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This Ensemble Fought Bloat, and Won

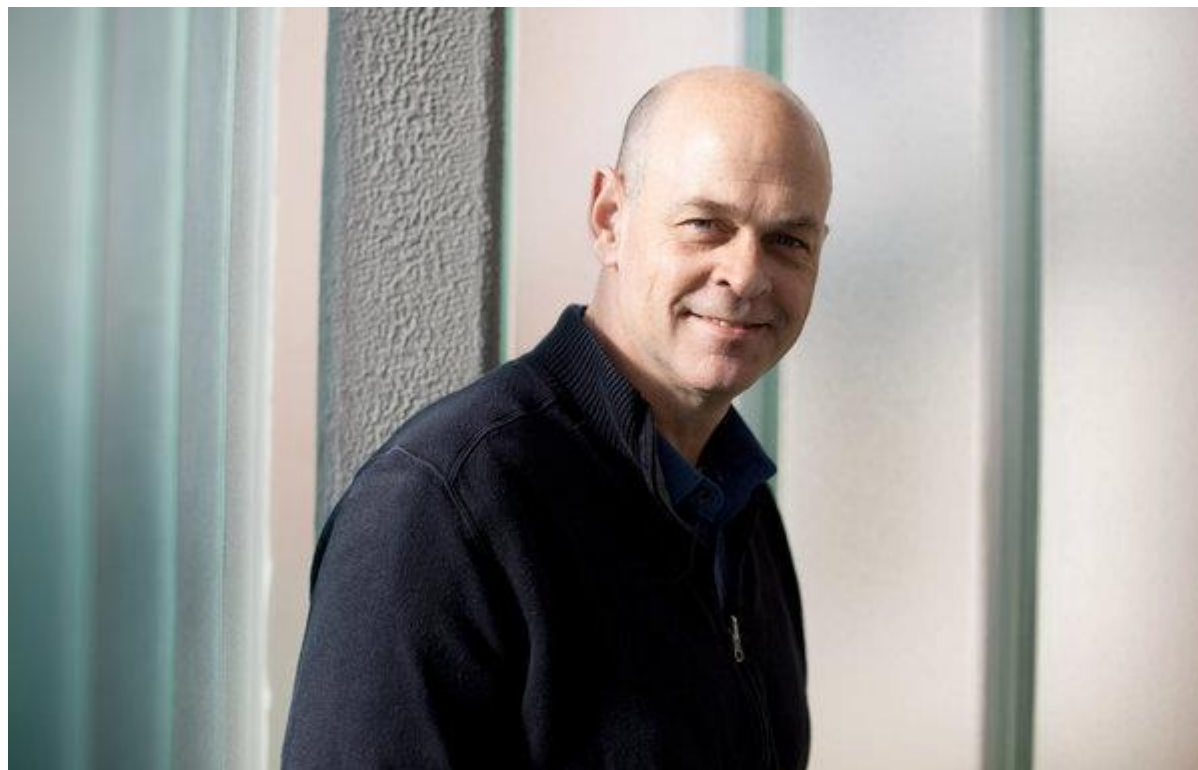
Smaller is better for the Boston Modern Orchestra Project.

By DAVID ALLEN

BOSTON — Cast your eye over the orchestral landscape, and the big picture could be seen as one of institutional malaise: deficits, labor strife, cowardly programming. All of which makes it imperative to celebrate those ensembles that, through luck, skill and diligence, pull off what the symphonic behemoths too rarely achieve: diverse repertoire and financial equilibrium.

So raise a glass to one of them, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, known universally as BMOP, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. The orchestra has become one of the most artistically valuable in the country for its support of music either new or so woefully neglected that it might as well be.

Led by the tireless conductor Gil Rose, who founded the ensemble in 1996, the orchestra has built a national presence through nearly 50 releases from its garlanded in-house record label, BMOP/sound. It just deservedly received a sixth Grammy nomination, for Andrew Norman's outstanding "Play," and was hailed as Musical America's 2016 Ensemble of the Year.



Gil Rose, the founder and conductor of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project.

Kayana Szymczak for The New York Times



Gil Rose leading the Boston Modern Orchestra Project through a sound check before a recording session in November. Kayana Szymczak for The New York Times

Two decades ago, Mr. Rose said in a recent interview, the project was not specifically aimed at new music: “The argument I started to set out to make was that orchestras had become too bloated. Their repertoire was shrinking, not expanding. Their wealth was contingent on pleasing the subscription base, which was getting more and more conservative.”

So BMOP was an experiment in a different organizational model: a small number of

employees, low fixed costs and a more flexible schedule of concerts. Only over time did its mission on behalf of contemporary composers — those writing today, like Mason Bates, Kati Agócs and John Harbison, as well as those whose music is almost never heard, such as Virgil Thomson, Irving Fine and Lukas Foss — become so central.

“The point is to advocate for culturally important works that are just not on the menu

of the wealthier organizations,” said Mr. Rose, who has a particular love for American music of the 1960s and ’70s, but who has also taken his offbeat [Odyssey Opera](#) company into Wagnerian and Verdian thickets.

The orchestra has given three concerts so far this season at the New England Conservatory’s Jordan Hall; a fourth comes [on March 25](#), with a rendition of David Del Tredici’s “Child Alice,” part of which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1980. All have been played crisply and with commitment, and each has proved distinct in concept and content.

[An October program](#) commemorated the centennial of the Armenian genocide with music by Komitas, Alan Hovhaness, Betty Olivero and Tigran Mansurian. Gunther Schuller’s comical “The Fisherman and His Wife” — a 12-tone children’s opera, unheard for four decades — was part of a thoroughly charming bill for [a November tribute](#) to its composer, who was based in Boston and [died last June](#). Another [in January](#) gave a reprise to a series of Bach responses called “The New Brandenburgs,” originally commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, of which contributions by Christopher Theofanidis and Paul Moravec particularly captured the spirit of the originals without being beholden to their language.

Mr. Rose conducts with modesty and clarity, achieving the canny trick of seeming to avoid interpretation. At his disposal is a roster made up of freelance players (paid by the concert rather than a regular salary) that is nevertheless relatively stable, including stalwarts of the local scene like the cellist Rafael Popper-Keizer and the trumpeter Terry Everson. They are nimble enough to play in a variety of configurations, from a small group for Schuller’s “Games,” to a hybrid jazz-classical jam for his “Journey Into Jazz,” to a full orchestra (with singers from the

Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum and the Boston University Marsh Chapel Choir) for Mr. Mansurian's alternately raging and desolate Requiem.

Despite the ability to scale up for grand performances like that one, though, BMOP remains petite. It has a full-time staff of just three, and lacks the safety net — if also the temptation — of an endowment. Yet in the past seven years, the group has not once overspent a budget that flirts with the \$1 million mark. Of that amount, much goes toward recording, with each release costing between \$25,000 and five times that, of which good sellers earn back perhaps a quarter, requiring money to be raised from individual donors or philanthropic foundations.

"It's like rock climbing, with an endless wall," Mr. Rose said of fund-raising, with a resigned air. He is still seeking the resources to release music already in the can by Wayne Peterson, Tod Machover, George Perle, Stephen Hartke and many others, as well as to complete a cycle of Leon Kirchner's orchestral works.

Given the well-documented travails of the recording industry, BMOP's focus on making albums is unexpected. But for Mr. Rose, it's the soul of his project, an opportunity to ensure that music ignored by others has a permanent presence. "Recording means preservation," he said. "And there's a motivation to put money into something that has a shelf life, as opposed to a

concert," so "recording makes the concerts possible, in a way."

Given its strong national reputation, one might expect the orchestra to draw large, enthusiastic crowds in Boston. Alas, attendance is, as Mr. Rose ruefully notes, modest. "I don't like to put a lot of money into marketing," he said, as partial explanation, "because I'd rather put it on the stage." He places more of the blame on the city's musical culture, in which the Boston Symphony Orchestra dominates the scene: "There's been no shortage of endorsement from the musical powers that be, no shortage of awards, no shortage of effort on our part to provide interesting things."

Mr. Rose insists that he cares little about box-office receipts. Instead, he and his orchestra concentrate on creating a stimulating environment. The composer Lisa Bielawa, who was in residence with BMOP for three years, recalled "an oasis of productivity, a joyful collaboration, unmatched and unparalleled."

And Mr. Norman wrote in an email of a similar collective pleasure. His "Play" has drawn wide acclaim in large part because of the stellar playing on BMOP's recording and despite a poorly attended premiere in Boston at



Mr. Rose conducting the BMOP at the New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall in 1998. via BMOP

which, Mr. Rose recalled, "the applause sounded like a eurhythmic exercise."

The ensemble, Mr. Norman said, is "leading the way toward the bright future of our art form" and understands "like few others in the orchestral world that innovation necessitates risk and experimentation."

If anything, Mr. Rose insisted, the problems he diagnosed with symphonic life 20 years ago have worsened, as programming has calcified and finances have stagnated during and after a recession that left BMOP, with so little overhead, practically untouched. "Who is calling the shots?" he asked of major orchestras. "Is it the development office, or the artistic office? And if it becomes the development office, Andrew Lloyd Webber evening is not very far away. People love 'Cats.'"

So Mr. Rose revels in his artistic autonomy. "I get the one thing that other conductors might not get," he said. "I get up in the morning and know that I have given something a future life. It's a labor of love: Some days the love is heavy, and some days the labor is heavy. But when we hit some wall I always say, 'Well, we're doing God's work — what did we expect?'"



An Orchestra's Gift to Audiophiles

Since its 2008 debut with John Harbison's "Ulysses," the Boston Modern Orchestra Project's in-house label, [BMOP/sound](#), has become indispensable to anyone interested in American music of the past century. Lavishly packaged and recorded to audiophile quality, its almost 50 releases have presented portraits of composers from Antheil to Ziporyn. Here are five recommendations.

GEORGE ANTHEIL: 'Ballet Mécanique' The earliest music in BMOP/sound's catalog is also the most aurally assaulting, thanks to a stunningly controlled account of Antheil's earsplitting "Ballet Mécanique" (1924) — scored for 16 player pianos, two pianos, electric bells, propellers, a siren and more —

and a brash, never-too-decadent performance of "A Jazz Symphony" (1925).

MILTON BABBITT: 'All Set' Given Babbitt's forbidding reputation, the conductor (and BMOP founder) Gil Rose's great accomplishment here is to make Babbitt's music approachable, even alluring. Simple enough, in the 12-tone jazz of "All Set" (1957), but whether in the blip-blop of "Correspondences" (1967), for string orchestra and tape, or in the early serialism of "Composition for Twelve Instruments" (1948), his forces imbue this music with a sense of ease.

IRVING FINE: Complete Orchestral Works A typical BMOP/sound release, this one rescues a composer from wholly undeserved obscurity with transparent, energetic performances — and Mr. Rose is rightly proud of it. Of six pieces, including the delightfully upbeat "Blue Towers" (1959), most important is Fine's neo-Classical Symphony (1962), lucidly done.

LISA BIELAWA: 'In medias res' A celebration of this composer's residence with the orchestra, this double feature includes early works alongside a handful written especially for BMOP: a winding Double Violin Concerto (2008); a concerto for

orchestra, "In medias res" (2009); and a set of "Synopses" (2006-9), 15 solo showcases that resulted from collaborating with individuals in the ensemble.

ANDREW NORMAN: 'Play,' 'Try' The reputation of "Play" (2013), the preposterously challenging quasi-symphony that has catapulted its composer into the limelight, is impossible to imagine without BMOP, for whom it was written, and who recorded it to wide praise. A chamber work, "Try" (2011), is a slightly earlier intimation of Mr. Norman's characteristic hyperactivity.