

Why should we advocate for larger pit orchestras?

I received many insightful comments from musicians across our Federation after my column addressing the downsizing of touring musicals' orchestrations appeared in this space back in November of 2017. Most of these comments were suggestions about ways to educate the public about this issue, and have them demand larger orchestras, so as to enhance their theatre experience. However, one colleague of mine in Boston asked me to expand on *why* a larger orchestra would provide the public with a more satisfying night in the theatre. What is it about a fully staffed pit of highly skilled musicians that will give the theatregoer that unquantifiable thrill that only live music can offer?

Real Instruments Just Sound Better – There is no doubt that synthesizer technology has exponentially improved over the last 20 years or so. Keyboard samplers continue to get better, guitarists are using Fractal multi-effects processors more frequently, and percussionists often utilize CAT technology to broaden their pallet of sounds. However, I am convinced real instruments will always sound better. A sampler cannot reproduce the turn of a phrase of a master oboist, the excitement generated by a lead trumpeter, or the warmth of a full string section. Perhaps all these things are unquantifiable. But, audiences do notice. In my experience, the average patron might not be able to explain why they prefer the sound of real instruments, but they know they do.

Music Sounds Better When Musicians Play Off Each Other – We musicians have all (I hope) experienced the unique thrill of interacting musically with our fellow colleagues. Again, it's a sensation that is difficult to express in words. But it is an important element that transforms mere sound into art. And, when it comes to musical theatre, I would argue that when a larger number of musicians play off each other in a pit, this musical back and forth raises the quality level of the show. And there is no doubt audiences do notice.

More is More – As previously mentioned here, shows originally orchestrated with larger forces will often tour with a reduced compliment of players. Also, when shows are revived, it is common for the scores to be reorchestrated for smaller forces. A show that once boasted a full string section hits the road configured for few or even no players. Three trumpet books are condensed into one, and so on. Obviously this produces a thinner sounding orchestra. But, we also need to be aware of the wear and tear these reduced orchestrations exert on the players who perform them. Where once that three-trumpet section shared the burden, on tour one player is handling all the trumpet duties. I've often heard brass and woodwind players complain their instruments never leave their face for the duration of the show, with fatigue or even injury the result.

While the obvious reason producers reduce orchestration is financial, in the long run, I would argue this practice could very well hurt their bottom line. If the

audience hears a show with the large orchestra the composer intended, what will these patrons think when they attend a future production with a small ensemble? Will they notice, and next time think twice before spending their hard earned money on the ever-increasing cost of a ticket? In a recent phone call with TMA vice-president Heather Boehm, she mentioned to me that the Lyric Opera of Chicago produces one musical theatre production per season using their full opera orchestra. She confirms that a show presented with these kinds of forces in the pit produces an authentic, remarkable experience. What will patrons in attendance think the next time they see a show with an orchestra of seven musicians? I guarantee they will notice. Recently, Jesus Christ Superstar was presented live on NBC utilizing a 32-piece orchestra. Playbill, in listing the seven best things about this broadcast, ranked the use of a large live orchestra as #1.

At recent TMA conferences, we have often discussed this issue. These meetings have produced useful ideas on how we can raise audience awareness of pit size and quality using a few simple actions. For example, if a show is produced in or travels to your local theatre with a large orchestra, take a few minutes to express your approval on social media or in the comment section of online reviews. Conversely, negative comments can be added to shows using small ensembles. Increasing the pit musicians' visibility is an important component of this, and can be achieved by having musicians hand out leaflets in front of the theatre before the show, giving short bios of the talented musicians they are about to hear, and inviting patrons to come up to the pit before the performance or during intermission to say hello. Another good idea is to include a clause in local theatre contracts that require the names of the musicians be listed in the program, and even allow for short musician bios to appear alongside those of the cast. As always, I'd welcome your ideas. I can be reached at president.tma@afm-tma.org.