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Interview with a Music Director: Marin Alsop

by

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Interview with a Music Director: Marin Alsop

In my work with orchestra conductors on learning to understand their own personalities and leadership styles, I meet hard-working, fascinating, and dedicated people. Among these acquaintances is Marin Alsop, the music director of my hometown symphony organization, the Colorado Symphony Orchestra. She holds the same position with the Eugene Symphony in Oregon, the Long Island Philharmonic, and the Concordia Orchestra, of which she is the founder. She has been named Creative Conductor Chair of the Saint Louis Symphony and also finds time to provide musical leadership for two summer festivals. She attended Yale University and holds bachelor's and master's degrees in music from The Julliard School.

It has been especially interesting for me to observe her in the Colorado Symphony's musical leadership role because of the organization's unique (for America) structure as a cooperative symphony organization. She graciously consented to share her personal views on a range of questions about the role of the music director, particularly within the cooperative organizational structure. We spoke in January, 1996, and what follows is an edited transcript of that conversation.

Barbara Pollack: Let's set the scene for our readers. Would you please define music director for me?

Marin Alsop: Music director is a very broad term. The music director is the person who is responsible for the artistic vision of the organization. To me, the music director is the artistic CEO, with different departments under his or her direction. In my opinion, there should be a general business plan and a direction for the organization which is linked directly to the music director and that artistic vision.

Under that, of course, falls the responsibility for the quality of the artistic product. In conducting a concert, the music director is responsible to see that the product has a certain quality. And it trickles down from there. I consider all my musicians, but I put a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of my principal players, my managers, to demand a certain level of performance from their sections.

BP: Do you function differently as a music director in the different organizations with which you work?

MA: In every organization except the Colorado Symphony, I do the things I described. However, the Colorado Symphony is a musician participatory orchestra. The musicians compose one-third of the board of directors and they are integrally involved in the management and decision-making process of the organization. The consensus management of this symphony is completely atypical of orchestras in the United States.

My responsibilities to the artistic product of all my symphonies are the same. I try to bring the orchestra to a certain level; to solicit certain avenues for them.

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But within the Colorado Symphony everyone has basically equal status and no one person can set a vision. My input carries a lot of weight, but as far as voting goes, I literally have one vote. The artistic committee is composed of musicians and membership changes each year. That presents a considerable challenge. I must negotiate and convince and “sell” my vision to the majority which can be both extremely challenging and very time consuming.

Let me give you an example. Programming is the backbone of an artistic organization because it defines your profile to the public and sets you apart from every other organization. All of the organizations with which

I work, except the Colorado, have very distinct and unique profiles and I am comfortable that they are well suited to the communities in which they are located. In planning programs, I, of course, consult with the management team about budgets, soloists, and whether things fit with what they have in mind. But ultimately, I have complete authority. With the Colorado, the process is completely different.

BP: Can you explain the reasons why the process works differently?

MA: I think the main factor is the structure of the organization. As you know, the Colorado Symphony is functioning with a relatively new, cooperative organizational structure and we are all trying to learn to make it work. When everyone is equalized, everyone is an expert. The musicians really are experts, but in my opinion, they are not quite experts in music directorship. Every musician has a vision of what he or she would like the orchestra to be and every vision is different. So where does one draw the line? Do we finally say we can't create a profile by committee? The picture to me often seems random.

BP: Despite your obvious frustrations, you have been music director of the Colorado Symphony for three years, so there must be some elements of the cooperative orchestra structure which interest you.

MA: I think that there are tremendous advantages in having the musicians involved. They feel much more rewarded through their involvement and I sense

a vitality in their participation. The quality of the orchestra is our greatest selling point. The Colorado Symphony is an excellent instrument and I see where it could be in 10 years. However, I think that there is an evolution which must occur. Rather than micromanaging every program, we all need to start looking at the bigger picture and discussing where we want to be in five years rather than continually dealing with next week. I would like to think that the organization is moving in that direction.

BP: Do outside factors, such as the size of the community and the influence of the board and others affect the way you function as music director in different organizations?

MA: Definitely. Eugene, Oregon (and I have just returned from there) is a community that places the arts at the very top of the pyramid of values. It is a community of about 120,000 people and has a 2,600-seat concert hall—the same size as Boettcher in Denver. In Eugene, the hall is sold out every time I perform. The community is known as a sports community, but they also have a tremendous interest in culture. When I walked in seven years ago, it was as though someone had poured gasoline all over the floor and all I needed to do was light a match to set it on fire!

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The Eugene Symphony follows a traditional orchestra structure and the board is devoted. They attend meetings and concerts and they ask me questions. They really want to be involved and want to understand. They have enabled me to do projects that I couldn't even envision doing anywhere else. A percentage of the budget is permanently dedicated to research and development which gives us the chance to try something new every year.

And I have the same feelings about the community which supports the Colorado Symphony. I have the same feeling in the concert hall as I had when I arrived in Eugene. People are excited, they're interested, they're intrigued, they're alive. The greatest difference I see is in the structure of the orchestra itself.

BP: So how do these differences in organizational structures and communities fit with your own management style?

MA: I think I am very reasonable. I enjoy input. I like the dialogue process and being forced to think about my plan several times because it enables me to be far more convincing and far more committed. I also think I am a good negotiator. However, ultimately, I want to have the freedom to make some mistakes and take full responsibility for them.

BP: Leadership is another theme that is of great interest to the Symphony Orchestra Institute. So take off your “music director” hat for a moment and put on the one which says “conductor.” Are any of these skills which you have described—working with a variety of people in a variety of situations—ones

which you learned in your preparation to become a conductor?

MA: Oh no! Of course not! If one has a good conducting education, one learns how to analyze scores and do the physical gestures of conducting so they reflect the music. But education in conducting does not really include the dynamics of one person dealing with a large group of people. And I certainly never had a course in how to spend rehearsal time with musicians. I am dying to teach such a course to young conductors!

BP: If you could design the curriculum for a conductor training program, what would you include?

MA: I would include structural things such as analysis, score reading, orchestration, and the physical gesturing of conducting. And I would also include techniques of how to speak to an orchestra and how to react. These are very important, because if you waste the musicians' time you will not be a successful conductor. The musicians will not like you and they will not do their best.

My curriculum would also include educating conductors about things that take place off the podium. And I am wearing both hats now—conductor and music director. I would include courses to help understand how businesses are run, or should be run. Not that we need to be experts, but I think we do need to have a grasp of fund raising and marketing. We need to understand that we can provide inspiration to the development and marketing people because they are often not musicians themselves. It is hard to market a Brahms symphony if you are not really sure what one is!

BP: Let's expand upon the collaborative relationship between conductor and orchestra. What does a conductor do to foster that relationship?

MA: When you are a conductor it is as though you are in the focus of the Hubble telescope. You are in the eye of this enormous magnifying lens and anything you do that is the least bit idiosyncratic becomes a caricature. Let me give you an example from my own experience.

I sometimes like to wear vests. One time, my entire orchestra came in wearing vests. It was hysterical and I think it was done in a loving way. But if you don't have a sense of humor about yourself, you are dead. Because you *are* a caricature of yourself when you are standing on that podium. Hundreds of people are staring at you. They are being paid to listen to every single thing you say . . . or at least to endure it. But you need to understand that you have to make it enjoyable for them, knowing how to back off when you are pushing too hard. It is very much like other relationships. It is a building process.

Conductors also need to always remember that if we do not have musicians, no matter how much we wave our arms, no sound is going to come out. It is truly consensus management. Our job as conductors is to get the musicians to be interested, intrigued, and inspired by our commitment to the composer, but we're not the ones making the sounds. Somehow, by our words and gestures, we are trying to get musicians to play a certain way. That requires complete,

total respect for one's musicians. I think if you have that respect, you will have a collaborative venture.

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BP: Describe for me what you consider the ongoing challenges in relationships between conductors and orchestras.

MA: I think the challenges differ depending upon the situation. When it is your own orchestra, it resembles a marriage. There are habitual behaviors that one needs to be wary of as a conductor. You can get into habits of not saying what you really mean, not taking the time to listen carefully, not responding, or responding in a “programmed” way.

In an orchestra with a traditional structure, one generally does not have a lot of personal contact with musicians. I consider them my colleagues and, on a certain level, very good friends. And perhaps that is why I find the cooperative structure a bit awkward.

One is forced to have lots of dialogue with the musicians. And sometimes the dialogue is about topics which are uncomfortable, such as my opinion of an individual's playing. So I think there is a line of separation—not distance, just mutual respect—that needs to be observed. And that is one of the challenges of an orchestra with a cooperative structure.

BP: But doesn't the conductor have the final say about the music, no matter what the orchestra's organizational structure?

MA: Yes. But if you are doing a great job, meaning that you are totally committed and totally convinced and that you have worked terribly hard, the way you are structuring and motivating a piece sweeps up even those who disagree with you. There is no conflict.

I also think that successful conductors need to give the musicians room to do what they do best and not restrict them. For example, if an individual has a solo, you need to listen first before telling the musician what you want. Musicians often have better ideas than I do.

BP: Has working with a variety of symphony orchestras which have different organizational structures made you more self aware?

MA: Working with the Colorado Symphony has given me reason to think about that more than I have in the past. The cooperative organizational structure provides an opportunity to learn and grow because there is so much dialogue and so much interaction on so many levels with so many people. We are all trying to figure out how to build this organization which seems huge. And so many of us have different ideas about direction. One of my personal challenges is to be able to state my feelings about something emphatically, convincingly, and without apology.

BP: When we began this conversation, you likened the music director to an artistic CEO. Are there other ways in which the CEO analogy applies?

MA: I think the running of an orchestra is analogous to the running of a business. Your employees need to feel that they are part of the process, that they are contributing, that they are vital, and that they are irreplaceable. You also must be savvy about your market, knowing how to diversify, but not too much. And, of course, you have to be willing to take responsibility when something goes wrong—regardless of whether it is really your fault.

I do actually think of the orchestra as composed of different managers, each with his or her own department. I try not to micromanage my leaders, but let them run with the ball.

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I believe that good management style involves checking in but not staying on anyone’s case. It involves clearly setting your expectations and then letting members of your organization live up to those expectations or exceed them. And you must let them know when they have done well. That is an area in which I am personally trying to improve. I was raised that straight “A” grades were the expectation and no special mention was made when I achieved them. I am trying to break that pattern and actively work to let people know when I think they are doing a good job.

BP: Do you have any final thoughts about music directors and their symphony orchestra organizations?

MA: It is a new age for music directors. The field is completely different from what it was 20 years ago. Music directors must be aware of how the arts, and music in particular, fit into our society—our

dramatically changing society. One has to come prepared to say, “I understand how this is going to work in this community and I am your salesperson.” It is no longer an “Ivory Tower.” Music directors are in the trenches now and had better be willing to take out the garbage if necessary. Our job is to do whatever is necessary to get our message across.

Barbara Pollack is president of Pollack Communication Associates in Denver, Colorado. She is a licensed clinical psychologist and holds M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Columbia University.