Musical careers began at an early age if they began at all, and the subjects were talented players in high school.

The problem then was not so much getting into the orchestra but staying in it. Auditions were perfunctory, involving few competitors, in contrast to today when vacancies are widely publicized and may attract hundreds of competitors from all over the world. However, summary dismissal was possible, contracts were renewed annually, and each change of music director was a time of uncertainty. Some music directors are reputed to have dealt harshly with players. Today, after a probationary period of a few years, players are granted tenure and can be dismissed only for specific reasons, with inability to play one's part being judged by a peer committee. The players in this study, therefore, must be regarded as survivors of a difficult system.

The management of symphony orchestras has changed. No longer do trustees and large donors interfere in musical and personnel matters. Orchestras are run as businesses that employ professionals. Pensions, which were once granted at the discretion of management, are now a right protected by federal law and specified in the contract between the players and management. Musicians in the symphony receive retirement status with pension after a minimum of 20 years of service. The maximum pensionable service is 30 years, and once the player has retired, the amount of the pension is fixed according to the terms of the current contract. The stated retirement age of the orchestra is 70 years, but agreements between players and management are possible, so that players, including some in this study, continue on a year-by-year basis past this age. The great symphony orchestras differ somewhat in their retirement policies.

The repertoire of the modern orchestra has changed greatly from that of the past. Some classics have disappeared or have become pops concert fare, whereas the music of Mahler and Bruckner, for example, which was rarely played in the past, is now part of the repertoire of every full-sized orchestra. Some modern music has become part of the standard repertoire, and many modern pieces are dropped after a few performances. Ravel, Bartok, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Prokofiev wrote contemporary music that the subjects played, and while attitudes toward modern music varied, each had favorites among such composers.

Several striking observations emerge from examination of the information in Table 1: (1) the long duration of most careers; (2) the advanced age of some players at retirement; and (3) the lack of musical activity by most players after retirement.

Some of the subjects had careers lasting longer than 50 years. Long careers were possible not only because they began early, but also because players sometimes continued as active members of the orchestra well beyond the age of 70. The mean age at retirement in the United States is now between 61 and 62 years.[3] Why did most of these subjects continue working longer?

There is an element of love. The players liked their careers, with the principal reason cited being artistic, although they recognized that the opportunities for creativity

TABLE 1. **Data on Subjects**
(arranged in order of increasing age at retirement)

Instrument	*Age at Retirement*	*Years in Orchestra*	*Years in Full-time Professional Musical Performance*	*Muscial Activity in Retirement*
Brass	47	23	23	Teaches at university
Wind*	62	37	37	Does not play
Wind†	62	37	37	Does not play
String	63	40	40	Does not play
Wind	63	38	38	Does not play
Wind	64	21	31	Teaches at university
String‡	65	34	40	Plays in community orchestra
Brass	65	45	45	Does not play
String	69	22	42	Teaches
String	71	50	50	Just retired—too soon to tell
String	73	40	ca. 45	Does not play
String	74	46	51	Teaches and plays in community orchestra
String	74	45	50–55	Played professionally 3 or 4 years after retirement. No longer plays.
String	78	24	57	Does not play

*Player retired for health reasons
†Player disabled. Continued in service to orchestra as librarian for 12 more years
‡Player disabled

were limited. One musician phrased it well, "The composer is the creator, the conductor is the artist, and I was a craftsman." For the players of many instruments, the symphony orchestra offers the only career in classical music, but even players of the violin and cello, for which there are large solo and chamber music literatures, accepted the realities of an orchestra career. Some might have preferred to be soloists, but they realized that solo careers were not available to them, and they were happy to get into a great orchestra. The career of a musician in such an orchestra includes frequent contact with greatness—great music, great conductors, and great performances. (Tyrannical conductors who were great musicians are recalled with respect and even fondness.)

A related source of satisfaction is the collective success of an orchestra whose fortunes are very high at the moment. The professional symphony orchestra is probably the only team in our society offering lifelong employment in the sense that it consists of a group of specialized workers in a stable configuration performing diverse and complex roles in a tightly coordinated manner. The great orchestra must be regarded as a winning team, and there is satisfaction in having been a member of such a team and having contributed to its success. The players recalled less successful times of the orchestra with unhappiness.

Some dissatisfaction about their careers was expressed. The greatest dissatisfaction was also artistic and concerned playing, particularly rehearsing, for conductors who were less than great and with members of the orchestra who did not play up to their own standards. Another source of displeasure was confining and disruptive schedules—not only the rehearsals and concerts of the orchestra, but also tours, recording sessions, and individual practice, along with the teaching and freelance work that many sought to supplement their incomes. Added to these frustrations were the frequently unpredictable time periods between obligated activities which were difficult to use productively.

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Generational issues emerged. Several of the elderly musicians expressed their belief that younger players, while well-trained and the products of a formidable selection process, are less dedicated to music and to the orchestra than they themselves were. Younger orchestra players are the recipients of better pay and working conditions from the start. Although they are no real threat to the tenured senior player, the generations are products of different times with different values and expectations.

The anonymity of the symphony orchestra musician is perceived as a problem by some of the subjects. This anonymity may be amplified by the alphabetical listing of players in the printed program and by the system of rotating seating in the string sections of many orchestras during the past 10 years. In the past a player could measure his progress by gradual movement forward in a section, even if he never made it to the first chair. Subjects who had made it to the first half of the section expressed displeasure that they had to rotate and spend time in the back of the section. A player who had been active in the cause of rotating seating, however, explained that the orchestra used to consist of two classes of players, whereas now every player has the opportunity to play music scored for smaller orchestras, as well as to have his mettle tested by having to sit part of the time near the front of the section where he can be heard clearly by both the conductor and the section leader.

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There is a financial incentive to remain active in the orchestra even though the maximum pension is earned after 30 years of service. The salary of the active player is well above the pension and above the pension plus Social Security. The pension is increased at periodic contract negotiations, but once it is awarded, the amount is fixed for the life of the retiree.

A third reason that musicians may continue to be active to an advanced age is that some have few interests to be pursued in retirement. The work schedule does not facilitate the development of other interests, nor is the minimal educational experience of many of the musicians conducive to developing new outlets. One musician stated, "Those who have been to college have an easier time adjusting to retirement." Some of the subjects planned for retirement and looked forward to it or at least accepted it, whereas others dreaded it and put it off as long as they could.

These elderly musicians engage in the usual retirement activities including travel, sports, and hobbies. It is of interest that as good musicians as they once were, few continue to play music in retirement. They do not need the money, and so they do not freelance. Some continue to teach and maintain enough skill to demonstrate what they teach, but no more. Some played their last note at their last concert with the orchestra, and some have even sold their instruments. One of the musicians put it well. "How can I have loved it so much and then not play anymore?" The same man answered his own question. "There's no reason to keep playing at that level." Another player said, "The problem is maintaining anything I would be satisfied with." The active orchestra player plays several hours each

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day. In retirement there are no conductors, colleagues, or audiences to please and no new music to learn. There is no reason to spend the time playing with the discipline required in pre-retirement life. With some instruments there is little solo or chamber music literature, but even the violinists and cellists stopped playing, although the physical condition of some would have permitted them to continue. The player of a double-reed instrument pointed out that he has to spend time at the arduous task of reed making[4] before he can even begin to play.

These attitudes may seem surprising to the amateur musician who hopes to have enough musical ability left to enjoy playing in retirement. The retired professional orchestra musicians in this study seem not to want to play on as amateurs.[5] "It is all or nothing," as one player put it.

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Most of the subjects continue to listen to classical music, maintain friendships with active orchestra members, and go to concerts of the orchestra. They continue to enjoy music, but not playing it themselves.

Playing in a great symphony orchestra seems to be a more agreeable lifetime career than most, as evidenced by the length of careers and the responses of the subjects. The senior player in a great symphony orchestra does not become a victim of what some call the throwaway society, but is valued for experience gained in playing a large musical repertoire for a variety of conductors. This is something that a young musician, however good, acquires only after years of playing. Today's procedures for replacing a retiring player are cumbersome and time-consuming and may be an impediment to turnover. Even contemporary orchestral music, which sometimes requires modified approaches and techniques, seems to be within the reach of the senior player. Obsolescence is not a problem in that entering skills serve well for a lifetime, and that cannot be said of many careers today.[5]

Medical Problems

Few human endeavors appear to be more physically demanding than professional music making. Yet, while other physically demanding careers such as those of the professional athlete and ballet dancer[6] are finished by midlife, many professional musicians are able to perform until an advanced age. The literature is replete with reports of maladies affecting musicians more or less specifically (reviewed in reference 7), some of which appear to be related to the physical demands on the player. Many have been described in music students and in amateur musicians after a period of overexertion or overindulgence in music making, and some have been described in professional musicians, such as violin player's jaw.[8]

Two recent studies of professional orchestra musicians indicate a high incidence of medical problems that affect playing. In the study of Fry,[1] approximately half of the members of several professional orchestras had musculoskeletal complaints that were attributed to "overuse." In the study of Fishbein et al.,[2] 76% of the members of 48 professional American orchestras (International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians) described one or more medical problems.

The subjects in the present study were queried as to medical problems. As mentioned above, musicians leaving the orchestra short of 20 years' service for any reason, including medical ones, were not included. Of the 14 subjects, three left the orchestra for medical reasons before they wanted to retire: two were disabled in sudden episodes unrelated to their musical careers but which left them unable to play, and the third developed painful arthritis affecting his hands and other joints. In each of these cases, however, the musicians played actively into their 60s before having to retire. Two other subjects left the orchestra, not for medical reasons, but to take full professorships in the music school of a major university. While the subjects, like other professionals,[9] were probably not entirely candid about their careers, it is doubtful that any of them was forced to retire before age 70 because of deterioration of playing. It must be concluded that, medical problems notwithstanding, the work of the symphony orchestra musician is compatible with playing to an advanced age.

This is not to say that the subjects did not have medical problems during their musical careers. More than half of them described problems that would probably have been recorded as positive responses in the Fishbein study.[2] These include cataracts and gastric ulcers as well as hand pain and back pain. The subjects had not been, however, preoccupied with medical problems. For example, they did not insure their hands, and some used power tools in leisure pursuits.

The musicians had a keen interest in hearing loss as an occupational hazard and were aware of studies that have been done.[10–12] Although some described hearing loss, none had to retire prior to age 70 for that reason.

Age-related decrements of function did occur, although they did not force the players to retire early. Just as experience and a good memory are assets to the senior player, so is the ability to compensate for age-related loss of playing ability. Two players who had developed cataracts stated independently that this necessitated more individual practice and greater familiarity with the music. A wind player

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described his compensatory efforts: "It took me three breaths to play what I could play in one breath when I was younger, but I doubt that even the conductor could tell."

The players of wind and brass instruments retired in their 60s, whereas some string players continued to play until their 70s, (see Table 1) and recently a first violinist (not a subject in this study) retired from one of the great symphony orchestras at the age of 83. There appear to be two factors contributing to the longer professional lives of string players compared with wind and brass players. One is that bow control appears to outlast breath control. One wind player pointed out that an instrument requiring a high flow makes a player more vulnerable than one requiring less air flow. Wind and brass players seem to be more conscious of their physical condition than string players because of the dependence of their playing on their respiratory systems. The other factor is that although orchestral parts for string instruments are very difficult, they are played by sections of eight or more players. Solo parts are played by the first desk players, and the playing of the other section members is not so exposed. In contrast, parts for woodwind and brass instruments are solo parts, written to be played by individuals. Not only the first woodwinds and brasses but also the seconds and sometimes the assistant principals and others have places in the orchestral literature where they are heard distinctly. Solo players in orchestras may move to less exposed positions as they get older. Woodwind and brass players are better paid than most string players because they play solo parts, but they do not endure as long.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank Harold E. Kupper, Professor Emeritus of Music at Roosevelt University, Chicago, Illinois for his advice throughout this project and the unidentified participants in this study and others in the orchestra for their cooperation.

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