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MINNPOST

How to replenish both social capital and good will toward MN Orchestra, Target

By [Louis D. Johnston](#) | 01/22/14



Last week, the

Photo by John Whiting

The orchestra lockout frayed our social fabric. Now we need to start mending the rips and tears.

Minnesota Orchestral Association and the musicians of the Minnesota Orchestra **ratified a three-year contract** and ended the 15-month lockout that darkened Orchestra Hall.

The **Minnesota Orchestra**, along with other arts and cultural institution, plays a critical role in our social fabric. The lockout and the animosity generated throughout the state toward both sides in the dispute frayed that fabric. We need to start mending the rips and tears.

Here are some ideas on what's at stake and the way forward.

Social capital and the arts

Why are some places richer than others? Economists attack this question by examining the relationship between a region's outputs (e.g. per capita income) and inputs (e.g. the work force.) Many

of these inputs are things: workers, machines, buildings, tools, and the like. However, when we add up the importance of these objects, we're left with a lot to explain; in particular, over half of both the level of a region's income and its growth rate are not explained by labor, capital, and other "stuff."



This implies that intangibles play an important role in determining standards of living. One important intangible that economists try to measure is **social capital**. According to the World Bank, "Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. Increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together."

Robert D. Putnam's book "**Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community**," brought the concept of social capital to the broader public. In a later book, "**Better Together: Restoring the American Community**," Putnam devotes a chapter to the connections between the arts, generally, and arts organizations, in particular, to an area's social capital. He points out: "The arts can nurture social capital by strengthening friendships, helping communities to understand and celebrate their heritage, and providing a safe way to discuss and solve difficult social problems."

The Minnesota Tour: a way to reconnect

The Minnesota Orchestra is one of the many arts organizations that contribute to the Minnesota economy both directly through things (artists, buildings, etc.) and indirectly by creating and maintaining social capital.

How can the Minnesota Orchestra start reconnecting with the community and begin replenishing the social capital lost during the lockout?

Here's an idea: The Minnesota Orchestra could stage a series of free concerts throughout the state. For starters, they could play in Minneapolis/St. Paul, St. Cloud, Duluth, Moorhead, Marshall and Rochester in order to cover most of the state. Local communities could provide the venues (e.g. Benedicta Arts Center at College of Saint Benedict or the Paramount Theater in St. Cloud) and handle local arrangements.

At each concert, there would be a performance by both the Minnesota Orchestra and by local musicians. For example, the **Duluth Superior Symphony** could play the first half of the concert in Duluth, followed by the Minnesota Orchestra. The local musicians and members of the Minnesota

Orchestra would go to local schools and hold master classes to truly bring music to everyone.

(Note: I can't take credit for the idea of staging free concerts. **David Stanoch** floated the idea of "opening the doors of Orchestra Hall free to the public for a series of shows" on his Facebook page. David bears no responsibility for what I've done with his idea but credit for inspiring me.)

Who would pay?

A big question, of course, is who would pay for this? Here's another idea: **Target Corporation**. The recent security breach hurt Target's reputation in the community; what better way start mending fences than sponsoring the Minnesota Orchestra throughout the state? Target could pay the expenses for the Minnesota Orchestra, including paying the musicians for each concert. Local businesses and nonprofits could partner with Target to, for example, collect donations for the local food shelf.

It's easy to think of the orchestra as a frill or something that only affects a small number of Minnesotans. But we need to keep in mind that one reason Minnesotans enjoy a high standard of living is that we have invested in social capital, and that we've suffered a loss of that capital over the past 15 months.

I think that something like the Minnesota Tour would go a long way toward replenishing the Minnesota Orchestra's good will, Target's reputation, and Minnesota's social capital.

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Louis Johnston writes Macro, Micro, Minnesota for MinnPost, reporting on economic developments in the news and what those developments mean to Minnesota. He is Joseph P. Farry professor in the Eugene J. McCarthy Center for Public Policy and Civic Engagement at Saint John's University. He is also a professor of economics at the university.

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