

Symphonic Music as an Educational Project State support to symphony orchestras in Sweden 1910–1940

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Summary

The early establishment of professional symphony orchestras in provincial towns in Sweden was the result of ambitions driven by philanthropic and liberal forces within the movement for adult education. In 1911 the Swedish parliament voted for financial support to orchestral societies that were willing to engage in adult education by means of people's concerts. There were plans to start 10–15 orchestras in towns all over the country but only three orchestras were actually established: in Gävle, Helsingborg and Norrköping. The state support to those orchestras continued to be taken from subsidies allocated to the adult education movement until the late 1930s.

The arguments for the parliamentary resolution in 1911 and in the debates in the parliament until the 1930s concerning the subsidies reflect a change in public opinion to adult education and cultural heritage. In Sweden, as in many other countries in Europe the period from 1890s to the Great War brought much social unrest. In this context middle-class liberals strongly articulated the need for adult education among workers. Music and especially symphonic music was believed to have an ennobling effect on the listeners. Its supposed capacity to move the emotions made it uniquely suited to change people's thoughts and manners. There was also a belief that music could act as a social cement by bringing together people from different classes.

People's concerts were first established in Stockholm in 1894 and then spread to other towns in Sweden. In Stockholm and Gothenburg, the concerts were usually accomplished with few performers. In other places as in Helsingborg concerts with symphonic music became the most common form. The people's concerts here from 1901 became the model that advocates for the phenomenon used in the parliamentary debates from 1911.

The scarcity of public funds during the war meant that the plans to start 10–15 orchestras were postponed until after 1918. At that time the political situation had changed and the influence of the social democratic party started to become evident. Members within it advocated a much more active form of education among adults and supported the establishment of amateur orchestras. The three professional orchestras that had been established before the war managed to keep the support once given to them but the money was constantly reduced in value because of the inflation. Neither could any new orchestras start. In order to survive the existing professional orchestras had to rely more and more upon support from local authorities and private donations.

Even if the motives for starting professional symphony orchestras in provincial towns in Sweden can be shown to have their background in the adult educational movement it is also possible to discern other causes. During the 19th century the symphony orchestra became an important institution to the bourgeoisie, a scene where its status as the 'cultured' class could be displayed. In cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö (the three largest cities in Sweden) the bourgeoisie was wealthy enough to support the establishment of symphonic orchestras on its own. This was not the case in Gävle, Helsingborg and Norrköping, provincial towns that around 1900 grew rapidly because of industrialisation.