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Decision Making in British Symphony Orchestras: Formal Structures, Informal Systems, and the Role of Players

by

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How are key decisions made in British symphony orchestras? What formal and informal decision-making systems exist? How do they vary between orchestras? In particular, what is the role of musicians in important artistic and commercial matters and how satisfied are they with the decision-making processes in their organizations?

These are the questions underlying a study of decision making and change in symphony orchestras which I am conducting at the Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield, England. Organizational research on orchestras, in particular British orchestras, is relatively rare. One notable exception is the major comparative study of 78 United States, United Kingdom, and German symphony orchestras which was carried out by J. Richard Hackman, Jutta Allmendinger, and Erin Lehman.¹ In an interview published in the April 1996 issue of *Harmony*, Hackman identified such factors as adequate financial resources and good leadership as critical to an orchestra's effectiveness, both as to its artistic performance and in terms of member job satisfaction.² However, little research exists which examines, in depth and over time, the day-to-day functioning of such organizations, especially considering the parts played by musicians when they are not on the stage.

My research involves a study of the decision-making and related organizational change processes of three British symphony orchestras. To date, I have followed these orchestras over the period of a year. The study is ongoing and since detailed data analysis is currently in progress, this report presents only an overview of preliminary findings. The report describes the three different types of symphony orchestras which exist in Great Britain and, outlining the research methods adopted to study them, examines the decision-making systems in place in one orchestra from each category. I anticipate that the results of my completed research will be available later this year and will be published by the Symphony Orchestra Institute.

Three Types of Symphony Orchestras

The 13 full-time symphony orchestras in Great Britain fall into three distinct categories: regional contract, BBC contract, and London independent orchestras. While the first two categories employ musicians on permanent contracts, as is

the case in most symphony orchestras in the United States, the London independent orchestras are distinctive in comprising freelance musicians who are self-employed but who work together regularly in a particular orchestra. These three categories of orchestras also differ in their primary sources of income, their key activities, and their governance structures. These features are summarized in Table 1 below.

The Study Method

This study examines three orchestras, one from each of the categories described above: a regional contract orchestra, a BBC contract orchestra, and a London independent orchestra, called here, for the purposes of confidentiality, the

Table 1. Types of British Symphony Orchestras

	Regional Contract	BBC Contract	London Independent
Orchestra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Bournemouth – City of Birmingham – Hallé – Royal Liverpool – Royal Scottish National 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – BBC National Orchestra of Wales – BBC Philharmonic – BBC Scottish – BBC Symphony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – London Philharmonic – London Symphony – Philharmonia – Royal Philharmonic
Basis of Musician Employment	– Permanent contract	– Permanent contract	– Freelance
Core Income Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Arts Council of England[†] – Arts Council of Scotland[†] 	– BBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Arts Council of England – Corporate and private sponsors
Key Activities	– Public concerts given locally	– Recording for radio broadcast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Public concerts given locally and internationally – CD recordings
Governance Structure	– External board of directors, comprising leading figures from the local business & arts communities, town councillors & some employee directors	– BBC management team, operating from within the wider BBC hierarchy	– Player-governed by elected board, comprising a majority of player directors, the managing director, & leading figures from the business community

[†] The Arts Councils receive over £200 million from the British government for distribution in support of the arts. As “non political” bodies, they distribute money at arm’s length from government to a wide range of arts organizations and projects.

Regional, BBC, and London orchestras. Data were collected over a one-year period, using a variety of methods. I conducted interviews with the managers in each orchestra, with the musicians on the representative orchestra committees, and with a wide range of other players. In addition I attended, as an observer, most meetings that were held in each orchestra over the one-year study period. These included management meetings, orchestra committee meetings as well as those held with the full orchestra, meetings between management and players, and board and trustee meetings. I spent time on tour with two of the orchestras, which provided the opportunity for much informal discussion and observation. Players and managers in two of the orchestras also completed detailed opinion surveys. Finally, I carried out extensive analysis of current and historical documentation about each orchestra.

Decisions in British Symphony Orchestras

The decisions examined in this study spanned a range of artistic, financial, and personnel issues. They included: appointing or renewing the contract of the principal conductor (music director), re-engaging guest conductors, choosing the repertoire to be played, appointing players to key positions in the orchestra, dealing with a player's unsatisfactory standards of performance, determining players' pay and contract conditions, identifying new areas for income generation and cost saving, and developing collaborative relationships with other orchestras. I initially chose these decisions because of their apparent significance in artistic, commercial, and often political terms and because they had arisen in all three orchestras during the period of study, offering the opportunity for comparative analysis across organizations. In discussing this decision set with players and managers from each orchestra, I found confirmation that these were key issues facing their orchestras during the study period. Over time, such decisions are likely to arise in many orchestras, in Great Britain and elsewhere.

Who Has a “Say” in Decisions? How Does This Happen?

The following sections examine decision making in the three orchestras, first describing their governance structures, their formal schedules of meetings, and their informal decision-making interactions. Then the nature of players' participation is investigated in each orchestra in turn. Here, three elements are considered central to employee participation: the level of *interaction* between players and key decision makers, the extent of *information sharing* relevant to the decision, and the degree of *influence* players have on the decision process and outcome.³ These concepts are used to describe players' involvement in decision making in each orchestra. Finally, I offer a preliminary comment on player satisfaction with the existing systems.

Regional Orchestra: Decision Structures and Systems **Organizational Governance Structure**

The Regional is officially governed by an external board of directors, a structure typical of most United States symphony orchestras. As outlined in Table 1, the

board comprises elected members from the local business and arts communities, a number of town councillors, and three employee directors: two players, and one member from the administration. Both the managing director and the principal conductor (music director) are accountable to this board. The players have a representative body comprising an elected committee of six, whose role is to represent players' views and interests.

Meetings: Formal Decision-making Forums

The board meets bimonthly. The managing director also attends, as does the chairman of the orchestra committee, as an observer. In addition, five board subcommittees exist to consider matters of finance, artistic policy, marketing, sponsorship, and education. Each subcommittee is scheduled to meet once between board meetings.

The orchestra committee meets as required, typically every few weeks, to discuss a range of issues, including day-to-day logistics, but also programming and key appointments. This committee meets quarterly with management and some board members at the consultative committee meeting. The consultative committee itself has three subcommittees, considering artistic matters, concert logistics, and marketing. These subcommittees meet once between each meeting of the consultative committee. Full orchestra meetings are called every few weeks by the orchestra chairman to inform other players of developments on matters such as pay negotiations. The senior management team meets weekly to discuss ongoing matters and medium-term plans.

Most of these meetings (board, consultative, subcommittee, and senior management) are scheduled well in advance and minutes are taken for subsequent distribution. The Regional clearly has an extensive and complex system of meetings for information sharing and decision making.

Informal Exchanges: Additional Opportunities

Despite the great number and range of formal meetings, much important interaction in the Regional nevertheless takes place informally. In particular, the managing director and one key board member are in quite frequent contact to discuss specific matters, as are the player directors with the managing director and, separately, with the board member. The artistic director is also in fairly regular contact, backstage and informally, with players from the orchestra. As in most orchestras, daily exchanges among players on a variety of matters are common.

The Nature of Player Participation

The intricate system of meetings outlined above shows high player interaction with official decision makers in the Regional orchestra. Not only do certain elected players attend board and subcommittee meetings, the full orchestra committee also meets regularly with a subset of the board and other managers to discuss a wide range of artistic, financial, marketing, and other matters in the consultative committee meeting and meetings of its associated subcommittees. Along with regular face-to-face interaction, these forums enable a considerable

amount of information sharing in both directions. Informally, too, the two player directors maintain informal relationships with the managing director and a key board member.

But how much *influence* do players in the Regional orchestra have in major decisions? I observed in the scheduled meetings players expressing their views on certain decisions that were made concerning conductors, repertoire, and the way in which player appointments and retirements were handled. Largely, however, player influence was limited to offering their thoughts to the main decision makers—the senior management, the principal conductor, and key members of the board. A greater source of player influence possibly came through the informal channels which the two player directors maintained with the managing director and with the key board member. In this way, and particularly because of these players' personalities and what was perceived to be their generally moderate and considered stance on orchestra matters, their views were quite often sought and given serious consideration.

Player Satisfaction with the Existing System

Despite the relatively high levels of interaction and information sharing the player representatives experienced, their lack of influence was frustrating, for themselves and for others in the orchestra. This feeling may have been especially strong because there was a widely held view that some poor artistic and commercial decisions had been made in previous years and that these decisions were taking time to be righted. Although players did not consider it their responsibility to manage the orchestra, their anxiety about what they perceived as past mismanagement kept player attendance at meetings high and their desire for involvement in decisions considerable. Meanwhile, the player directors, seeing ineffectiveness in the formal systems, made it their business to try to influence decisions through the informal channels available to them.

BBC Orchestra: Decision Structures and Systems

Organizational Governance Structure

The BBC orchestra is part of a music production department within the BBC and the managing director and senior producer responsible for the orchestra also have duties and commitments relating to other music production activities. Most of their time, however, is spent on orchestral matters. The managing director reports to two very senior BBC managers. One of these, the editorial manager, has editorial responsibilities for a number of production areas including music, and the other is the controller of the BBC classical music radio station, the orchestra's main customer. The principal conductor of this orchestra is answerable to the managing director and senior producer of the orchestra. As in the Regional orchestra, the players have an elected committee, in this case five players, again with a role to represent the players' interests and opinions.

Meetings: Formal Decision-making Forums

During the course of my study, there were comparatively few meetings in the BBC orchestra. No regular, formal meetings were scheduled between the

managers identified above and although meetings for all the staff of the music production department team were planned monthly, they were often rescheduled because of other senior management commitments. Small groups of four or five senior managers attended planning “awaydays” every few months and the managing director had similar meetings with his editorial manager a few times a year.

The orchestra committee met at least once every two weeks (very largely to discuss day-to-day concerns), and met with managers in the orchestral office monthly (typically to pass these matters forward). As in the Regional orchestra, the orchestra chairman called full orchestra meetings every few weeks. The orchestra chairman often expressed the concern that he was unable to get dates from the busy senior managers for what were supposed to be the quarterly meetings during which the orchestra committee was scheduled to meet with the managing director and senior producer to discuss wider artistic and strategic matters. However, about twice a year, the managing director and senior producer addressed the full orchestra on such issues, informing them of plans and decisions and taking questions from the players.

Informal Exchanges: Additional Opportunities

The atmosphere in the BBC orchestra is one of high informality. Many discussions take place between managers in passing, or, for example, when traveling to or from concerts. Being based in open-plan offices adds to the ease of such informal exchange. In addition, while there are relatively few meetings for players to interact with decision makers, the orchestra chairman makes it his business to have considerable informal contact with management. During my study, he daily took questions and concerns into the orchestra management offices, feeling it important and enjoying this part of his role. Another set of informal exchanges occurred between the players and the senior producer, who often worked closely with them on recordings for broadcast. During breaks he had the opportunity to pick up the views of those who came to chat with him about conductors and repertoire. As in the Regional orchestra, the degree of informal exchange among players was high.

The Nature of Player Participation

As described above, neither the governance structure, nor the number and type of scheduled meetings encourage extensive player participation. Formally, interaction and information sharing are low and therefore, influence through these channels is low, too. The orchestra committee here was said to deal with “tea and toilet” concerns. They were not seen as having an influence on major artistic, financial, or other strategic decisions and indeed, did not consider this their responsibility. The meetings held with orchestral office management were primarily geared towards logistical or detailed contractual matters. When they did meet with senior management, discussions were more concerned with artistic and financial issues, but these meetings were relatively rare. Senior management addresses to the full orchestra were primarily information sessions, considered to be for the players’ benefit. Similarly, although the orchestra chairman spent

considerable time in the management offices, this was largely information-seeking, rather than decision-influencing behavior. When players did have an influence in decisions on matters such as conductors, or player personnel matters, this was much more likely to happen through informal exchanges in a break or over lunch with the senior producer.

Player Satisfaction with the Existing System

Both formally and informally, player influence in major decisions in this BBC orchestra is limited. However, most players are reasonably content with this arrangement, not considering it their business to intervene in such management concerns, a particularly common feature of the “us and them” climate in many parts of the BBC. Players generally perceive their senior managers as highly competent in the key artistic and financial decision areas. Equally, BBC managers believe they are the best-placed people to make decisions for the orchestra and do not seek great input from the players. And while the orchestra chairman makes efforts to extend his information base, even he does not strive for much greater powers of influence.

London Orchestra: Decision Structures and Systems

Organizational Governance Structure

The London orchestra is officially governed by a player-elected board, made up of seven player directors, the managing director, and a small minority of external members drawn from the local business community. The principal conductor reports to this board. In addition, the orchestra has a management committee of local business people who act as financial advisors. The orchestra committee comprises the seven player directors.

Meetings: Formal Decision-making Forums

Formal meetings in the self-governing London orchestra are generally held regularly, but relatively infrequently. Board meetings take place approximately quarterly, covering a very wide range of matters, including player appointments, specific artistic and commercial projects, and longer-term financial and strategic plans. Also held approximately quarterly are management committee meetings, which are attended by the managing director and the orchestra chairman and vice-chairman. These meetings are almost exclusively concerned with the orchestra’s financial planning. The orchestra committee meets as required every few weeks, typically to discuss player personnel matters. There are no formal management team meetings.

Informal Exchanges: Additional Opportunities

As in the other orchestras, informal exchanges among players are high and members from the orchestra committee share information with each other and with colleagues as opportunities arise between rehearsals and on other occasions. Similarly, informal communication takes place among members of management, although some of those I interviewed commented that the physical layout of the offices makes this difficult. Extensive informal discussion takes place between the orchestra chairman and the managing director. They speak daily, in person

or by telephone, exchanging information and views on a very wide range of organizational decision matters.

The Nature of Player Participation

In examining player participation in a self-governing orchestra, it does not really make sense to ask how much interaction, information sharing, and influence players have with key decision makers. Instead, it is important to clarify the precise roles of the players and other primary actors in various decision-making processes. This is what I observed during my study.

While player directors attended meetings with the orchestra's external board members and financial advisors, much of their input to orchestra decision making happened in the ad hoc orchestra committee meetings that took place between rehearsals. Here, they discussed many personnel matters, for example, appointments, demotions, and sorting out interpersonal difficulties between certain players. However, player directors were not expected to rely on their own judgements to make hiring and firing decisions, as management or the principal conductor might in a managed orchestra. Section principals were highly influential in these decisions which were then ratified by the elected players. On certain matters such as key conductor appointments, the orchestra chairman, having presented the recommendations with some reasoned argument, would take a vote from the full orchestra.

The player directors in the London orchestra considered themselves responsible for the major artistic and financial decisions the orchestra made, and did not take their positions lightly. However, most were very open about their lack of understanding of accounting and other financial material discussed in board and management committee meetings. They saw the managing director and external members as critical decision makers in these matters.

In some areas, the managing director was more influential than one might have expected in a self-governed orchestra. Although he described himself as "employed by the players," which was factually correct, he was not driven solely by their instructions. Knowledgeable and well-connected in the business, he took responsibility for the great majority of decisions concerning conductors, and with them repertoire, and for a wide variety of income-generating activities, including long-term strategic initiatives. He maintained a close working relationship with the orchestra chairman, whose understanding of this side of the business was also considerable. Thus, interaction and information sharing were particularly high at this managing director-chairman apex. Together, these two had very considerable influence over decisions that were made on a wide range of artistic, financial, and personnel issues.

Player Satisfaction with the Existing System

Perhaps as an inevitable result of the high interaction and exchange between the managing director and the orchestra chairman, other player directors at times felt uneasy that they did not know more about the orchestra's current activities and future plans. In describing these feelings, the London players

sounded quite similar to those in the Regional orchestra, as they expressed anxiety about their ignorance and their impotence in the decision-making process. Overall, however, most players in this orchestra felt it was well directed by the managing director-chairman team and were grateful to see them continue in this way, not seeking to add the burden of such responsibilities to their already busy schedules.

Summary and Interim Conclusions

Three quite distinct decision-making systems are described above, each containing different kinds and degrees of player participation. While players in the Regional orchestra, with substantial representation on its multiple decision-making committees and subcommittees, were well informed about the issues facing their orchestra, they were not highly influential in decision outcomes. Formally staged interaction between players and management was much rarer in the BBC orchestra and overall, whose input into important decisions was very limited. The governance structure of the self-governing London orchestra meant player participation was built into the fabric of the organization. Nevertheless, for speed of response and because of the particular management skills of some individuals, many decisions were made within a centralized core team.

These differences clearly relate neither solely to the organizations' governance structures nor to the formal systems of meetings that exist in each. In traditionally managed orchestras, the openness to player input shown by key managers was an important factor in determining the extent of participation allowed, which itself could depend on management perceptions of and relationships with certain player representatives. Other critical components in participative decision making were, of course, the levels of ability and interest that players showed in dealing with organizational issues.

A brief preliminary examination of players' satisfaction with their orchestras' decision-making systems suggests that their desire for involvement was dependent on a number of factors. For example, in orchestras where the decision makers were perceived to be competent, players were less concerned about interfering with an apparently effective system and were comfortable with little information and limited influence. However, in the Regional orchestra, where players were not convinced that their organizational problems were being addressed adequately, the considerable information they possessed and the levels of interaction they had with key decision makers may have increased their anxiety to influence matters themselves. In the self-governing London orchestra, players' beliefs in their own *potential* power appeared more important than the frequency with which they exercised these rights, especially since they very directly experienced the orchestra's growing success through increased quantity and quality of work. These points are summarized in Table 2.

This short piece, written while data analysis is still in progress, does not begin to consider the full complexities of decision making in symphony orchestras.

Players' interest in participation and their ability to affect decision outcomes clearly vary with each orchestra and depend on much more than established structures and meeting schedules. Not only must there be the opportunity for participation, created by the governance structure or the management, but additionally, for players to become involved in organizational matters, they must have the skills and motivation to do so. Even in this brief overview, the importance of such factors as the individual personalities of key player representatives, the perceived competence of the official decision makers, and the extent to which players believe their views have relevance all appear to be critical factors in determining the nature of player involvement in an orchestra's decision making. These points will be elaborated and further developed in a future article or report which the Symphony Orchestra Institute will publish, providing both players and managers with a better understanding of symphony orchestra decision-making processes and of players' current and possible future roles in them.

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Notes

- ¹ Allmendinger, Jutta, and J. Richard Hackman. 1991-1994. *Cross-national Study of Symphony Orchestras*. Cambridge: Harvard University.
- ² Judy, Paul R. Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras: An Interview with J. Richard Hackman. *Harmony* 2 (April 1996): 1-14.
- ³ Wall, T. D. and J. A. Lischeron. 1977. *Worker Participation*. London: McGraw Hill.

Table 2. Player Participation in Three British Symphony Orchestras

	Regional	BBC	London
Primary bases of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Governance structure allowing player representatives on board – Formal meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Informal mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Self-governing governance structure – Informal exchanges
Nature of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – High interaction and information sharing through formal meetings – Most influence happens informally through key player representatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Low interaction and information sharing through formal meetings – Some interaction and influence happens informally through representative and nonrepresentative players 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – High interaction, information sharing, and influence between key player representative and managing director – Moderate informal exchange between these individuals and other players
Player satisfaction with system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Some dissatisfaction from frustrated player representatives, aware of their limited influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reasonable satisfaction despite lack of information and influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Overall satisfaction with being in a self-governing system, but some discomfort at the small centralized power base
Key factors influencing the extent/type of participation, and players' satisfaction with it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Managing director is open to player participation – Decision makers perceive key player representatives to be trustworthy and of sound judgement – Players have the desire to intervene (having access to considerable management information and perceiving past mismanagement which is slow to right itself) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Managing director does not seek high player input – BBC players do not expect to have a role in wider decisions – Players do not perceive their representatives as influential – Players perceive their management as highly competent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Governance structure creates relatively high participation opportunity for some players – Managing director supports the practice of player government – Orchestra Chairman has strong management skills and the inclination to influence decisions – Representative role of players perceived as difficult and time-consuming – Players extremely busy – Players perceive effective decisions being made