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Musician Involvement in Symphony Orchestra Organizations



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Musician Involvement in Symphony Orchestra Organizations

In organizations, “involvement” generally means “participation,” “engagement,” and “inclusion.” The involvement of symphony orchestra musicians in the affairs of their organizations has been an emerging issue. Indeed, it is an issue the Symphony Orchestra Institute has raised since its founding, in the belief that musician involvement increases the effectiveness of symphony organizations. It seems that the direction, nature, and degree of musician involvement is—and is likely to be for some time—the most central issue many symphony orchestras will face.

In order to explore this wide-ranging topic, the Symphony Orchestra Institute invited a diverse group of approximately 60 symphony organization participants and observers to share their ideas about, and opinions of, musician involvement. The group included a balance of board members, executive directors, musicians, and conductors—mostly active, some retired—from organizations in different cities around North America, along with some close observers of the symphony community. Nearly all acknowledged the invitation, with 30 indicating a desire to contribute, time permitting. Several reluctantly declined to contribute, but encouraged the project. More than 20 individuals followed through with written contributions, and provided a reasonable cross-section of opinion.

Contributors were invited to write about some aspect of the topic of musician involvement that they considered especially significant or about which they held strong beliefs. What follows is based on the responses, and presents a panorama of thoughtful opinion of participants from various orchestra organizations.

In the corporate world, involvement generally implies fuller participation in and knowledge of the overall affairs of an organization. It means a greater degree of engagement—both in the work and the larger concerns and identity of the organization—and a greater sense of inclusion. In “high involvement” organizations, employees quite often work in “self-directed” teams, and actively and significantly participate in the decision making which directly affects their work and its context.¹ These employees are often described as “empowered.”

For symphony orchestra musicians, involvement has generally been taken to encompass any activity related to the affairs of the orchestra, or the overall

orchestral organization, other than preparation and participation in the orchestra's performances. The range of activities mentioned by the contributors to this essay bears this out, and included board service in one form or another; participation in other areas of the organization's decision making, such as artistic direction or hiring decisions; chamber music performance; and music-related community service, such as music appreciation or preconcert lectures and applied lessons sponsored by the orchestra.²

Musician involvement in fund raising or other aspects of the organization's finances, except as part of participation in the work of the board, received little discussion (despite the fact that financial crises have, in many instances, been what first precipitated moves to greater musician involvement). Of course, just what the involvement of musicians in any of these activities implies, and the extent of involvement, varies from organization to organization. Some sense of this can be gained from the responses quoted in the rest of this article, particularly in the discussions of board service, a type of involvement mentioned by nearly all of the respondents.

Contributors also made little, if any, mention of orchestra committee and audition process work, as if these forms of musician involvement are now considered a routine part of orchestral life, at least for some musicians

Goals and Benefits of Musician Involvement

Musician involvement has been initiated, in many instances, as the result of an orchestra organization's financial crisis: musicians who accepted pay cuts for the good of the orchestra having demanded or been offered more say or more part in the organization's operations.³ Many respondents noted that orchestras—and indeed, the arts in general—face continued crises, not only of finances, but of identity and mission, and they see increased musician involvement as a response to the challenges that most symphony orchestras face. Musician involvement is seen as a factor working for the overall good of the organization. And not insignificantly, increased involvement is seen as a countermeasure against job dissatisfaction among orchestra players.

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Albert K. Webster, a consultant to The Helen F. Whitaker Fund, and former managing director and executive vice president at the New York Philharmonic, sketched out an approach to successful musician involvement in broad terms:

Musician involvement needs to be founded upon relevance, flexibility, job satisfaction, artistic quality, communication, full disclosure, and an overall understanding of the institution and its environment.

Everyone needs to be willing to fully consider fundamental change, to be willing to abandon the positions and strictures and habits of the past. We will need to take risks together. As we approach the millennium, change is upon all of us in the symphony orchestra world in some degree: a few of us are in the midst of change; a few of us know that it's right around the corner; and the majority would appear to be but dimly aware that change is somewhere down the road. I fear that we will learn to our dismay that we can't afford to delay our investigation of change . . . Musician involvement and all it involves will not be an easy task, . . . but we will all be the winners when it is in place, and it is about time that we got started.

Edward Arian is the retired head of the arts administration program at Drexel University, and author of *Bach, Beethoven, and Bureaucracy*,⁴ a 1971 study of organizational dynamics in the orchestra world. He echoed the recognition of the need for organizational flexibility and the multifaceted nature of musician involvement:

The present demographic revolution projects a multicultural population that will require adaptation by symphony orchestras in terms of new programs and formats to increase community support. In turn, these will necessitate greater flexibility under labor contracts, something not easily accomplished in the present environment where musicians and managements view each other as adversaries in stereotypical terms. The key to change is meaningful participation by musicians in all important decisions. In

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organizational theory and research, it has been demonstrated that this policy, which confers dignity and respect, leads to a greater employee sense of responsibility for the fate of the institution. This is the model in some universities where policies and programs are subject to extensive consultation with faculty. . . . New types of services and formats, crucial to survival, should be part of the musician's regular contract. They are too important to depend upon the uncertainties of volunteerism. These variations from the traditional orchestral format and repertoire, such as solo and chamber recitals, concerts and workshops in schools and colleges, outreach programs through social agencies, and so on, can be a refreshing change and help to alleviate the work alienation which can result from routinization, repetition, and lack of individual recognition and autonomy in the large orchestra.

From his perspective as executive director of the Breckenridge Music Institute and National Repertory Orchestra, a position that puts him in contact with aspiring orchestra musicians, performing musicians with academic jobs, and

professional symphony orchestra musicians from throughout the country, Joseph H. Kremer observed simply that, “like it or not, musician involvement, beyond simply performing, is here to stay and is likely to grow as more and more orchestras in tier two and three markets cope with their fiscal and organizational difficulties.”

Responses also suggest that the goals that may have been held when measures for increased involvement were initiated are not as important as the benefits that may be recognized once new attitudes and practices are in place. Webster said:

“The value of musician involvement needs to be actively championed by all stakeholders, not just tolerated.”

Involvement of playing musicians in the affairs of symphony orchestras must serve to better the artistic and financial lot both of the musicians and the institutions of which they are a part. A process motivated out of lip service to some lofty ideal or the begrudging fulfillment of a hard-won contractual provision will not work. Simplistic solutions will not do it. Hard work, time, and commitment are necessary to bring about this betterment. A willingness to examine the encrusted traditions of history and to openly and seriously consider change are critical ingredients, as is the fundamental

assumption that things can and must get better, however one defines better. The value of musician involvement needs to be actively championed by all stakeholders, not just tolerated. Once such involvement is constructively in place, with everyone profiting from it, we will look back and wonder why it took us so long to overcome all of the obstacles we set up along the way.

Experience with musician involvement in three organizations, the Grand Rapids Symphony, the Toledo Symphony Orchestra, and the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, revealed various benefits to the organizations. John Schneider, a former chairperson of the Grand Rapids Symphony, observed:

Although it is naive to believe that the involvement of musicians as volunteers in the activities of the orchestra organization will eliminate all, or even most, friction between the musicians’ union and the symphony orchestra organization, musician involvement certainly intensifies the awareness of the musicians, administrative staff, and community volunteers that cooperation among them is essential for the continued health of the organization about which all of them care deeply. It also helps broaden and clarify their perceptions of each other and of the organization in ways that will be helpful to the development of creative and effective responses to these unavoidable challenges of the future.

The experience in Toledo, where an orchestra relations committee, a stand-

ing committee of the Toledo Orchestra Association, was established in 1989, was described by Marna Ramnath, the committee's chair and a trustee of the orchestra:

Ultimately, dialogue between trustees and musicians broadens the perspective of all participants, and provides an opportunity for both to get to know one another as individuals as well. The process heightens awareness of the bigger issues involved in the preservation and development of the orchestra's artistry and service to the community. At the same time, the dialogue provides a constant reminder of the many relevant parts that contribute to the success of the symphony enterprise.

Lee Yeingst, violist and vice chair of the board of directors of the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, and one of the founding members of the cooperative orchestra, said:

For more than 35 years I have experienced firsthand the trials, tribulations, and gratifications of a performer in the symphonic art form. Contract negotiations, capable and not so capable administrations, whimsical music directors, and one season with a musician-run operation have helped shape a belief I hold strongly: that musicians can improve the well-being of their respective orchestras through active participation in any or all components of their orchestras. . . .

The "partnership" structure of the Colorado Symphony has created a sense of ownership among all of the components within the organization, the musicians, staff, trustees, and volunteers. All realize that the product generated on stage at Boettcher Hall is a result of their collective efforts, and this realization makes for a greater feeling of purpose and commitment. This style of operation is particularly effective in building mutual respect and understanding among the four components. . . . I do not suggest that all other orchestras follow the lead of the Colorado Symphony, but I do want to advance the notion that musicians can and should invest in their organizations, beyond what they do on stage, in order to preserve and enhance an art form we all cherish and need.

The notion of symphony players as the stakeholders with the most to gain or lose by the success or failure of their organizations—if only because, of the various constituencies, the musicians have the longest potential tenure with the orchestra—appeared in several responses. Peter Benoliel, chairman of the board of the Philadelphia Orchestra Association, for example, wrote:

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If major symphony orchestras are to survive well into the 21st century, they must rethink and undoubtedly redefine their institutional vision and strategic goals. In particular, they must rethink their artistic objectives, the manner in which they relate to their constituencies (audiences, donors, volunteers) and the broader communities in which they reside. As they go about this task, they will be well advised not only to characterize the external environment (demography, technologies, economic market forces, and entertainment alternatives that will impact their future, for instance), but to undertake a stakeholder analysis, that is, an analysis of those groups of people who stand to gain or lose by the success of the enterprise. Generally speaking, the major stakeholders are audiences, the broader community, the volunteers (including the board of directors), the staff, and, most importantly, the musicians themselves. The players stand at the core of the enterprise. Without them one does not have an orchestra and a product to offer audiences. Of all the stakeholders, they are the ones that tend to stay for a career lifetime, while the others—volunteers, staff, and audiences—come and go. Of all the stakeholders, the musicians are most affected by the success or the failure of the enterprise.

“The players stand at the core of the enterprise. . . . [They] are most affected by the success or the failure of the enterprise.”

The musicians’ longer tenure, compared with other constituencies in the organizations, also puts them in positions to be the holders of the organizations’ corporate memories, as noted by Allen N. Rieselbach, president of the board of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra.⁵ Rieselbach said that:

Orchestra members bring at least the following unique input to our board and committees: first, as career professional musicians, orchestra members are considerably more knowledgeable of the music business than virtually all of our board members, and they also seem to have a network of information on successful and unsuccessful initiatives and activities by other orchestras. Sometimes this information comes from a different perspective than orchestra management’s, which provides additional insight. And second, orchestra members usually have served the organization longer than board members or staff. They can bring a historical perspective.

Even more, the talent, skills, and creativity of symphony musicians were frequently seen as great resources for their orchestras, resources that might be tapped by involving musicians more fully in more areas of the orchestras’ operations as these groups look to the future. Webster saw the situation in these terms:

I am also convinced that the musicians of our orchestras are an undervalued, underutilized, and underappreciated resource of extraordinary potential with respect to nonartistic—administrative or managerial—matters. One of the results of creative musician involvement should be seen in the contributed income columns of the resources ledger, an area I experimented with while at the New York Philharmonic with occasionally very positive results. Many of the musicians in our orchestras are the best spokespersons we have: why do we seem to be afraid of letting them speak for themselves and for their art? Many of them have wonderfully creative ideas: why can't we learn to truly listen to them? Many of them have artistic talents and skills that rarely find expression within our institutions. A full partnership is not only possible, it is essential.

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And in the same vein, Benoliel said, “It is incumbent upon symphony orchestra musicians, if their craft is to survive, to lend their talent and energy to that of staff, boards, and volunteers to ensure the flourishing of orchestras into the 21st century.”

Participation on Boards of Directors and in Administrative Decision Making

Membership on the board of directors is one of the more structured forms for musician involvement in the decision-making system of an orchestral association. And this is the form of involvement referred to by almost all (20 out of 22) those who answered our invitation to write about the topic.⁶ The ways such involvement is structured, and the actual extent of musician participation, varies from organization to organization, of course. In some organizations, musicians serve as members of the board of directors; in others, they serve on board committees, but do not sit on the board. Board committees may make decisions or may be only advisory or task-oriented in nature. Likewise, musician members of boards of directors may be full board members or may serve on the board without voting power.

Themes sounded again and again in the responses addressing the issue of board service were the need for open communication, trust, and sharing of full information.⁷ Christopher Rex, principal cello at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, outlined the situation:

There are many and varied types of direct contact which can be helpful in repairing and maintaining a good working liaison between board and musicians:

- ◆ full board membership for a specific number of musician representatives, including participation in decision making;
- ◆ participation by musicians on both standing and ad hoc board committees;
- ◆ formal and regular meetings between elected representatives of the orchestra and members of the executive committee of the board;
- ◆ town-meeting-type events for open question, answer, and opinion expression; and
- ◆ social contact, such as receptions.

All these and any other positive types of interaction should be tried and evaluated, the goal being to foster trust, communication, unity of effort, and consensus of direction.

It must be understood that at this time of difficult relations between the board and musicians in many orchestras, to deny board representation to the musicians will destroy any attempt to establish

“[Musician] board participation is a heavy responsibility and must be given a mature and positive approach by all.”

a real, viable trust between the parties. By the same token, musicians must realize that the reason for their participation in board activities is not for the sake of finger pointing, recrimination, blame assessment, or blanket criticism. Board participation is a heavy responsibility and must be given a mature and positive approach by all. I am optimistic that if the fundamental bond between musicians and their patrons, the board of directors, can be reestablished and made the foundation of their endeavor, the symphony orchestra has a relevant and dynamic future.

The importance of full information sharing was echoed in remarks by Robert O. Vos, a cellist and member of the orchestra committee of the New World Symphony, a Miami-based, independent professional training orchestra.

An important condition for encouraging musician involvement in the areas of orchestra operations, marketing, or related management is complete and reliable information about the organization’s immediate financial condition and market position as well as long-range plans and planning processes. Efforts from musician leaders may feel futile, or musicians may fear that efforts are misguided if information is obscured (either intentionally or unintentionally) by management. Indeed, musician leaders who invest time or energy in advocating a position that later turns out to be rooted in fundamentally inaccurate information may feel a particular sting and be reluctant to lead again in the future. . . .

I believe more research is needed to explore to what extent information sharing is a necessary precursor to musician involvement, what elements of adversarial relationships preclude information sharing, and what can be done to open up lines of communication. To be sure, the problem cuts both ways. If a trusting and open relationship is to develop, musicians must be willing and able to share information with management, and management must have the expectation that musician leaders will maintain the confidentiality of sensitive organizational information.

Christopher D. Guerin, president of the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, puts it simply: “Musician involvement exposes the players to the facts and the figures. We have a single goal when it comes to musician involvement: a desire that the players know and understand the issues. We need, above all, to nurture trust, for without it nothing much else is possible.”

Erin Lehman, a Harvard University researcher and long-standing observer of symphony organizations, is concerned that another dimension of organizational trust must exist in symphony organizations which seek to involve, through representatives, many participants and stakeholder groups in decision-making processes.

For organizations to capture the enormous benefits of employee involvement, there must be mutual respect and trust in the individuals—whether hired, appointed, or elected—who represent groups. There must be trust that the decisions [of these representatives] make sense and speed the organization toward a better future—in the short and long term . . . they must be given a modicum of freedom to perform their duties.

Along with a need for full information sharing, several respondents noted as well the musicians’ desire to have a “real voice” if they are to be part of the organization’s decision-making structure.⁸ Lucinda Lewis, principal horn at the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra (and secretary of the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians), raised these points:

Musicians have traditionally been pushed away by their boards and managements when issues of orchestral administration are broached. Only when an institution is faced with perilous financial waters will a symphony’s board and management make a gratuitous offer of inclusion to their musicians and usually after the musicians have accepted economic cuts to keep the orchestra afloat.

Rarely is such an offer extended with any serious desire to hear what

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the musicians have to say. It is therefore not surprising that many symphony musicians feel greatly disenfranchised from their institutions—frequently expected to subsidize their jobs but with no real voice. . . . It is a rare organization, indeed, where the board and management want the musicians to be informed and involved. Only a very strong and secure board chairman and executive director actively court their musicians to be involved, informed, and seek their input. If this kind of invitation is extended with a genuine desire to benefit the organization, and not just to elicit financial cooperation from the musicians, the long-term institutional value can be tremendous. The board, management, and musicians are each integral to an orchestra's success.

However, when all is said and done, musicians shouldn't be in the board room or acting as administrative consultants any more than board members or managers should be performing on the stage with their musicians. All things being equal, we shouldn't have to overlap our responsibilities. Boards must raise money and govern their institutions. Managers must manage, and musicians must perform. But not every situation on the symphonic landscape is ideal. Cooperative relationships do work. Unfortunately, they cannot work everywhere. Such relationships require mutual trust and respect, two very elusive qualities that must be earned through deed, not word.

Communication as a necessary component, and also a benefit, of the process of board and musicians working together was noted by Ramnath, who observed:

The Orchestra Relations Committee [of the Toledo Symphony] provided great service during the music director search and selection process, and through ongoing, open communication, helped ease the transition to new artistic leadership in 1991. Since then, the ORC has provided particular support for some important management objectives, and the process has resulted in positive communication for the orchestra, the board, and the administration. . . . From the perspective of the current ORC chair, this approach has proven to be a creative response to the challenge of effective communication among the board, the orchestra, and the administrative team.

In 1996, Paula Wright, a cellist with the Austin Symphony Orchestra, surveyed Regional Orchestra Players Association delegates about musician participation as board members. Three out of four delegates responded. Wright found that 86 percent of respondents reported that their orchestras had musicians serving on boards or committees; 76 percent said that these positions were mandated by collective bargaining agreements; and 70 percent replied that their orchestras benefited from such representation. Specific comments from ROPA delegates included the following:

- ◆ Our musician board member's communication in trust with the board was a pivotal factor in the decision not to renew [the contract of] our previous music director.
- ◆ It has given us a broader understanding of how the organization works. . . . This has been an excellent communication device for us.
- ◆ I believe the voice of the orchestra is better understood than before there were musician board members. . . . As the role of the orchestra board member expands, communication should improve.

Lewis had a somewhat different slant on contractually required musician involvement:

Faced with wage and benefit cuts—cuts which are not always shared by their managerial counterparts—symphony musicians are responding by demanding a voice in the operation and governance of their organizations. Often, their voice becomes formalized through collective bargaining and is thereafter, contractually mandated. The result is not always a harmonious working relationship; although the organization, as a whole, is usually better off.

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The need for communication and trust are universal issues, as vital for successful employee involvement in orchestral organizations as in other organizations. Orchestras often face issues related to entrenched adversarial relationships between management and the musicians' committee and union, as already hinted in earlier comments. Many of the questions in implementing increased musician involvement are occasioned by the tradition of union representation and involvement: should board membership exist because it is mandated by a collective bargaining agreement (a "concession" gained by the players, rather than a "desire" of management and non-musician board members)? Will musician members of the board be full participants except and only up to the point that negotiations of a musicians' contract begin?

Should musicians be compensated for board or other nonperformance work? Diane M. Wittry, music director and conductor at the Symphony of Southeast Texas and the Allentown Symphony, said, "I feel strongly that musicians need to be paid for these additional duties. Smaller orchestras could negotiate separate fees with their orchestra members depending on what their responsibilities were and the time involved. Larger orchestras might try service conversion."

While not unique in the nonprofit field, but complicating the picture, is the fact that symphony boards are composed of unpaid volunteers. Much other work in supporting a symphony organization is also provided by volunteers, perhaps in greater proportion than in most other nonprofit enterprises. Thus,

the issue of paying musicians for services provided so freely, and with such dedication, by volunteers becomes complicated. But perhaps musicians should feel free to volunteer time to their symphony organizations, as good citizens, if they wish.⁹

Experience of the benefits of involvement, specifically in terms of labor relations and negotiations, were reported by Ramnath and Sara Harmelink, a violist and former chair of the players' council at the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. Harmelink said:

“Musician participation on the board has had a positive effect on the sense of unity within the organization.”

The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra began musician board membership as a part of contract settlement in 1993. Each year the musicians elect two board members plus two representatives to each of the board standing committees, excluding the labor relations committee. The most communication occurs on the actual working committees and subcommittees. We learn the most and can express our views in these smaller groups. Although not every idea is acted upon, we are heard and our ideas are often used and recognized. Musician participation on the board has had a positive effect on the sense of unity within the organization. We also believe it was a large factor in the early settlement of our latest negotiations.¹⁰

Ramnath noted:

A recent article in *The Blade* newspaper focused on labor negotiations leading to a newly ratified contract between the Toledo Orchestra Association, Inc. and the Toledo Symphony musicians. The article quoted Alan Taplin, head of the musician negotiation team, as stating, “We’re pretty happy. It was a civilized set of conversations.” Responding for the administration, president Robert Bell said, “We’re happy with it. The players were reasonable with their demands. The negotiations were completed with ease in a relatively short amount of time.” Some credit for the positive negotiation process goes to the Orchestra Relations Committee. . . . Because of its initial success and the uniqueness of an open management style, it comes as no surprise that current labor negotiations, the third contract talks since the inception of the ORC, proceeded smoothly and without incident. Both parties have established a comfortable level of dialogue, with information, including financial and budgetary information, fully shared. Through positive and open communication, musicians have experienced firsthand how the association is working on their behalf for the benefit of the community.

Administrative Involvement Is Not Always Successful

Creating greater musician involvement through membership on boards and committees does not always result in favorable outcomes. As one long-experienced participant in symphony organizational life, requesting anonymity, commented:

A performing group of my acquaintance involved board, staff, and player members of a variety of committees, administrative and musical, in a cooperative effort of the most idealistic sort—good persons representing a wide variety and intensity of involvement, heavy to light, trustees and musicians alike. . . . Some musicians cared deeply and gave of themselves, even money, selflessly, others hardly at all. Some, not all, of even the heavily committed musician members tended to burn out As with “super glue,” involvement without a second catalyst—like personal fiscal responsibility or benefit, or personal loss or gain—too easily becomes a fiction and a burden and in time may not, probably will not, hold.

Lynn Osmond, a former orchestra executive director, reported on an institution which failed despite musician involvement in board and committee activity:

In 1993, I was approached by a transition team made up of both musicians and former board members to take the Sacramento Symphony out of Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The team was committed to an arrangement in which musicians would sit on all committees and be involved in the decision-making process, including the executive committee, the finance committee, and the artistic advisory committee. The musicians represented 10 percent of the board and had full voting rights. It is an arrangement that is logical, because musicians have been with the orchestra and will be with the orchestra a lot longer than most board or staff members. . . . They could help the institution learn from past successes and mistakes. . . . For a few years it did work. It failed in the end, however, because we became polarized [into] we versus they. . . . With involvement in the decision-making process comes commitment and responsibility [and] being a part of a partnership [in which] tough decisions have to be made for the overall health and survival of the organization.

*“With involvement
in the decision-
making process
comes commitment
and responsibility. . . .”*

Involvement in Artistic Direction and Hiring

Musician involvement in artistic direction, hiring, and other aspects of administration and decision making outside of participation as members of the board of directors or of board committees, although mentioned by some respondents, received little discussion.¹¹ Some case histories draw attention to the fact that the beginnings of greater musician involvement grew out of player

or union involvement in the selection process for a music director or an executive director. And then, too, players have considerable say in the choice of conductors, guest artists, and repertoire in the case of cooperative orchestras, such as the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, and even in musical leadership and interpretation, as in the case of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra.¹² But cooperative and self-governing orchestras are rarities in North America.

Other Areas of Musician Involvement

Eric Schultz, a former orchestra cellist, and now a producer and director of television programs, believes that musicians need to become substantially more involved in the initiation, evaluation, and selection of the electronic media projects of their organizations.

I believe it is imperative that orchestras embrace the electronic future, and that at least some musicians within each orchestra become familiar enough with this world to make informed decisions about which projects to embrace. . . . This is a complicated environment [but] any attempts on the part of orchestras and their musicians to better understand the media will bring positive results. If this means special training or release time from traditional duties for several musicians within an orchestra, I think it would be well worthwhile.

“... any attempts on the part of orchestras and their musicians to better understand the [electronic] media will bring positive results.”

Several respondents advocated musician involvement in areas outside the administrative and decision-making aspects of their organizations. Suggestions included community service, such as providing music appreciation lectures, workshops, chamber music performances, or applied lessons sponsored by the orchestras. The advocates of involving orchestra musicians in these types of service to (or through) their orchestras were quite passionate, seeing this type of educational outreach as crucial to the continued viability of symphony orchestras.

One of the most prominent efforts to integrate a community outreach program into the regular working life of symphony orchestra musicians is being carried out by the Saint Louis Symphony. The Community Partnership Program was initiated several years ago by the Saint Louis organization as a central component in an overall institutional change program. The partnership, substantially designed and guided by musicians, involves the option and the encouragement of orchestra members to provide a variety of community services throughout the year in lieu of a specified number of orchestral services. As Bruce Coppock, executive director, said in a recent speech, the traditional vision has been that the only activity an orchestra as a whole could engage in is “playing orchestra concerts.” This view translated into “a workplace where the job description was lowest-common-denominator-based—one size fits all.” But the Saint Louis

leadership began to see that “unleashing the creativity of musicians of the orchestra in the community had the potential to enrich the lives not only of our community but of our own musicians.”¹³

Wittry wrote:

The current structure of the symphony orchestra is outdated. It functions, and yet I can't help but think that we are wasting a very precious resource: the expertise and personal enthusiasm of the individual members of the orchestra. Why can't we structure an orchestral system where orchestra members, besides playing in concert series, also participate in every artistic aspect of the organization? By participating, I am not talking about sitting as a voting member of a large board, with very little input, but rather a structure in which every orchestra member is involved in an area that has a vital impact on what the orchestra contributes to the community. Some of the areas to be considered are educational outreach (individual, ensembles, and mentorship programs), chamber music concerts, new music concerts, music appreciation classes, and long-range planning. On a more basic administrative level, some musicians also have a flair for marketing, public speaking, and fund raising.

“Why can't we structure an orchestral system where orchestra members, besides playing in concert series, also participate in every artistic aspect of the organization?”

Quality educational outreach is essential for an orchestra to be effective. Orchestra members could plan and implement all of the educational programs with the help of an administrative coordinator and/or a very good secretary. Programs should include individual musicians visiting the schools, ensemble programs geared towards specific age groups, and the organization of a mentorship program. The musicians should also work closely with a committee of teachers from the community so that their programs would be relevant, timely, and effective. Every symphony in the country should offer a subsidized lesson program that provides individual and/or group lessons taught by members of the orchestra. It is this personal interaction, with music as the vehicle, that will insure the survival of symphony orchestras in the future.

Orchestras should also be encouraged to organize cooperative programs with local universities to coordinate new music concerts and seminars. One of the things orchestral musicians do best is talk about the thing they love, music. It would be wonderful for each orchestra to offer a series of music appreciation classes taught by orchestra members geared toward the concert subscriber.

Musicians of the future are going to have to be more well rounded and willing to give more of themselves to the job. But I really think in their hearts that this is what most musicians want—to be personally involved with helping music to have an impact in their community. In order to remain relevant, an orchestra must do more than perform subscription concerts and a few token youth concerts every year. Our orchestra musicians have spent their lives training and studying their art form. Now is the time to let them share their expertise for the good of the cause.

And from Christopher Wilkins, music director of the San Antonio Symphony:

I would like to put aside for the moment issues of representation, morale, governance, and so forth and concentrate on the orchestra's mission. In doing so, I have reframed the original question. It is no longer, "Do we need musician involvement," but, "What do we need most, and can musician involvement help?"

Imagine an orchestra that regularly makes a profound contact with its audience, a soul-to-soul connection based upon the real intent,

"Can't the enormous resources of talent in our orchestras be used in some new and very significant way to serve our mission?"

substance, and scope of the music it performs. This orchestra recognizes that while the music itself is always of central importance, what matters most is the deep and authentic experience of that music by its audience. The concerts are spiritually alive and personally affecting. Supposing ourselves to be an orchestra in this enviable situation, the question is, "Did musician involvement get us here, or did some new way of thinking about musician involvement help?" It might seem a strange question to ask, since music is our main product and only musicians make it: musician involvement is about the only thing we know to be absolutely necessary!

The sobering reality, though, is that musicians often struggle to feel that their own initiatives are making a difference. Can't the enormous resources of talent in our orchestras be used in some new and very significant way to serve our mission?

My proposal is modest: that we turn our attention to helping audiences really hear and experience the music we perform. We organize, plot the territory, sharpen our skills, then scatter throughout our communities to spread the good news. It isn't complicated, but it is challenging to do it well. The art of poetic and persuasive speech, of delivering impassioned, concise remarks about music, becomes a cherished skill. Through this process, the music itself is heard over and over again by hundreds of potential audience members in advance of the performance.

Five, twenty, or fifty musicians fully engaged as musical missionaries represent a powerful force for doing some good in the world! We can commit our energies to revealing and expressing the power of the musical experience, period. Our orchestral institutions need this more than ever, and by doing so we also honor our musicians, as deeply committed and passionate people who first entered this profession for exactly the reasons they are now explaining.

With these latter types of musician involvement, we have moved the discussion beyond musician involvement in already well-established roles as members of the board and of board and task committees; participating in various levels of

“Transforming the way musicians feel about their orchestras”... is “the most important objective of musician involvement.”

artistic advice and influence; and providing a voice in other management or administrative functions, such as the selection of a new music or executive director. Those who envision a committed and expansive program of educational outreach, of greater community service, and of advocacy of the art of music have instead looked for what musicians could do that might serve their organizations in new or expanded areas of endeavor. Has a new look at the orchestra’s potential mission inspired fresh notions of musician involvement? This speaks, at the very least, to a sense of a need to strengthen both players’ identities with their orchestras, and the orchestras’ own identities in their communities, or what Jack A. Fishman, executive

director of the Amarillo Symphony, called “trans-forming the way musicians feel about their orchestras” and characterized as “the most important objective of musician involvement.”

As the range of contributor beliefs and suggestions indicates, the topic of musician involvement in symphony organizational affairs has many dimensions, some quite apparent, some more elusive, all very important. Many organizations in other nonprofit fields, as well as in a vast array of for-profit organizations, are asking quite similar questions about much broader and deeper involvement of employees and other stakeholders in decision making and other areas previously considered substantially the task and the turf of managers and boards.

It seems appropriate to conclude our presentation with the following thoughts and fundamental questions contributed by Paul Ganson, bassoonist with the Detroit Symphony, and a longtime leader and thinker on orchestral matters.

The questions swirling around and within symphony orchestras—the concerns about their futures—suggest that some systemic change or paradigm shift might be in order. Often, one of the first notions suggested is to increase the involvement of musicians in the governance and operations of their orchestras. If that is a course believed worthy of pursuing, then there are at least four questions which, if addressed, should make those experiments more likely to succeed.

First and second, “who” is seeking to involve musicians and “why”? Third, “how” do the organization’s other constituents and stakeholders feel about the possibility of such involvement? And finally, “what” are the goals toward which the involvement of musicians is believed to be potentially beneficial?

These seem to be such basic questions that they are often taken for granted or ignored. However, only if they are addressed as candidly and completely as possible at the beginning will the larger and more difficult question of “how” to involve musicians be likely to yield constructive and durable results.

Notes

- ¹ For more about “high involvement organizations,” see: Jay R. Galbraith, Edward E. Lawler III, and Associates. 1993. *Organizing for the Future: The New Logic for Managing Complex Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Publishers.
- ² Of the 22 respondents, 20 mentioned board membership or related service; 3 mentioned chamber music performance; 3 mentioned community service activities, such as music appreciation lectures or lessons; 2 mentioned musician participation in hiring decisions; 5 mentioned musician participation in artistic direction; and 2 mentioned work having to do with finances or fund raising.
- ³ The financial soundness of orchestral organizations seems to hold an inverse relationship to the perceived need for involvement of musicians on the board. This observation is made by J. Richard Hackman in the interview reported in Paul R. Judy, *Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras: An Interview with J. Richard Hackman*. *Harmony* 2 (April 1996): 9.
- ⁴ Arian, Edward. 1971. *Bach, Beethoven, and Bureaucracy: The Case of the Philadelphia Orchestra*. University, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- ⁵ The Milwaukee Orchestra is discussed in Michael J. Schmitz, *Musician Participation in Symphony Orchestra Management: The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra Experience*. *Harmony* 3 (October 1996): 23-29. See also comments of Sara Harmelink on pages 48 to 50 of this issue of *Harmony*.
- ⁶ Our respondents nearly all saw increased musician involvement in the work of the board of directors (or at least some aspects of it) in positive terms. The opposite viewpoint is put in an editorial, “Input is futile: prepare to be ignored,” in Senza Sordino (January 1996): 8-9.

- ⁷ The issues of communication, information sharing, and trust are discussed in Lawrence Tamburri, Trust. *Harmony* 4 (April 1997): 11-13, and on page 51 of this issue.
- ⁸ J. Richard Hackman points to “token involvement” as one of two kinds of musician involvement that is not beneficial. (The other is when the organization suffers from incompetent management.) See Judy, Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras: 9. *Harmony* 2 (April 1996).
- ⁹ See the comments of Sara Harmelink on page 48 of this issue of *Harmony*, and also comments from various members of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra on pages 21 through 39 of this issue.
- ¹⁰ The labor negotiations in Milwaukee are outlined in Schmitz, Musician Participation in Symphony Orchestra Management: 27-29. *Harmony* 3 (October 1996). See also the comments of Sara Harmelink on page 48 of this issue.
- ¹¹ Jack Fishman, executive director of the Amarillo Symphony, has the following incisive view: “The area of management that musicians should have the most impact on is currently reserved for conductors and artistic administrators. Musicians should be the main group making many artistic decisions, including the selection of guest conductors, guest artists, and repertoire. Why not abolish the entire position of artistic administrator and turn the job over to the musicians?” On this aspect of greater musician involvement, see also James Orleans, Rebuilding the Repertoire for the 21st Century. *Harmony* 4 (April 1997): 57-69.
- ¹² Traub, James. 1996. Passing the Baton: What CEOs Could Learn from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. *The New Yorker*, August 26 & September 2: 100-105.
- ¹³ Coppock, Bruce. 1997. The Abyss or a New Life: The Saint Louis Symphony as a Study in Institutional Change. An address to the Urban Parks Institute Conference, Boston, Massachusetts.