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Musician Participation in Symphony Orchestra Management: The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra Experience

by

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Musician Participation in Symphony Orchestra Management: The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra Experience

Most readers are by now aware that greater engagement and involvement of musicians in symphony orchestra organization affairs is a precept which the Symphony Orchestra Institute espouses. So we were delighted when Michael J. Schmitz agreed to explain for readers of *Harmony* the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra's (MSO) experience in this arena.

Schmitz writes from the dual perspectives of senior corporate executive and past president of the board of the MSO. He begins by outlining the business functions and management activities which both for-profit and nonprofit organizations must undertake to achieve their missions. Useful charts contrast the leadership structures in typical corporations and in symphony orchestra organizations, presenting quite clearly the ambiguities which often exist in the latter.

He goes on to discuss the role and influence of musicians' unions in what he describes as a "unique organizational and leadership structure." He again contrasts typical labor negotiations in corporations with those in symphony orchestra organizations.

The MSO's Experience

The balance of the essay is devoted to a case study of changes which have taken place in the MSO since 1990 when Schmitz assumed the presidency of the board with personal objectives of improving communication with musicians and bringing them into the management process.

His pride in the success subsequent of these efforts is evident as he relates events from 1993 to 1996. MSO musicians now serve on the board, the executive committee, and many standing committees. They were also actively involved in the selection of new music and executive directors for the orchestra.

The essay concludes with an exhortation to other orchestras to move in the direction of greater musician involvement as a way of better dealing with the complex challenges which all orchestras face.

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Several articles in the first two issues of *Harmony* addressed the unique organizational characteristics of American symphony orchestras. One aspect of these structures which merits further attention is the fact that symphony musicians, in varying fashion, report to a “troika”: the executive director, the music director, and the board of directors. In theory, each of these three has distinct and definable functions; in practice, there is considerable overlap and ambiguity.

On its face, this leadership format is an almost certain recipe for organizational confusion and discord, with the inevitable consequence of diminished results. The first principle of any organization is, after all, clarity of purpose pursued through concerted, unified leadership. Good organizations in any field of endeavor are characterized by a focused vision and clear understanding of lines of authority and command. This principle applies to all forms of organizational activity, including those of nonprofit entities.

Artistic organizations are not exempt from the principles which make for successful achievement of organizational mission. Symphony orchestras have a product to market and sell, just as do for-profit businesses. Musicians sometimes object to references to their output as a “product,” reacting to the crassness that this terminology suggests. But just as a business needs effective management of its resources to create and sell its products profitably and to ensure its continued existence, so does a symphony orchestra. The fact that the “product” is ephemeral, inspirational, and even quasi-spiritual does not change this organizational truth.

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Business Functions; Management Activities

Three business functions—production, marketing, and finance—drive the activities of business organizations. The same is true for most nonprofit organizations.

Distinct from these business functions is the way in which a company is

Functional Disciplines		
<i>Function</i>	<i>Primary Responsibility</i>	<i>Secondary Responsibility</i>
Orchestra Functional Disciplines		
Production	Music Director/ Executive Director	Board of Directors
Marketing	Executive Director/Board of Directors	Music Director
Finance	Board of Directors/Executive Director	Music Director
Business Functional Disciplines		
Production	Chief Executive Officer	Functional Head or Line Manager
Marketing	Chief Executive Officer	Functional Head or Line Manager
Finance	Chief Executive Officer	Functional Head or Line Manager

Management Disciplines		
<i>Function</i>	<i>Primary Responsibility</i>	<i>Secondary Responsibility</i>
Orchestra Management Disciplines		
Planning	Executive Director/Board of Directors/ Music Director	
Staffing	Music Director/Executive Director/ Board of Directors	
Directing	Music Director/Executive Director	Board of Directors
Controlling	Executive Director/Board of Directors	Music Director
Business Management Disciplines		
Planning	Chief Executive Officer	Line Manager or Staff Head
Staffing	Chief Executive Officer	Line Manager or Staff Head
Directing	Chief Executive Officer	Line Manager or Staff Head
Controlling	Chief Executive Officer	Line Manager or Staff Head

managed. What activities need to be done to achieve overall organizational objectives? Accepted organizational theory usually defines the tasks of management as planning, staffing, directing, and controlling. Through the application of these four management skills, an organization achieves—or fails to achieve—its results.

The adjacent tables compare the responsibility for these three business functions and four management activities in typical American symphony orchestras and typical for-profit corporations.

Both types of organizations have boards of directors and, in each case, the board holds the ultimate responsibility. In the case of the corporation, the board delegates clearly defined authority to a chief executive officer (CEO). In the case of a symphony orchestra, there is rarely a defined CEO. The principal officer of the board is sometimes considered the CEO and may even have that title. But this designation is unrealistic because every board president or chairman is a part-time volunteer. Practically, a volunteer cannot exercise full CEO authority.

Historically, strong music directors have considered their roles to be absolute and have acted as de facto CEOs, answerable only to the principal officer of the board (if to any one). Readers who are familiar with symphony orchestra organizations can recite abundant examples of dictatorial music directors and might even argue that only this type of leadership could create certain great orchestras. Over time, people's expectations have changed, however, and I do not know any contemporary musicians who would prefer to work under the martinets of old. Effective leadership must relate to its own era.

“Effective leadership must relate to its own era.”

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Today, many music directors are more collaborative and are willing to share defined areas of decision making with capable executive directors. Younger music directors, particularly, are likely to be more open and deferential in the decision-making process. But even now, this practice is probably the exception. Most music directors still see themselves at the apex of a pyramid and are comfortable with the vagueness that typically exists in their working relationships with other organizational authorities.

If any member of the troika should function effectively as CEO, it should, in my view, be the executive director. In some orchestras, strong and capable executive directors do fill this role. However, the industry seems to be short of dynamic leaders who can command the respect to lead their organizations

while being publicly eclipsed by towering music directors.

Today, there is no consensus about the workable model for effective American symphony orchestra leadership. And leadership is the key determinant to the success or failure of any human institution.

The Role and Influence of Musicians' Unions

In the middle of this unique organizational and leadership structure stands another major force, the players' union. Musicians' unions have historically wielded considerable power, but just as industrial labor-management relations vary from company to company, symphony orchestra organization labor-management relations also vary from orchestra to orchestra. As a generalization, it is fair to say that labor-management relations in symphony orchestras have not been good—ranging from fair at best to totally distrustful at worst.

During contract negotiations, boards of directors and executive directors present the unified management position, while music directors usually assume an uncommitted, indifferent stance—a complicating factor, at best. Here again, the existence of troika management creates the potential for union members to believe or to assert that there is not a strong management bargaining position, creating opportunities to drive real or imagined wedges among the management group.

When symphony orchestra labor negotiations break down, the public often sees the same outward public remonstrations as they do in corporate labor conflicts. Bitterness, name calling, and all sorts of acrimony can flow from each side, with the usual counterproductive results.

It is difficult for board members to accept this nastiness. Individuals typically accept positions on symphony orchestra boards out of feelings of duty, community obligation, or commitment to the art form. Directors who give generously of their time and money understandably become disillusioned with the institution they are trying to help. Some walk away forever.

While orchestral labor-management disputes have all the outward appearances of typical industrial disputes, there is little or none of the conflicting self-interest that exists in corporate labor relations. In the business world, there is a natural divergence between the interests of management and shareholders and those of the workers. In a symphony orchestra, the broad goals of both groups are much the same, all related to sustaining and improving the musical excellence and output.

In an orchestra, management is not motivated by stock options or compensation schemes. Directors are not trying to maximize earnings to advance stock prices. Greed, plant closings, and similar corporate motivations do not

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exist on management's side. Whatever prestige comes with being a symphony orchestra board member is usually offset by the time commitment—often enormous—and the financial obligations—usually major.

One Orchestra's Experience

Most symphony orchestras have not satisfactorily resolved the leadership dilemma which arises from the diffused authority of the troika coupled with ineffective communication channels to the musicians' union. The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra (MSO) had not resolved this dilemma as it approached its 1993 contract negotiations.

The MSO was founded in 1959 and in its relatively short life has become a leading orchestral ensemble among America's second-tier orchestras. The orchestra has a \$12 million budget, 90 full-time players, and ranks 19th in size among U.S. orchestras. The last two music directors were Zdenek Macal and Lukas Foss. The MSO's artistic growth has exceeded its financial growth, leading to periodic financial crises not unlike those experienced by both larger and smaller organizations.

I became president of the board in 1990 and it took me about a year to understand the underlying organizational dynamics of the institution. From the beginning of my term, two of my personal objectives were to communicate openly with the musicians and to bring them into the management process. Both objectives proved difficult to achieve.

Communication with 90 musicians was a daunting assignment because no established vehicles existed to facilitate this process. Occasionally, I took a few minutes at the start of a rehearsal and stepped on the podium to converse with the group. But this setting was very intimidating and it was unrealistic to expect much two-way conversation. There were also always the tight time constraints of the rehearsal.

Informal conversations during intermissions, after concerts, or at special events are certainly ways to communicate with our artists, but these visits tend to be personal rather than organizational. Although these conversations are very satisfying—since getting to know musicians personally is a fine reward—they do little to advance organizational objectives.

It became obvious to me that we needed a more structured way to communicate which led to the second objective—bringing the musicians into the management process. I felt this step was necessary even before I fully comprehended the real nature of the troika and it was even more clear to me after a year of working with the MSO's organizational structure. It was evident that even with some ongoing confusion over organizational clarity, improved communications and the input from thoughtful, motivated people would provide enormous benefits to all parties.

However, to my surprise, bringing musicians into the decision-making process proved more difficult than I expected. The collective bargaining agreement in

place at the time did not provide for defined participation and there was a general reluctance among the musicians to assume this new role. We were able to get some attendance at committee meetings, but most of the musicians and many members of the board were not ready to take such a big step, particularly with the knowledge that several discussion topics would also be issues in the forthcoming contract negotiations.

Contract negotiations for the season which opened in September 1993 began in January of that year and continued until March 1994. There was no strike, but those 15 months were a period of gradually increasing tension and acrimony which was well covered by the local media. It is not a pleasant memory for anyone who was involved.

There were many contentious issues, but the proposal to bring musicians into the management process was not one of them. The final agreement created two ex-officio positions on the board, one on the executive committee, and one on each of the eight committees (excepting personnel/labor relations).

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Our management and board believe that bringing the players into the management process is the most significant organizational change the MSO has ever made. The musicians' participation in orchestral affairs has introduced a new vitality to all of our committee work. The relations among board, staff, and musicians is now strong, supportive, and, I believe, trustful.

Two opportunities to bring our musicians even further into the decision-making process came about in 1994, when we began searches for new music and executive directors. The music director search committee consisted of nine board members, two staff members, and four musicians. The executive director search committee consisted of six board members, one staff member, and three musicians.

I chaired the music director search committee and can attest to the dedication and commitment that the musicians brought to a totally-aligned, two-and-one-half-year process. Their input was invaluable on both musical and non-artistic considerations. The search concluded in June 1996 with the unanimous selection of Andreas Delfs.

Musicians' involvement in the executive director search process was equally positive. They helped us focus on our requirements and their participation in the selection of Steven Ovitsky can be observed by assessing the fine relationship that exists between the staff and musicians since Steve's appointment in May 1995.

In an article in the July 1996 issue of the newsletter *MSO Musicians Soundings*, the players' council deemed the musicians' involvement in board committees successful. The article urged players not currently involved on committees to

become active. The council commented that “many musicians who have served on committees have found an empowerment that has eased their frustration at the workplace.”

A final attestation to the success of this program appears in a comparison of the recently completed contract negotiations with the 1993 experience. The 1996 negotiations took only three months (compared with 15 months) and were completed three months *before* the current contract expired (compared with seven months *after* the contract expired). It was one of the few contracts in the industry settled so quickly. I would also note that by common agreement there was no media discussion during the negotiations.

The Lesson To Remember

It is easy to forget that without the musicians there would be no music. The music director is essentially mute; others play supportive roles and are, in a sense, accessories. Keeping the players on the sidelines of the decision-making process makes no sense. Individual musicians tend to have above-average intelligence and good creative-thinking skills and every symphony orchestra can benefit from musicians' participation.

So why has it taken symphony orchestra organizations so long to bring musicians into the management process? After all, participatory management is nothing new in the profit-making world. Businesses began practicing participatory management in the 1960s and in countless companies today it has become a mantra. It is easy to understand the benefits of involvement, buy-in, and participation of people who produce the product.

Union resistance is one answer to the question, but many businesses have achieved cooperation from their unions with these programs. Tradition, inertia, fear, and uncertainty also play a part. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to bringing musicians into the management process is that such a move represents a cultural change. Cultural changes are difficult in any organization because there is a natural tendency to preserve the status quo and not do things which might result in some loss of control.

The MSO's experience to date suggests that symphony orchestras which genuinely open their management processes to musician participation are better able to deal with the complex, overwhelming challenges they face. And measured in human terms, it is the right thing to do. Whatever downsides exist are offset by the potential for revitalization that involvement can bring.

Michael J. Schmitz is Executive Vice President of Firstar Corporation. He was President of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra from 1990 to 1993 and continues as a member of that board, as well as on the boards of a number of other community and business organizations. He holds a B.S. in economics and an M.B.A. from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.