

# *Harmony*<sup>TM</sup>

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## Hartford Symphony Orchestra: A Work in Progress

A Roundtable Discussion



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## **How Are They Doing? Hartford and Pittsburgh Revisited**

*Over the past several years, the Institute has presented readers of *Harmony* an inside look at orchestra organizations that have undertaken extensive organizational change efforts. So the question arises: how are they doing? To find out, we hosted roundtable discussions with members of two of these organizations—the Hartford Symphony Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra—to review institutional status and progress. Edited transcripts of these reviews follow.*

## **Hartford Symphony Orchestra: A Work in Progress** **A roundtable discussion**

**I**n 1991, after a number of years of increasingly difficult circumstances, the Hartford Symphony Orchestra (HSO) went dark for 14 months. The orchestra resumed work under a compromise contract that called for, among other things, the establishment of 10 voting positions on the board of directors to be held by musicians. Those positions are still in place, and six musicians also constitute one-third of the executive committee.

As the orchestra approached a 1994 contract renewal, it used a facilitated process to reach an agreement. In the October 1997 issue of *Harmony*, we reported extensively on the Hartford Symphony Orchestra in a background piece written by musician board member Ann Drinan, a roundtable with participants in the 1994 contract-renewal process, and a brief essay on the “lessons learned” written by Paul Boulian, the organizational development consultant who facilitated the process.

Three years have passed since our report, and we recently gathered a group of HSO current and former board members to give us an update on the orchestra’s organizational progress. Following is an edited transcript of our conversation.

**Institute:** To get us started, please introduce yourselves and describe your roles in the Hartford Symphony organization.

**Ann Drinan:** I am a violist with the HSO and the representative for the orchestra to the Regional Orchestra Players' Association (ROPA). I'm a member of the board and have been since 1992.

**Dwight Johnson:** I am a past president of the HSO board and am currently a member of the executive committee.

**Candy Lammers:** I am a violinist with the orchestra, a member of the board, and currently chair the orchestra committee.

**Arthur Masi:** I am also a violist with the HSO and a former member of the board.

**Millard Pryor:** I am the president of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra board.

**Greig Shearer:** I am principal flute of the HSO and a member of the board.

**Tom Wildman:** I am currently vice president of finance of the HSO board.

**Institute:** Because this is not our first roundtable with the Hartford Symphony, *Harmony* readers know a good bit about your organization, its active efforts to bring about organizational change, and the long-term involvement of musicians in the governance of the orchestra. So give us an update as to how you are doing as an organization.

**Pryor:** In general, I would say that things are going very well. The good news is that we are making real progress in filling some organizational slots which have been unfilled, or inadequately filled, during the year. Our relationships, to my way of thinking, seem to be very strong. The bad news is that we ended the year with a small loss of \$6,000, which reflected some incomplete budgeting and the lack of a director of development. I am optimistic about the next year, although we do have some strategic issues, the most important of which is what we are going to do about our summer series at Talcott Mountain. I am becoming concerned about the risk-reward ratio there.

**Shearer:** Millard has alluded to it, but I think it is important that your readers understand that the past year has been one of some administrative turmoil. Partly through coincidence, and partly on purpose, there has been a lot of turnover in staff. From a musician's viewpoint, we have had a difficult operational situation because we have not had an orchestra manager. We've had the bizarre situation of having an orchestra manager who is living in California and doing his job by e-mail, if you can imagine! So there has been some frustration among the musicians which we think will be resolved shortly.

And one of our central issues is still to make sure that we try to involve more musicians in the process. There is still considerable reluctance among some of the musicians to get involved. There is still a sense among some that by being involved they are being co-opted. That is something that time will have to cure, and it is not as easy as one might like to think.

Those of us who are involved in the process, in the governance, are aware that there are limitations in our market and that people are doing their jobs as best they can. But there are still some musicians who think that things are not happening because people are not doing their jobs. Some of our frustrations are tied into our location in Hartford, which is having its own problems right now.

**Masi:** I would like to reinforce something that Greig just said about musician participation. Out of the 80 or 90 people in the entire group, we have pretty much exhausted the inventory of those who want to participate and serve. It is extremely difficult to get people who have not participated to even go to a board meeting. One of our challenges is to get people motivated and make them realize that they do have a voice and can make a difference. That is a major challenge.

**Lammers:** While I agree with Arthur and Greig, I have found that if I am working one-on-one with people, I can get them interested in specific tasks. If they are interested, they will go to meetings. For example, if the issue is touring, I am able to involve people who have been very vocal and very unhappy in the past because we haven't done any touring. They are slowly beginning to understand that people do listen to what we, as musicians, say. It is a long, hard educational process.

Some of the musicians who are not involved are the very young players who came to the orchestra right out of school. So part of it is just an education and maturing process. Most of us were probably not that interested in governance when we joined our first orchestras because we were just excited to be in an orchestra and didn't begin to realize everything that goes into actually running one.

**Institute:** Listening to you, it sounds as though musician and non-musician board members continue to work together well. Is that true?

**Drinan:** Yes, it is true. And let me give you an example. I am in charge of the ROPA conductor evaluation bank, and I talk with orchestras across the country that are doing music director searches, as we are. And I am thrilled and amazed at how wonderfully our system works by comparison. Greig and Tom are the co-chairs of our music director search—one musician and one non-musician. Candy and several other musicians are on the search committee, as are several other non-musician board members. We have a completely open sharing of information. What I have learned is that there are other orchestras that are doing searches where musicians are desperately trying to get their boards' attention with evaluations of candidates, with no success.

We don't even think about that issue any more. Cooperation is just the way it is. For us, a collaborative process is normal, and we need to be reminded that that is still somewhat unusual in the industry.

**Shearer:** We are arriving at a decision through consensus.

**Wildman:** It is really hard for me to imagine doing it any other way. I think that the symphony in Hartford would be in big trouble if we had proceeded any

other way over the last few years, which have been difficult for many of the reasons Greig outlined at the beginning of this conversation. And when I looked back at the material that appeared in *Harmony* three years ago, it seemed like looking back to a distant time. The transformation in the governance of this organization has been huge in a relatively short period of time.

I do share the concern of the musician board members about the players who are not actively involved. Those who are involved are fully engaged in the process. They make substantial contributions to the organization and to the community as volunteers. At times, their work as board members puts them in awkward positions because they realize that not everything the musicians would like is attainable. If we have a tough issue down the road, I sometimes fear that not all of the musicians will be as committed to our process as those in this room are.

**Johnson:** I am gratified to hear that the musician board members feel that the process is still on track. Yes, there are still issues that we continue to struggle with. But I can't imagine approaching those issues without the active involvement of the musician members of the board. It's interesting to recall that not too many years ago, musicians were not given access to much of the symphony's financial and other information, and some musicians believed that the symphony maintained two sets of books. Although we've got a long way to go, we have made important progress over the past decade.

**Institute:** What about volunteerism from the community? Are new people developing into leadership roles in the organization?

**Johnson:** Because we have a large board, the executive committee plays a key leadership role. In the last couple of years, we have brought some new people into the executive committee and I think that is a real plus. I have not seen any resistance by these new board members to the active involvement of the musician members. In fact, everybody seems to accept it as appropriate and natural. Is that a fair comment, Candy?

**Lammers:** I think it is. They are fascinated that we have voting roles. Seriously, really fascinated. They want to know what we do and to learn about the process. I explain that this is the only way we survived some very rocky times. We all need to be committed together in order to function. They accept that. "Wonderful" is the word I hear most often.

**Drinan:** We have a new member on the orchestra committee who has been in the orchestra for a long time, but not on the orchestra committee. At the last board meeting, he asked question after question after question. It was very gratifying to see some of the long-time, non-musician board members reassure him that asking so many questions was fine.

**Wildman:** I have to say that I have learned a great, great deal from the musicians involved. We all have. The musician to whom Ann referred has been consistently questioning the effectiveness of some of our marketing efforts. That is a very

legitimate topic. Once again, I think this demonstrates the real benefit—not just the political benefit, but the real benefit—of the insights we get by having substantial musician involvement. It's not a bad idea to have fresh views from time to time.

**Pryor:** Let me give you a concrete example of the real benefit of musician involvement. As part of our education effort, we went to see the superintendent of schools here in Hartford. One of the musicians who was part of our group brought his instrument. Right in the middle of the meeting, he played a small piece that was fabulous and a totally unrehearsed part of our presentation. I didn't know why he had brought his instrument. I thought that he was on the way to a rehearsal. What an impact. What a masterful piece of marketing.

**Johnson:** Let me back up for a minute to our very talented player board member who asked some tough questions at a recent board meeting. He has a history of asking the tough questions and expressing opinions that to some board members may, at first blush, seem a bit outside the box. The questions that he asked concerning our marketing efforts made some of us uncomfortable. But we need that kind of input, and we "suits" have to keep our minds open to it.

**Institute:** Since we last visited, you have been through a contract-renewal process. How did that go?

**Lammers:** We have just completed year two of a four-year contract. The contract was done with an executive director who is no longer here and who, I think, really didn't buy into the process. There were some wage increases, but not much other change. It wasn't difficult, just frustrating, and we certainly didn't break any exciting new ground.

**Drinan:** We had invited a couple of musicians to join us with the intent of showing them how the process works and perhaps helping them buy into the way we renew contracts as an institutional process. Among a minority of players, there is still a sense of needing to try to get back what was lost in the work stoppage of 12 years ago. And on that point, Arthur Masi did quite an assignment during our negotiations. Arthur, why don't you explain.

**Masi:** I took on the task of looking at the wage scales from the prior contract and one contract before that, and comparing the increases over the years, and taking into account work stoppages, wage cuts, and so on. And I think one of the things we did that shocked management most during our negotiations was to come up with the wage level where we would have been if none of those things had happened. It wasn't rocket science by any means, but it was obvious that no one in the administration had ever thought of looking at our situation from that point of view.

**Drinan:** What was interesting was how vehement some of the musicians were about "that is what I should be making." They had no sense of "life happens," or "life dealt us a bad thing," or "this is more than 10 years later and can't we get past it?" Even though Arthur spent a huge amount of time working with

those numbers, the bottom line is that I don't think we succeeded with those musicians. Maybe it's only 10 out of 85. But there is still a small, but very vocal, group of players who cannot get past the sense of "what the symphony owes me."

**Wildman:** I keep reminding myself that the full orchestra is about the same size as the law partnership of which I am a member. Almost never do we get agreement on anything. With that many people, you just don't. Sure it is frustrating. But my guess is that there are a handful of people who will always be unhappy in this orchestra. That is just a reality.

**Pryor:** I did my first negotiation with the UAW when I was 24 and have had a lot of experience. I've never, ever found a circumstance where there weren't a few people who just can't get on board. I don't think we will ever reach the point where there aren't some naysayers. We shouldn't organize our view of success as coming only when we get those people on our side, because we won't.

**Lammers:** I would agree that we will never please everybody. But those people who hold their opinions long and hard serve another function. That is to remind those of us who are deeply involved how other members of the orchestra may feel. One night when Dwight was addressing the orchestra, I sat in the back of the hall, and was amazed at the different feelings coming from the musicians. It was a reminder that I have tried to retain. I need to step back and think of things from the viewpoint of a musician who is not involved and doesn't necessarily care to be. If you cannot do that, you cannot ever hope to communicate effectively with those people. This process is difficult. It makes you think about and clarify the ways in which you deal with your colleagues.

**Institute:** Very well put, Candy. Now, let's shift gears and turn our attention to how the Hartford Symphony is viewed in the community.

**Pryor:** When we are out seeking money, there are a certain number of people who remember the lockout with great displeasure and will not be distracted from it. The search for a new music director has opened up some people to look at the orchestra with more interest. We're in better shape, but I can't say we've made great progress.

**Lammers:** Millard is right. We have made some progress. We have done some social events tied to concerts that have been important steps in our money-raising. But I still don't think the community understands that this orchestra is resident in the community. We pay our mortgages, our kids go to school here, our musicians teach music to their kids. We're still too self-effacing. We don't toot our own horn nearly enough.

**Johnson:** Recently, I have noticed that even some of the people who retained bad feelings from the lockout have been much more favorably inclined to contribute to the symphony, in both time and money. Almost all of the comments I receive are very favorable about the new relationship. This is a real plus and will continue to be a plus as it develops and becomes better known.

**Wildman:** I would agree with Candy and Dwight. Those who think about our recent progress think in increasingly positive terms. Our main challenge as an organization is by no means unique to Hartford. And it doesn't have much to do with our system of governance. Our challenge is to interest a wider constituency.

**Institute:** And how about a quick review of your current financial situation. You mentioned a small deficit for the year that just ended.

**Johnson:** We've actually done quite well since our last conversation. Although we did have a small deficit this past year and are concerned about the coming year, in recent years we have generally been balancing our budgets. This is in part because of the extraordinary performance of the stock market. Unfortunately, we cannot count on it to perform similarly in the future. In addition, like most of our mid-sized peers, we have not figured out how to close the gap between what we would like to have available and what we do have available. That brings me back to broadening our constituency. I agree with Tom that we need to increase our support both in terms of performance revenue and in terms of contributed revenue.

**Institute:** We are nearing the end of our time together, but let's take a moment to look ahead. Share with our readers your thoughts looking forward over the next few years.

**Shearer:** I want to respond to something that was said earlier. Because I am on the inside of the process, I find myself focusing on simply being able to continue as we are. We have succeeded tremendously if we can end the year with a balanced budget. But within the orchestra are a significant number of people who feel that their desires for increased service guarantees and increased compensation have been put on hold for many years. They're frustrated that we are simply staying in the same place, whereas those of us who are involved in the process are relieved by that fact.

**Pryor:** Greig, I think we have some real opportunities. It is my observation that our development efforts have not fully matured, and that with the revisions in our staffing we have reason to be optimistic. We have also talked about marketing and I think we have some new opportunities there, too. The third area that gives me reason for optimism is touring. We have received a \$200,000 grant from the state to play concerts outside Hartford and we are going to seek additional funding.

Having said that, we need to remember that this is Hartford, Connecticut. This is a small market that is close to New York and Boston and people have many entertainment options. But I hope the things I have outlined will allow us to meet the basic requirements of a group of people who are not well paid, which the board understands.

**Drinan:** A lot of players are very interested in Millard's concept of us being the "Connecticut Orchestra" rather than the Hartford Symphony. Not that we would change the name, but there are areas of the state that are underserved. It is

possible—if we can find the venues and secure local assistance with marketing—that we could expand the full orchestra’s schedule by four or five concerts a year, even if we just run out existing concerts.

**Lammers:** As you can see, there are a lot of forces pushing and pulling on us. And I would add our music director search to the list of reasons to be optimistic. We hope that the person we select will help give us some impetus, some direction.

**Johnson:** I, too, am optimistic about a new music director. The response has been very strong and we’ve seen excellent candidates. And I would wrap this up by saying that although we have a long list of things to work on, we need to remember how far we have come. Of course we have made mistakes. But we have also done a lot of things right. And, most importantly, we are all willing to keep trying.

**Institute:** We thank you for taking the time to give us this update. The Institute lauds your continuing efforts toward being an effective symphony orchestra organization.