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London Symphony Orchestra: New Vision and New Policies through Self-Governance

by

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London Symphony Orchestra: New Vision and New Policies through Self-Governance

Symphony organizations are always in the process of change. If the impetus for change does not come from within, then certainly as the external world changes, symphony organizations must respond and adapt to their environments. In retrospect, one can observe that throughout history, symphony organizations have been dynamic, not static. Composers' requirements change the orchestra, societies change, and the orchestra itself—as a social system—changes from within.

The Institute has an ongoing interest in exploring the ways in which different symphony orchestra organizations have changed and are changing to become more effective. The Institute's focus is on helping North American symphony organizations become better functioning. However, from inception, we have taken the view that there is something to be learned from symphony organization practices developed in other parts of the world. Of course, one must take into account environmental, legal, and cultural differences. But for the most part, the processes and structures within all organizations are ultimately determined by the will, energy, thought, and behavior of the people within the organization itself.

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Organizational life would be much simpler if evolution were always a gentle process, but sometimes crisis intervenes. Crisis can be the condition that so distracts an orchestra as to divide its members, create impossible work loads, and discourage its supporters. However, if met with vision, imagination, and devotion, crisis can also be the provocateur of positive change and growth.

One example of such positive change is found in the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO). The developmental processes which have taken place and are continuing within this organization are significant. The organization has undergone positive change in its artistic vision while preserving much of its long-standing culture of individual self-determination among its members. This remarkable accomplishment has manifested itself in a unique system that could

be of interest to North American orchestras that wish to take advantage of opportunities for individual performance growth available in our large urban areas. The LSO system also allows sufficient flexibility for choice about work load to permit options unknown in U.S. orchestras.

A Brief History

The LSO was formed near the turn of the 20th century out of a pool of players from the Queen's Hall Orchestra (QHO). Because the orchestra pay alone was not sufficient to provide a living wage, the QHO had established a deputy system whereby players could send substitutes when there was better-paying work available outside the orchestra. Subsequently, in an attempt to abolish the deputy system, the members were offered a guaranteed salary in exchange for abandoning the deputy system. The material and artistic rewards of that offer were not sufficiently persuasive and in 1904, 46 members broke away to form their own self-governing orchestra, an organizational construct that gave the musicians the freedom to organize their professional and personal agendas.

Almost a century later, in 1984, long after the LSO had risen to international prominence, the orchestra found itself faced with bankruptcy and possible extinction. In the midst of that crisis, Clive Gillinson was appointed managing director. At the time of his appointment, Gillinson had been a cellist with the orchestra for 15 years. Because he knew the organization so well, he and the self-governing orchestra had a unique relationship with which to address their life-threatening problems while, to the extent possible, marrying those solutions to the orchestra's long-standing culture that allowed its members broad freedom of choice in managing their artistic, personal, and material lives.

The LSO is governed by a 14-member board of directors. Nine members of the board are players in the orchestra, one member is the managing director, and four are individuals from the business community. According to the organization's constitution, both the chair and vice-chair are required to be players. The board operates with two parallel streams of authority and responsibility. The players are responsible for all internal processes, including personnel decisions, discipline, and scheduling. The managing director and his staff handle relations with government agencies and corporate sponsors and take the initiative on artistic matters such as programming, tours, recordings, and those matters that determine the orchestra's competitive strategy. The nonplayer members of the board are resources in the management of government, corporate, and community relations. They rarely make monetary contributions, but offer guidance on issues of a commercial nature, not on internal management processes or artistic decisions. There is no music director with responsibilities comparable to that position in North America. There is a principal conductor, but the managing director handles the artistic plan, and personnel matters are handled by the players. The principal conductor is responsible for conducting 16 weeks of the 48-week season.

The initial years under Gillinson were difficult. The LSO has always been highly dependent on public funding, primarily through the Arts Council of Great Britain (funded by the British government) and the Corporation of London. The LSO had to compete with four other orchestras in London for funding, audience, venues, recording opportunities, film and television sessions, and tours. The 1980s were also a difficult time economically in Great Britain. Additionally, the Arts Council had ceded many of its funding decisions for all British orchestras to local and regional agencies. As a self-governing and self-managed organization the musicians had to examine their organizational priorities.

The orchestra had developed a substantial audience at the Barbican Centre, but those box office receipts provided for only a small part of the budget. The Barbican concerts, although artistically the most important work, paid less than outside work such as film, recording, and television. That meant that players had to give preference to work that paid well but that was not as important artistically to the orchestra or to its individual members. Some members felt that the orchestra needed to examine its priorities and redefine its artistic mission.

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The members of the LSO believed that a heightened artistic goal was central to the orchestra’s salvation. In reaching for that higher goal, they knew they would have to modify their culture of individual choice. In the early 1990s, grants by the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Corporation of London provided the bridge over which the orchestra was able to establish its new plan for development.

The LSO has always engaged in a broad menu of performance activity. Because the symphonic agenda had been augmented by a wide range of alternative musical activity that in fact paid better, orchestra members had supported their artistic ambitions by the fruits of their more commercial activities. The new plan called for a realignment of the pay differential between the artistically important work and the work that had previously brought higher pay because of its commercial value. Concert pay was raised, thereby signaling a new alignment between the heightened artistic goals and their material reward. Gillinson noted that, “The artistic mission in the past drove only a few; [the orchestra as a whole] had mixed motives. [Now players] know what they are here for, it is now why they join, they primarily believe in the artistic goal.”

New Directions

The organization’s heightened artistic ambitions required other significant organization changes. Whereas the LSO had been a core of 80 musicians, augmented, when needed, by associates who were the substitutes most frequently used, the players, deliberating within their process of self-governance, decided that the goal was to have a full roster of members with double (shared) principal players. With the new plan they were persuaded that they now could,

and therefore now would, engage the finest musicians for every position. String sections were expanded, player compensation was raised, and the roster grew to 115 permanent members. The orchestra chose to establish sufficient flexibility for members to be able to plan their performing lives in ways that would enable them to fulfill their creative potential while remaining members of the LSO. With a well-planned system that would permit members to select varying amounts of work, they saw that they could attract to the existing core the highest-quality musicians in London, for whom orchestra membership would previously have meant abandoning chamber music careers and other high-quality, artistically fulfilling endeavors.

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This new system provided players with great flexibility while controlling the cost to the organization. LSO musicians have defined categories of pay rather than individually negotiated personal contracts. Rates of pay for principals, co-principals, sub-principals, and categories within the strings are incremental, but pay within each category is uniform. Rather than having rigid weekly or monthly schedules and regular pay schedules, the LSO has no maximum number of services for each player in any given period. The players might not perform at all for weeks, then have a schedule of two and three calls a day for

many weeks. In fact, there were 550 occasions last year when the orchestra had need for members' services. Those occasions required the service of varying numbers of musicians and for a wide range of types of music. Clearly, no one individual can play that many services. The new uniform alignment of pay per service requires the organization to pay only those who play any given service.

Having changed the compensation system, the organization could now put in place a system that provided equal pay to members who chose the same percentage of work, while allowing other members who wished to reduce their percentage of work to do so without jeopardizing the rest of the section or artistic standards. One can imagine the flexibility this system provides for those who wish to pursue other performance and professional development opportunities, for those who would elect a gradual path toward retirement, and for parents of young children.

The LSO plays 50 concerts a year at the Barbican Centre. That module is the basis for the distribution of all of their many kinds of work. In the string sections, members are asked to choose the percentage of Barbican concerts they will play. They may choose a minimum of 50 percent to a maximum of 88 percent. Nobody may choose more than 88 percent. Once a player has chosen the Barbican concert commitment, he or she is offered the same percentage of all other types of work (e.g., film, recording, light classical, etc.). Choosing more than 88 percent of Barbican services would—when projected out into a like percentage of the other work—create a load that would threaten artistic quality.

Non-string player percentages vary from section to section. Since the orchestra operates a double principal system in which two players share one job, in the strings it is a straight 50/50 split and the principals are left to decide who does what, as long as they each do broadly 50 percent and the position is always covered by one of them, with all repeat performances being tied. In the winds and brass, the system is not as rigid, with players sometimes “sitting down the line” when they are not playing principal.

The members agree that section sizes and release procedures are based on the premise that it should always be only LSO members playing in the orchestra. In order to reach that goal, the members had to make some modifications to their long-established policy of individual choice for vacation periods. There are now fixed vacation periods in August and December. While there is substantial room for individual choice in the rotation policy, the release procedure is a very strict one. Many decisions can be made on a case-by-case basis, but the needs of the orchestra, and the need to have only LSO members performing, are paramount.

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Other Performance Opportunities

LSO Discovery is the orchestra’s education and outreach program and serves also as an expanded performance opportunity program for the members. It is the LSO’s attempt to make music available as widely as possible across the whole of society. For example, the orchestra has purchased an unused church near the Barbican in a less advantaged part of London. By December 2002, they will have remade St. Luke’s into a venue for education work, rehearsals, concerts, lectures, and small-ensemble presentations. They will have installed technology for recording, television, and the Internet. The organization has developed high-level education presentations which are ready for CD and Internet presentation. It is their intention to present concerts, rehearsals, interviews with conductors, and social histories of scores on the new arts channels. St. Luke’s will also be the venue for members who wish to broaden their performance opportunities beyond the full orchestra through small ensembles. LSO Discovery is not part of the mandatory rotation system.

LSO Live is the Orchestra’s own recording label. They record live concerts from the Barbican series when the occasion allows repeat performances. Those recorded performances are then immediately augmented with a patch session to edit obvious flaws. The recordings have been successfully marketed as live concerts, and the LSO has currently released 10 CDs. The latest, Berlioz’s *Trojans*, has quickly risen to the top of classical sales in Great Britain. Collectively, the orchestra decided that in order for the recording project to work, none of the players would take a fee up front, but only take a share of the profits once the start-up costs were covered.

Today, the London Symphony Orchestra is harvesting the rewards of their devotion, good judgment, and hard work. The LSO has moved forward beyond crisis and, over the years, has invented an artistic and operational system that uniquely fits its needs. The musicians' investment of time in self-governance, consultation, and debate has been key to arriving at solutions that preserve important parts of the organization's culture while allowing the flexibility to meet changing circumstances.

Though the orchestra continues to face external challenges, the LSO's commitment to a thoughtful way of work is well summarized by its chairman:

This process, applied over many years now, has given the individual members of the orchestra a sense of being part of creating their own future, a stake in their own destiny. It means that the orchestra has an incredible ability to move with the exterior forces affecting it, whilst still keeping its eye firmly on its artistic goals. It is flexible but never loses sight of its first principles, quality and innovation in everything it does.

Fred Zenone is vice chairman of the Symphony Orchestra Institute. For the thirty years prior to his retirement in 1999, he was a cellist in the National Symphony Orchestra.

Notes

Conversations with Clive Gillinson and Jonathan Vaughn of the London Symphony Orchestra contributed to this article.

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