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Sociological and Historical Comparison of the Boston Pops and the Vienna Philharmonic

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how orchestras function as cultural institutions shaped by social and historical contexts, rather than purely musical entities. Through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the Boston Pops and the Vienna Philharmonic, the study explores how repertoire selection, performance practices, and institutional structures reflect national identity and societal values. Based on concert programs, performance styles, and scholarly sources, this research demonstrates that the Boston Pops emphasizes inclusivity and accessibility, incorporating popular, film, and participatory music alongside classical works. In contrast, the Vienna Philharmonic maintains a conservative artistic identity rooted in its democratic self-administration, a governance structure rooted in Viennese cultural tradition that prioritizes Austro-German works, traditions such as the New Year's Concert, and traditional dance music such as waltzes and polkas. The paper further examines demographic history, and cultural priorities that play a vital role in shaping orchestral characteristics, diversity, programming choices, and audience engagement. By situating orchestral practices within broader frameworks of race, politics, and economics, this study reveals how musical institutions both reflect and reinforce societal structures. This research is needed because it's not simply comparing two music institutions that are distinctly different. It is needed because, in the bigger picture, the orchestras reveal the history, demographics, politics, economics, and culture of their respective countries. The orchestras do not simply function and perform based on the preference of a single individual; they operate as a group despite being comprised of diverse opinions, and therefore become symbols of their countries to some extent, and audiences can feel inspired to foster camaraderie.

INTRODUCTION

As a violinist in the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, I receive instructions from San Francisco Symphony musicians weekly. When I have the chance, I also receive tutelage from European violinists, who share their musical philosophy. Through these experiences, I have observed notable differences between the Boston Pops. Even through listening to recordings alone, I have long sensed a distinct "difference." These experiences motivated me to write this article.

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Classical orchestral music emerged in Europe as a product of aristocratic patronage, court culture, and religious institutions during the 17th century, when “groups of just strings were formed, and it was to them that woodwinds, brass, and timpani were added” (Knight, 2006, p. 34). Due to their connections to royal courts, “audiences for orchestral performances across Europe were initially aristocrats” (Knight, 2006, p. 34) and “many royal and princely courts with orchestras became important nodes of musical performance, notably those in Paris (Lully), Hanover and London (Handel), Mannheim (Stamitz), and Vienna (Haydn, Mozart). Performances also occurred in churches, theatres, musicians' homes, and "music rooms" (some of which could seat 1000), organized by church and musicians' groups, notably in Leipzig (J.S. Bach) and Hamburg (Telemann, C.P.E. Bach)” (Knight, 2006, p. 34). As a result, composers such as Bach and Mozart wrote for ensembles that were shaped by rigid social hierarchies, and European orchestras developed a strong emphasis on formal concert etiquette, standardized repertoire, and the preservation of historical musical practices, values that continue to influence many European ensembles today. As European immigrants brought classical music traditions across the Atlantic in the nineteenth century, orchestral culture took root in the United States under markedly different social and economic conditions. In colonial America, “English and German musicians performed Handel overtures, ballads, concertos, German and occasionally French or Italian symphonies … In that colonial society, the culture was the mother-country” (Burkat, 1948, p. 14). Additionally, “the most important orchestra in the United States in the mid-century was not American but German. This was a band of young musical refugees of 1848 who called themselves the Germania Society” (Burkat, 1948, p. 14). Unlike their European counterparts, American orchestras emerged in a society without aristocracy or state-sponsored musical institutions. Instead, they relied heavily on private donors, civic organizations, and later commercial sponsorships, which encouraged orchestras to adapt to public demand and broader audiences, and this continues today as “private philanthropic contributions to US orchestras by individuals, businesses, and foundations ranged between 6 and 60%, 5 and 53%, and 2 and 35% respectively” and “for the 2005-2006 season, 39% of SO funding was provided by private contributors (corporations and individuals)” (Pompe et al., 2011, p. 169). This environment fostered experimentation in programming, including the incorporation of popular music, film scores, and lighter repertoire alongside canonical works. Over time, pops orchestras in America began to develop a more flexible, entertainment-oriented model that prioritized accessibility and catered to the diverse demographic. Although both orchestras function in their respective cultures, it is not representative of the entire culture of their countries. Not every American is progressive, and some may prefer traditional classical music over contemporary music. Similarly, not every Viennese person is conservative, and some may prefer modern music over traditional classical music. Therefore, although both orchestras predominantly represent their respective cultures, they do not represent all people.

RATIONALE FOR SELECTION

The Vienna Philharmonic and the Boston Pops are not chosen here arbitrarily or as convenient opposites, but as extremes; orchestras that have each been pushed by distinct cultural pressures, toward positions that other ensembles in their respective countries have not fully occupied. A potential objection is that programming style does not map neatly onto national culture. While traditional American orchestras like the Chicago Symphony Orchestra or the Boston Symphony Orchestra demonstrate that conservative

programming can exist in the United States, none has institutionalized that conservatism as a matter of democratic self-governance, the way the Vienna Philharmonic has. Considering that the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra operate within the same American institutional environment as the Boston Pops, they face the same external pressures: donor boards demanding audience growth, funding bodies requiring demographic outreach, and markets rewarding accessibility. The fact that these orchestras have maintained traditional programming shows deliberate resistance against those pressures, not evidence that the pressures do not exist. Their conservatism is a choice made against their cultural context. The Vienna Philharmonic's conservatism, by contrast, is reinforced by its governance model: because its musicians govern themselves democratically, the institution naturally reproduces the values already in place, without needing to resist external pressure at all. No American orchestra operates this way, because the American nonprofit funding environment, where orchestras depend on donors and ticket revenue, makes self-governance of this kind economically unviable. The BBC Concert Orchestra, an European orchestra meanwhile, performs popular and accessible repertoire but does not carry the civic identity and prestige that the Boston Pops holds within American cultural life. It exists as one programming format among many within the BBC's broader media organization, and is not a freestanding cultural institution with its own distinct civic mission. The Boston Pops, by contrast, was built from the ground up around the American democratic ideal that orchestral music should be available to and reflective of everyone. That institutional identity is the orchestra's entire reason for existing. This paper argues that the Vienna Philharmonic and Boston Pops are not simply different by choice, but are each constrained by the cultural systems that produced them. Understanding those constraints reveals how national culture shapes institutional identity in ways that go beyond repertoire.

DIFFERENCES IN REPERTOIRE

Diversity in the Boston Pops' Repertoire

A major difference between the Boston Pops and the Vienna Philharmonic is their selection of repertoire, with the Boston Pops incorporating a wide range of popular, film, and American music, while the Vienna Philharmonic preserves a traditional repertoire, stemming from Austro-Germanic composers. As a nation of immigrants with a diverse demographic, the Boston Pops have been heavily influenced by a wide array of ethnocultural influences and composers. This diversity is reflected in their repertoire, which often embraces popular, jazz, and folk traditions alongside classical works, making their programming more inclusive and representative of the broader American public. For example, Serge Koussevitsky, the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1924 to 1949, was "more sympathetic to jazz for its 'important contribution to modern musical literature. It has an epochal significance—it is not superficial, it is fundamental. Jazz comes from the soil, where all music has its beginning.' He commissioned jazz-inspired compositions from Ravel, Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, and others, even when such works sparked objections" (House, 2023, p.126). Despite racial segregation and widespread prejudice against African Americans and their culture, the Boston Symphony challenged the status quo and incorporated Jazz in their repertoire, which at the time was considered degenerate music and inappropriate for orchestras. This reflects the progressive stances of the Boston Pops and their willingness to defy social norms in the musical world. Additionally, Arthur Fiedler, the director of the Boston Pops from 1930 to

1979, made a “new formula for Boston Pops concerts, one with light classics, such as Johann Sebatstian Bach’s ‘Air on the G String’ and possibly Franz Liszt’s Concerto no. 1 (played by a young piano soloists) on the first half of the program, even lighter fare on the second half–perhaps a contemporary American offering like Ferde Grofé’s *Grand Canyon Suite* or Geroge Gershwin’s *An American in Paris*” (Frank, 2008, p. 136). Fiedler’s programming approach reveals a deliberate attempt to merge European classical tradition with a distinctly American sound, creating a hybrid concert experience unlike the rigidly traditional Vienna Philarmonic model. By placing Bach or Liszt side-by-side with Gershwin or Grofé, Fiedler expanded the definition of orchestral music and made it more approachable for everyday Americans who may not have grown up with classical music. This blending of “high art” with popular works also helped the Pops cultivate a unique American identity; one rooted not in preserving a specific European lineage but in reflecting the diverse musical tastes of the United States. His formula democratized the orchestral concert, transforming it from a formal, elite space into an accessible, entertaining, and culturally flexible institution. Before the formal establishment of the Boston Pops, “the Promenade Concerts also featured contemporary works by art music composers and even at times highlighted American music” (Marcus, 2018, p. 199). This earlier historical precedent shows that Boston’s orchestral culture had long challenged the notion that symphonic music must primarily serve European tradition. The Promenade Concerts, which were informal, socially lively, and open to experimentation, laid the foundation for what would become the Boston Pops’ signature style: programming that embraces contemporary trends, promotes American composers, and welcomes audiences who might otherwise feel alienated by conventional classical concerts. The fact that American music was programmed even in the nineteenth century demonstrates a continuity of cultural innovation that distinguishes the Boston Pops from orchestras like the Vienna Philharmonic, which remain guardians of narrowly defined Austro-Germanic traditions. Together, the Promenade Concerts and Fiedler’s later reforms illustrate the long-term evolution of the Boston Pops, which prioritizes inclusivity, cultural hybridity, and a repertoire that mirrors the diverse experiences of the American public rather than adhering to Old World traditions.

Figure 1. The program for "A Pops Christmas Party" performed in 1973.

Table 1. Performers in "A Pops Christmas Party" by Boston Pops

What? (Type of Concert/Role in Concert)	Where? (Location of concert/Performer's nationality)	When? (Living/active years)	Who? (Event/Performer)	Why?
Pops Concert	Symphony Hall (Boston, MA)	December 21~22, 1973	A Pops Christmas Party	To celebrate the holiday season by creating an accessible and family-oriented musical experience. As a Pops concert, it emphasized familiar repertoire rather than formal pieces.
Orchestra	Mostly American	1885~present	Boston Pops	To represent a distinctly American orchestral

				identity that is oriented toward popular music.
Conductor	American	1894~1979	Arthur Fiedler	He was the father of the Boston Pops and defined the orchestra's artistic identity by incorporating accessible American music, making him suited to conduct a holiday Pops concert.
Assistant Conductor	American	1908~2003	Harry Ellis Dickson	He was the long-serving assistant conductor of the Boston Pops and ensured the continuity of Fiedler's legacy.
Chorus	Tanglewood (Lenox, MA)	1970~present	Tanglewood Festival Chorus	To enhance the holiday atmosphere through carols, which are essential to Christmas traditions, and allow for sing-alongs.
Conductor	American	1939~2018	John Oliver	He was an expert in choral repertoire and helped integrate the chorus seamlessly with the orchestra and audience.

Table 2. Composers and Works Performed at "A Pops Christmas Party" by Boston Pops

What? (Composer/work)	Where? (Composer's nationality/base)	When? (Musical era)	Who? (Composer/ Work)	Why? (Why they were included in the program)
Composer	American	Early 20th Century	Victor Herbert	His operetta and incidental works shaped

				American orchestral traditions that were accessible, aligning with the Pops' ethos.
Composer	Soviet-era Russian	20th Century	Dmitri Shostakovich	To add contrast to the program, demonstrating the orchestra's ability to balance entertainment with serious symphonic repertoire.
Composer	English	Classical (inspired by English folk and church music)	Ralph Vaughan Williams	His music, inspired by English folk traditions and melodies, created a sense of warmth and communal spirit, which fit the holiday concert atmosphere.
Composer	French	Romantic	Émile Waldteufel	His elegant waltzes contributed to a festive and dance-like quality that reflected European light music traditions that complement the atmosphere.
Broadway and Hollywood orchestrator	American	Modern (1920's~70's)	Robert Russell Bennett	Orchestrated Broadway and Hollywood music, reinforcing the Boston Pops' emphasis on American pop culture.
Composer	Austrian/ German	Classical	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	To add classical pieces, providing historical legitimacy and contrast with lighter and more contemporary selections.
Light Concert Composers	American	Light orchestra/Pops	Leroy Anderson	His works, especially "Sleigh Ride," are central to the Boston Pops'

				origins and a staple of Christmas music.
Songwriter	American	Holiday songs	Johnny Marks	Iconic for his Christmas songs such as “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree.”
Songwriter	American	Pops/Holiday/ Jazz	Irving Berlin	His songs represent the pinnacle of American popular music from jazz, Broadway, and holiday music.
Composer	German	Light classical music	Leon Jessel	Included for his light classical works that add to the program’s celebratory tone.
Chief music arranger of the Boston Pops	American	Classical/Jazz	Richard Hayman	Included for his experience in orchestrating classical, jazz, and popular music for the Boston Pops.

From the program attached above, we could see that the program highlights American composers such as Victor Herbert, Vaughan Williams, and Anderson, as well as American Christmas carols such as “The Many Moods of Christmas” and “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” If we treat “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” and “More Moods of Christmas” as one piece, there are six American pieces out of 11 total. Similarly, there are six European composers, such as Shostakovich and Waldteufel. By performing Christmas carols many of the Americans have grown up with, the Boston Pops can evoke a sense of nostalgia and coziness. Even the highly decorated Christmas wreath on the cover of the program attracts the audience’s attention and invites them to share the warm musical experience. As an epitome of progress, the Boston Pops pushes the limits of orchestral music in order to provide audiences with diverse repertoire that represents the ethnic and cultural diversity of Americans. Boston Pops possibly knew that performing classical music like the Vienna Philharmonic would distance them from the audience, because classical music is still somewhat a “foreign” culture to Americans. Instead of performing only “formal” and “high culture” classical music, the Boston Pops instead relied on the ethos of Americans and appealed to their distant childhood memories that many adults sometimes yearn to rekindle. The definition of “classical” is then blurry, because Americans can define Christmas carols as their “classical” music, despite the traditional “classical music” often associated with European music by Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach.

At the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, I am currently a violinist. We also have Christmas concerts where we perform classic Christmas carols. One of the key aspects of the concert is that it is a sing-along. In European classical music, there is no such tradition where the audience sings along with the music performed by the orchestra. However, by allowing the audience to join the experience-oriented performance, the memory is better ingrained in the audience, and they can become regular patrons. This could be a similar mechanism of the passive versus active learning in schools as well, where active learning, such as solving practice problems, is inherently better than passive learning like listening to a lecture, because it involves thinking and motion to understand the concepts.

TRADITIONALISM IN THE VIENNA PHILHARMONIC'S REPERTOIRE

In contrast, the Vienna Philharmonic mostly focuses on classical symphonic works, preserving musical tradition that emphasizes works by composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms. "Founded in 1842, the orchestra looks back at a long history, with a repertoire firmly rooted in classical and symphonic music of the German-Austrian tradition. The VPO operates through a democratic self-administration and is positioned in a closely-knit network of Viennese musical institutions, for example the Musikverein or the State Opera Orchestra" (Petzold, 2023, p. 225). What distinguishes the Vienna Philharmonic from most orchestras in the world is not merely its repertoire, but its governance. Vienna Philharmonic operates as a self-administered democratic body, meaning the musicians themselves determine artistic priorities without external pressure from boards, donors, or market research. This structure is not incidental; it is a product of Viennese cultural and political history, rooted in a tradition of guild-like institutional autonomy that predates the modern concert hall. In this sense, Vienna Philharmonic's conservatism is partially a structural outcome. An orchestra that governs itself will naturally reproduce the values of those already inside it, creating resistance towards modernization not out of ignorance but out of principle. Unlike the Boston Pops, which often adapts to evolving cultural expectations and diverse audiences, the Vienna Philharmonic uses this independence to maintain a conservative artistic philosophy that prioritizes heritage. Their connections to institutions such as the State Opera further reinforce a cultural ecosystem that values continuity and fidelity to European classical lineage. Since these institutions have shaped Viennese identity for generations, the orchestra sees itself as a guardian and preserver of Austria's musical legacy. As a result, the Vienna Philharmonic rarely incorporates popular, film, jazz, or contemporary foreign repertoire; instead, it actively preserves a narrowly defined musical tradition that aligns with its historical prestige.

CONDUCTOR

Riccardo Muti

ORCHESTRA

Vienna Philharmonic

PROGRAM

Johann Strauß I.
Freiheits-Marsch, op. 226

Josef Strauß
Dorfschwalben aus Österreich. Walzer, op. 164

Johann Strauß II.
Demolirer-Polka. Polka francaise, op. 269

Johann Strauß II.
Lagunen-Walzer, op. 411

Eduard Strauß
Luftig und duftig. Polka schnell, op. 206

Johann Strauß II.
Overture to the Operetta "Der Zigeunerbaron (The Gypsy Baron)"

Johann Strauß II.
Accelerationen. Walzer, op. 234

Josef Hellmesberger (Sohn)
Fidele Brüder. Marsch aus der Operette "Das Veilchenmädl"

Constanze Geiger
Ferdinandus-Walzer, op. 10 [Arr. W. Dörner]

Johann Strauß II.
Entweder - oder! Polka schnell, op. 403

Josef Strauß
Transactionen (Transactions). Walzer, op. 184

Johann Strauß II.
Annen-Polka, op. 117

Johann Strauß II.
Tritsch-Tratsch, Fast Polka, op. 214

Johann Strauß II.
Wein, Weib und Gesang. Walzer, op. 333

Figure 2. Program for the Vienna Philharmonic's 2025 New Year's Concert

Table 3. Performers for the Vienna Philharmonic's 2025 New Year's Concert

What? (Type of Concert/Role in Concert)	Where? (Location of concert/Performer's nationality)	When? (Living/active years)	Who? (Event/Performer)	Why?
New Year's Concert	Musikverein (Golden Hall), Vienna,	January 1, 2025	New Year's Concert	Tradition of celebrating the start of a new year and promoting Viennese

	Austria			composers and their works throughout the world.
Orchestra	Mostly European	1842~present	Vienna Philharmonic	Preserves the Austro-Germanic classical tradition, maintains high artistic standards, and showcases Vienna's cultural identity internationally.
Conductor	Italian	1963-present	Riccardo Muti	As a regular guest of the Vienna Philharmonic, his expertise preserves and elevates the Viennese orchestral tradition.

Table 4. Composers and Works Performed at the New Year's Concert 2025 by Vienna Philharmonic

What? (Composer/work)	Where? (Composer's nationality/base)	When? (Musical era)	Who? (Composer/ Work)	Why? (Why they were included in the program)
Composer (Light music)	Austrian (Viennese)	19th Century Romantic	Johann Strauss I	The founder of the Strauss musical dynasty laid the roots of the Viennese waltz tradition.
Composer	Austrian (Viennese)	19th Century Romantic	Josef Strauss	His works bring emotional and dreamy moments to the concert. Shows depth beyond the famous Johann Strauss II.
Composer (Light music)	Austrian (Viennese)	19th Century Romantic	Johann Strauss II	The Blue Danube is always performed as the second encore, the most famous member of the Strauss family, and his waltzes are the epitome of Viennese culture.
Composer (Light music)	Austrian (Viennese)	19th-20th Century Romantic	Eduard Strauss	Connected to the Vienna Court Opera Orchestra and known for his fast and

				energetic polkas.
Composer	Austrian (Viennese)	19th-20th Century Romantic	Joseph Hellmesberger Jr.	Provides variation beyond the Strauss family, and he fits the "Viennese light music" style.
Composer	Austrian (Viennese)	19th Century Romantic	Constanze Geiger	To showcase overlooked Viennese composers and aim for more diversity.

From the program of the 2025 New Year's Concert, it is evident that the Vienna Philharmonic is deeply tied to a musical tradition that is uniquely and historically Viennese; most notably, the polkas and waltzes that shaped the city's cultural identity during the nineteenth century. Out of the 14 pieces performed at this concert, all were composed by Viennese composers, with waltzes and polkas comprising 11 of them. Despite taking place during the holiday season, the program does not include any Christmas songs or carols, unlike the Boston Pops' "A Pops Christmas Party" concert. Furthermore, in terms of the performers, the Boston Pops features a chorus and multiple conductors for their holiday concert, whereas the New Year's Concert is performed exclusively by the Vienna Philharmonic under a single conductor. This shows the orchestra's commitment to preserving Viennese musical tradition, ensuring that interpretation and presentation remain firmly within the institution rather than inviting external influences or performers. The polka originated "in the 1830s, in the area of the Habsburg Empire where today the Czech, Polish, and German borders converge" (March & Blau, 2015, p. 50), and it spread rapidly to Vienna, as the capital of the Habsburg Monarchy and the political and cultural center of the empire. The Viennese waltz "did not develop in the dance schools or ballrooms of the elite, but in numerous late eighteenth-century public dance halls, attended by all social orders of Vienna." (Korhonen, 2013, p. 607) and all members of society from "the rich young bourgeoisie, merchants and lower civil servants danced waltzes there with their wives, daughters and sisters." (Korhonen, 2013, p. 618). As a result, the waltz was a defining part of civic life in imperial Vienna, and unlike many European court dances that remained exclusive to the aristocracy, the Viennese waltz developed within a shared urban culture that cut across class boundaries. During the early 1800s, the waltz became the dance of the Viennese (*Viennese Waltz Celebrates One-Hundred-Fiftieth Anniversary*, 1962, p. 126) and evolved into a sophisticated cultural emblem under the influence of the Strauss family and composers such as "Franz von Suppe, Karl Milloecker, Michael Ziehrer, the brothers Schrammel, Edmund Eisler, Oskar Straus, Franz Lehar, Leo Fall, Ralph Benatzky, Robert Stolz, and many others proved to be unlimited inventors of new waltz" (*Viennese Waltz Celebrates One-Hundred-Fiftieth Anniversary*, 1962, p. 126)**.** These composers elevated the dance into orchestral showpieces, transforming it from social dances into symbols of national identity, and the dance became so deeply embedded in Viennese society that they formed a musical language through which the city expressed "disposition, buoyancy and joy" (*Viennese Waltz Celebrates One-Hundred-Fiftieth Anniversary*, 1962, p. 126). This historical rootedness explains why the Vienna Philharmonic continues to perform them annually at the New Year's Concert, which is a tradition dating

back to 1939, in " a concert dedicated to compositions by the Strauß dynasty which was performed on December 31, 1939" (Vienna Philharmonic, n.d.). The concert consciously preserves this connection to Vienna's past, broadcasting to millions of viewers worldwide a curated image of Austrian cultural continuity. The repertoire remains remarkably consistent from year to year, with staples such as "The Blue Danube," "Thunder and Lightning Polka," "Tritsch-Tratsch-Polka," and the "Radetzky March" appearing as ritualistic affirmations of heritage. By centering these works, the Vienna Philharmonic reinforces its conservative artistic stance and its role as a steward of tradition. The orchestra's programming choices reflect not a desire for innovation, but a commitment to sustaining the musical practices that have defined Viennese culture for centuries. In this context, the Philharmonic's emphasis on polkas and waltzes is more a deliberate preservation of the social and historical identity of Vienna itself. This continuity, paired with the orchestra's self-governed structure, allows it to uphold a repertoire that reflects not only musical preference but cultural stewardship, ensuring that the sound of nineteenth-century Vienna remains alive in the present.

DIFFERENCES IN MUSICIANS

Diversity in the Boston Pops' musicians

The Boston Pops actively promotes diversity through its BSO Resident Fellowship Program, which hopes to provide "an unparalleled opportunity for up to two early-career symphonic musicians from underrepresented or minoritized communities, whose populations have historically faced significant barriers when it comes to accessing the classical music world." (Boston Symphony Orchestra, n.d.) This fellowship program allows musicians from countries like Venezuela and Peru, where access to classical music training can be limited, to perform with a world-renowned orchestra while receiving an "annual salary of $78,300, housing allowance of $20,000, Reimbursement for audition travel stipend for private lessons, and Life, health, dental, and disability coverage" (Boston Symphony Orchestra, n.d.). Through this program, musicians can fully immerse themselves in the experience without the burden of expenses, and it shows the Boston Pops' commitment and ideology that diversity enhances the qualities of an orchestra.

In a 1993 performance of "Theme from Jurassic Park" by the Boston Pops with John Williams' live conducting, the orchestra epitomizes both the innovation and philosophy of an American orchestra (GGbreizh, 2016). Without even watching the performance, the rendition was made in 1993, showing that even before the 21st century, when more modern composers began to shine in the spotlight, the Boston Pops incorporated modern and film music in their repertoire. The Boston Pops were undaunted and knew it would be successful to perform film music in a venue like the Hollywood Bowl, where people of all demographics would enjoy music. In regard to the musicians' playing styles, the Boston Pops musicians' playing seems mechanical, with minimal expression and artistry. In other words, they are playing robotically and are minimizing their movement as they play. Even the concertmaster and the principal players, who are generally expected to vigorously move to give cues and convey the emotions of the music, are moving minimally in this performance. This is not because the orchestra is lethargic, but it is

due to their philosophy and their view of how film music is supposed to be performed. They view film music like the “Theme from Jurassic Park" as only one component of the film. While music and sound effects do play a vital role in a movie, it is merely one component of the film, and the musicians do not want to overshadow the other components of the movie. This is accomplished by the musicians moving minimally so the audience can pay attention to the equally important parts of the movie, such as cinematography, the plot, and other performers like the actors. In that sense, the Boston Pops sees music as both an art and entertainment. Furthermore, for the seating arrangements, they use a setup common in the 21st century of having the first violins on the audience's left, followed by the second violins, violas, and cellos to their right. While it is standard in this era, it still showcases the Boston Pops’ commitment to being at the cutting edge and leaving behind embedded traditions of the past. In addition, the concert attire of the musicians also underscores their ingenuity as the musicians are seen wearing white, and in particular, the male musicians are wearing bow ties. In traditional orchestras, the musicians are mandated to wear concert black, which consists of a formal black dress or suit with a necktie. However, the Boston Pops goes against this conformity, and the musicians wear a less formal white attire to make it approachable and comfortable for the audience. This attire allows the audience to listen without feeling pressured to be professional, creating a more relaxed and inviting musical atmosphere. Additionally, the orchestra's decision to play in the Hollywood Bowl instead of their home venue, the Symphony Hall, shows how they are not stuck in their Bostonian traditions and are willing to perform in an informal amphitheater. Musically, the Hollywood Bowl provides good acoustics with the use of the natural amphitheater shape and an advanced sound system with loudspeakers, leading to the music becoming grand and optimal for film music, which demands powerful and immersive sound.

Traditionalism in the Vienna Philharmonic’s musicians

In contrast, even in its recent ventures into more contemporary repertoire, such as its newly added performance of Jurassic Park under the same conductor, the ensemble maintains a distinct musical personality shaped by long-standing Viennese traditions (Deutsche Grammophon - DG, 2020). Since the Vienna Philharmonic is a self-governing organization and the orchestra has no permanent music director, the musicians have the final say on repertoire. Therefore, the relatively late adoption of film music shows the closed-mindedness of the musicians, whose commitment to preserving the orchestra’s traditional image has limited their willingness to embrace newer genres. Although one might expect relatively identical musical results, because John Williams is conducting in both videos, the actual performance reveals how deeply the Philharmonic’s sound is tied to the musicians themselves and is significantly different from the Boston Pops’ rendition. Their unique playing style, marked by expressive flexibility, warm phrasing, and a heightened sense of musical speech, where even orchestral music is played like “chamber music,” is the product of a culture that values continuity over innovation. This cultural insularity contributes to the orchestra’s reputation for artistic excellence, yet it also reinforces a closed system in which demographic diversity has historically been slow to develop. Their use of expressive, almost theatrical body language is rooted in a distinctly Viennese approach to performance that emphasizes artistry over entertainment, treating music as a refined cultural ritual rather than a modern public spectacle. The musicians’ physical and artistic presentation also underscores this traditionalism.

Their seating arrangement further reflects this adherence to tradition: the placement of Violin I, Violin II, Cello, and then Viola follows a historical Central European configuration rather than the more contemporary American or British layouts found in many modern orchestras, such as the Boston Pops. While such details appear purely musical, they symbolically reveal the Philharmonic's broader commitment to preserving older aesthetic conventions. Even the ensemble's visual presentation communicates continuity with the past. The orchestra maintains strict formal concert attire of black, elegant, dignified, and steeped in old-world tradition where "in the eighteenth century, orchestra musicians held a status similar to that of household servants; to this day, male musicians still wear tails as part of their concert clothing because it was the typical dress of the butlers with whom they were once categorized" (Osborne, 1999, p.71). This attire is not merely a dress code but part of a larger performance ethos that frames concerts as cultural ceremonies. The venue amplifies this symbolism: the Musikverein, with its intimate stage, golden architecture, and chamber-like acoustic, is one of the most historically charged concert halls in Europe. The proximity of the musicians on the small stage visually reinforces their unity and their rootedness in a shared artistic lineage. As a result, even when the orchestra steps into modern repertoire or global pop culture, such as performing Jurassic Park, the institution itself remains anchored in a past that it continues to preserve with deliberate care.

Within this deeply traditional setting, demographic change has also progressed slowly and unevenly. The Vienna Philharmonic has historically had very few women, and even today, women remain significantly underrepresented, particularly in principal or leadership positions, which are often the most visible and influential roles within the orchestra. For much of its history, the orchestra was completely closed to women; it did not formally admit female musicians until 1997, when harpist Anna Lelkes became the first woman to join. As one account notes, "after having performed with them unofficially for 26 years, she was given membership in 1997" (Osborne, 1999, p. 69), highlighting how long women were excluded from formal recognition even while contributing artistically. This milestone, while important, came centuries after the orchestra's founding, reflecting the deeply ingrained cultural and institutional biases that shaped its membership. The resistance to including women was not merely procedural but was also defended on ideological grounds by some members. Vienna Philharmonic members such as Helmut Zehetner "noted that the orchestra has a special "emotional unity" as an all-male ensemble that lends its music superior qualities" and the entry of women in the orchestra would "have an uneasy feeling" (Osborne, 1999, p. 69), suggesting that gender diversity could disrupt the social cohesion and artistic harmony of the orchestra. This reasoning reveals a broader cultural belief within the organization: that tradition, male exclusivity, and the perceived "purity" of the ensemble's sound were inseparable. The argument frames gender not as a matter of equal opportunity or talent but as a potential threat to the orchestra's identity, demonstrating how the Vienna Philharmonic's conservatism was deeply embedded in both its organizational culture and its aesthetic values. Even after women were officially admitted, progress has been slow, and the conservative stance continues to influence the orchestra today. On the Vienna Philharmonic's official website, as of December 2025 (Vienna Philharmonic, n.d.), only 23 members of the Vienna Philharmonic are women, a number that remains disproportionately low compared to the orchestra's total membership of 144. This imbalance is not solely the result of discriminatory policies but also of long-standing cultural expectations: for decades, the Philharmonic viewed its membership as an extension of a specifically Viennese tradition, one that "outsiders" like women and non-European musicians were thought unlikely to embody "authentically." While these attitudes have

softened over time, the effects of that history linger. The orchestra still projects an image defined more by heritage than by inclusivity, and its commitment to aesthetic continuity has often overshadowed calls for broader representation.

DIFFERENCES ACCOMPANIED BY ECONOMICS

Economics behind the Boston Pops' Diversity

In contrast to highly exclusive, subscription-based orchestral models, the Boston Pops historically implemented strategies to make music more financially accessible to a broader and more diverse audience. Although the Boston Pops can be dismissed as an orchestra that plays accessible music because it sells tickets, the orchestra deliberately curates a repertoire that spans film scores, jazz arrangements, and music from a wide range of ethnic and national traditions. Therefore, the Boston Pops is doing something that a purely profit-driven model would not require: it is enacting a vision of American pluralism. A pops orchestra optimizing purely for revenue would focus on the most broadly appealing repertoire, not the most culturally diverse. Instead, Boston Pop's programming reflects an ideological commitment that the concert hall should mirror the demographic and artistic diversity of its society. This may not be a vision every American orchestra has, which is precisely what makes the Boston Pops a unique case: they believe that musical institutions have a civic obligation to inclusivity. As Marcus (2018) explains, in 1885, "the Boston Symphony management sought to make the cost of tickets affordable to a broad public. As we have noted, at only twenty-five cents for a standard seat or fifty cents near the stage, the Promenade Concerts were considerably cheaper than the regular Symphony Concerts" (pp. 210–211). By deliberately lowering ticket prices, these concerts removed a barrier that typically restricted access to orchestral music. Affordable pricing ensured that the concert experience was not limited solely to Boston Brahmins and those with long-standing wealth or social connections but could also be enjoyed by the emerging middle class. In this way, the Boston Symphony consciously aligned its operations with the principles of economic inclusivity, broadening the potential audience and encouraging cultural participation among individuals who might otherwise be excluded from high-cost, subscription-based venues. Beyond ticket pricing, the Boston Symphony and Boston Pops further reduced economic barriers through practical operational decisions. Marcus (2018) notes that by "selling sufficient food and drink, employing musicians from its own orchestra, and using its own concert hall—all of which could keep costs down" (p. 212), the institution maintained financial sustainability while keeping concerts affordable. These strategies illustrate the careful attention given to the economic dimensions of access: by managing costs internally rather than passing them entirely onto the audience, the orchestra was able to offer high-quality performances without creating prohibitive financial barriers. Moreover, these measures enhanced the orchestra's ability to reach a diverse audience beyond traditional patrons of classical music, demonstrating that operational choices and economic planning can decisively shape the inclusivity of cultural experiences. This expanded access also reshapes how classical music is perceived and consumed, which directly aligns with Wang's discussion of cultural identity and consumption. Wang notes that "Baudrillard (1998) argues that we become what we buy," (Wang, 2016, p. 200), suggesting that access to cultural products influences who feels entitled to participate in them. Because classical music is often

misinterpreted as "music for the wealthy" and associated with elitism, limited access reinforces the idea that it belongs to only a small, privileged segment of the population, particularly in the United States. However, if people "become what they buy," then restricting access to classical music perpetuates historical exclusions. By contrast, when orchestras intentionally lower economic barriers and program repertoire by diverse composers performed by diverse musicians, they disrupt elitist narratives and invite broader audiences to see themselves within classical music spaces, helping to address long-standing disparities in cultural opportunity. "Western European governments provide more funding for SOs than government in the United States generally … in Germany, government provides 80% of SO total revenues. In the United States, government contributed only 4% of direct SO funding in 2005" (Pompe et al., 2011, p. 169). This funding imbalance fundamentally shapes orchestral behavior: because American orchestras cannot rely on consistent public subsidies, they are pressured to prioritize audience demand and ticket sales to survive financially. To establish a permanent home for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Henry Lee Higginson sought private backing to fund the project. In 1892, he and "three associates purchased a plot of land" in Boston, and by the following year, "stock shares were issued to fund the eventual construction of Symphony Hall" (Boston Symphony Orchestra n.d.). This reliance on private citizens rather than government subsidies reflects a defining trait of American cultural identity: the belief that public enrichment should be driven by private enterprise. While European concert halls of the era relied heavily on state or royal funding, America's burgeoning cultural landscape was forged by capitalist philanthropists who viewed the sponsorship of high art as both a civic duty and a testament to individual success. Furthermore, because private philanthropy inherently requires an institution to listen to its donors' opinions, it allowed American organizations to bypass the slow-moving state-run systems. By giving progressive, forward-thinking private citizens direct influence over the hall's development and mission, the institution could adapt more rapidly to new ideas and modern cultural shifts. As a result, programming decisions are driven less by the preservation of a fixed classical canon and more by market responsiveness, encouraging the integration of popular, film, and accessible repertoire that appeals across all demographics.

During my time with the Boston University Tanglewood Institute in the summer, I had the opportunity to attend a Tanglewood performance of the Boston Pops in the Koussevitzky Music Shed, an experience that highlighted a different approach to accessibility in orchestral music compared to traditional, subscription-based institutions. Unlike the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra or other elite orchestras with long-term subscription models and costly indoor venues, the Tanglewood concerts were held in an open, outdoor setting, where audiences could gather freely and enjoy the music in a relaxed environment. The open-air format not only made the physical space more inviting and flexible but also symbolically communicated that classical music could be experienced beyond the confines of formal, exclusive concert halls. Audience members were welcome to wear informal attire like sweaters and t-shirts, creating a relaxed and approachable atmosphere that resembled a picnic and encouraged broader participation. At Tanglewood, "five thousand people can be seated in the Shed, the covered area near to the orchestra, and the grounds beyond can take several times that number, enjoying suppers as they sit on blankets and await the performance" (Knight, 2006, p. 40), offering nearly three times the amount of seats than the Vienna Philharmonic's Musikverein Golden Hall, showing the Boston Pops' commitment to spreading orchestral music to as many people as possible. From an economic standpoint, outdoor venues reduce costs related to formal seating, building maintenance, and ticketed exclusivity, allowing concerts to reach a larger

number of attendees. Combined with repertoire designed to appeal to a broad audience, these strategies make live orchestral music financially and socially accessible to a wider public. Unlike subscription-based orchestras, where only individuals who can commit to high ticket prices and long-term subscription waits can fully participate, Tanglewood's approach allows people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to attend and enjoy performances. This economic inclusivity is particularly significant for younger audiences, families, and emerging music enthusiasts who might otherwise be excluded from elite cultural institutions due to financial constraints.

Economics Behind the Vienna Philharmonic's Traditionalism

On the other hand, during my orchestra tour in Vienna, I had the opportunity to play in historic venues, including the Musikverein. However, I quickly learned that taking photos or videos of the concert hall was strictly prohibited. While this rule may seem purely about protecting the performance environment or preserving tradition, it also reflects economic barriers that restrict access and diversity. By preventing digital recording or sharing, the Vienna Philharmonic effectively limits exposure to those who can physically attend, usually individuals who can afford tickets or maintain long-term subscriptions. Unlike digital media, which can reach broad and diverse audiences regardless of income or geographic location, these restrictions ensure that cultural access remains confined to a relatively wealthy, established audience. People who cannot afford the economic costs of travel, subscriptions, or premium ticket prices are excluded from the experience and cannot even gain a sense of inclusion through social media or shared media content. In this way, the economic model of access is reinforced: only those with sufficient resources to attend in person can fully participate. Restricting digital access acts as a gatekeeping mechanism, preserving the elite status of the audience and limiting the diversity of participants who can engage with these prestigious cultural spaces. The Vienna Philharmonic operates within an economic structure that significantly restricts who can access its concerts, ultimately shaping the diversity of its audience. Unlike musical experiences that circulate freely on social media or digital platforms, attendance at a Vienna Philharmonic concert requires both financial means and long-term commitment. In other words, the concert hall becomes a space available primarily to those who can afford premium cultural consumption. Petzold (2023) highlights this exclusivity directly, noting that "VPO's self-organised concerts at the Musikverein (Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Wien), which are accessible only to a long-standing, subscription-based audience. Concertgoers must apply for this subscription, which has a waiting list as long as up to fourteen years" (p. 225). A fourteen-year waiting list creates not only a temporal barrier but an economic one; only those with sustained financial stability, cultural capital, and long-term investment in elite musical institutions can realistically gain access. Meanwhile, people who rely on free, digital forms of musical engagement, such as livestreamed concerts, online programs, or social media content, are largely excluded. The Vienna Philharmonic's model, therefore, limits participation to a narrow demographic with specific economic privileges. This system directly impacts diversity. Economic access is one of the strongest predictors of who participates in elite cultural institutions, and the Vienna Philharmonic's subscription-based structure reinforces an audience composed of established, long-term patrons. Such a model makes it particularly difficult for younger listeners, lower-income residents, or individuals without generational ties to classical music to enter the space. Unlike orchestras that have adapted to broaden their audiences through discounted tickets, educational outreach, or free digital content, the Vienna Philharmonic's system creates a closed cultural loop in which

the same groups retain access year after year. The structural funding of Vienna's Musikverein exemplifies a distinct European model of cultural preservation that stands in sharp contrast to American private capitalism. While American venues relied on corporate stock and wealthy individuals, European institutions viewed classical music as a responsibility of the state. "It was not until 1863 that the Emperor showed his generosity and gave the society a large area opposite St. Charles' Church." (Wiener Symphoniker, n.d.). This land grant was essentially a massive government subsidy. Because classical music originated in the courts and chapels of Europe, European nations have historically felt an institutionalized cultural mission to preserve this heritage. By utilizing imperial resources to support the Musikverein, the Austrian state treated classical music not as a commercial luxury to be funded by private philanthropists, but as a public good deeply woven into the national identity. Furthermore, because the government deliberately provided this continuous supply of funding with the explicit mandate to safeguard history, it naturally fostered a more conservative environment within the institution. Without the financial need to constantly attract new markets or adapt to changing consumer tastes, the organization could remain dedicated to preserving centuries-old musical traditions exactly as they were inherited.

LIMITATIONS

This paper makes no claim about European orchestras or American orchestras as unified categories. Such generalizations would be unsupportable, given the enormous variation in funding models, governance structures, audience demographics, and artistic philosophies that exists within each national context. The argument here is strictly about two institutions: the Vienna Philharmonic and the Boston Pops. Every claim that follows is grounded in what these orchestras specifically do, how they specifically operate, and what their specific histories suggest about the cultural conditions that produced them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that orchestras are not merely artistic entities devoted to the performance of music, but complex cultural institutions shaped by history, social structure, and collective identity. By comparing the Boston Pops and the Vienna Philharmonic, this study exemplifies the central argument that orchestral programming, performance practice, and institutional values are constrained by the cultural systems in which these ensembles operate.

The Vienna Philharmonic cannot easily modernize without dismantling the democratic self-governance that has defined its identity, and the Boston Pops cannot retreat into a narrow canonical repertoire. This constraint, more than any surface difference in programming or ticket pricing, is what makes the comparison between these two orchestras genuinely revealing. Throughout this research process, several key takeaways emerged. One of the most significant findings was that repertoire choices are rarely neutral; instead, they function as statements of identity and power. The Boston Pops' embrace of film scores, holiday music, and participatory performances illustrates how American orchestras respond to a diverse population shaped by immigration, popular culture, and democratic ideals. Conversely, the Vienna

Philharmonic's focus on Austro-German repertoire, traditional performance practices, and ritualized concert formats highlights a commitment to cultural conservation that values historical continuity over adaptation. This paper also revealed how institutional structures, such as self-administration in Vienna and audience-driven models in the United States, play a role in shaping artistic decisions, influencing everything from hiring practices to programming. Looking ahead, this study opens multiple paths for future research. One direction would be a comparative analysis of orchestras across different regions of the United States, examining how race, geography, and local political climates affect representation and artistic priorities. Orchestras in the South, Midwest, and West Coast, for example, may exhibit different relationships to their communities based on historical segregation, economic development, or state-level arts funding. Another area for further inquiry could explore how government support versus private sponsorship impacts artistic freedom, diversity initiatives, and long-term sustainability. Additionally, future research might investigate how changing demographics and digital media are reshaping audience engagement and redefining what orchestral music means in modern society. Ultimately, this paper argues that while technical excellence and artistic mastery remain central to orchestral performance, they are not the sole elements shaping orchestral identity. Instead, race, politics, sociology, industrial structure, and history often dominate the characteristics and operations of orchestras, determining whose voices are represented and which traditions are preserved or challenged. By understanding orchestras through this broader interdisciplinary framework, scholars and musicians alike can better assess how these institutions might evolve to become more culturally responsive and reflective of the societies they serve.

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