As everyone even vaguely interested in serious music doubtless knows by now, Carnegie Hall is celebrating its 100th anniversary season. The press interviews and releases have borne their predictable fruit, and at this moment little seems to be going on in New York musical life but the chatter of Carnegie Hall congratulating itself. At the heart of the Carnegie celebration is an expanded concert calendar. Modestly described in the elegant promotional brochure as “The Greatest Concert Season in History,” “A Concert Season that Must Be Experienced To Be Believed,” and “Like Nothing You've Ever Seen Or Heard Before,” the calendar includes famous orchestras (Vienna, Amsterdam, Leningrad, Israel, Boston, Chicago, and Cleveland), famous conductors (Sir Georg Sold, Pierre Boulez, Claudio Abbado, and Seiji Ozawa), and famous soloists (Itzhak Perlman, Isaac Stern, Jessye Norman, Vladimir Ashkenazy). There are also chamber groups, pops concerts, folk-song recitals, and four operas done without staging.

Taken as a whole, the 100th season, far from being unparalled, is a reprise of just what Carnegie Hall was doing in its first seven decades when it was a rental house available to all comers, and of just what it has been doing in the past three decades when it has been taking a more active role in arranging that which appears under its name. What made Carnegie Hall viable when it was merely a space for hire, and what makes it viable today when it acts as a presenter of musical events, is the excellence of its warm and lively acoustics. In this it is superior to Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, the home of the New York Philharmonic and Carnegie's only rival in town. Music sounds better at Carnegie than it does at Avery Fisher, and it is the Carnegie sound, not the singularity of the Carnegie offerings, that alone undergirds all this year's hype.
But there is more to a great hall—or rather to the responsibilities of a great hall—than keeping good acoustics available to the public. A great hall should have artistic roots; it should provide an institutional touchstone for the musical life of its time. The best way this can be accomplished, and perhaps in Carnegie Hall’s case the only way, is to do something those responsible for the hall have sedulously avoided: to sponsor a great resident orchestra, setting the highest possible standards in performers and repertory. It is particularly important in Carnegie Hall’s case that it fulfill this task, for since the demise of the NBC Symphony in the mid 1950s in the wake of Toscanini’s retirement, the Philharmonic (despite the many visiting orchestras that come in for anight or two at a time) has had no continuing competition.

The resulting monopoly has doubtless been comfortable for the management of the Philharmonic, and perhaps going along with it has even been comfortable for the management of Carnegie Hall. But like all artistic monopolies, the dearth of resident orchestras in New York has only produced a torpid audience atmosphere, an atmosphere nicely co-existing with monopoly’s inevitable concomitant, institutional self-satisfaction. If there is one thing to be learned from the current Carnegie Hall hoopla, it is that good sound without enduring substance does not a rich musical life make.