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## Explorations of Teamwork: The Lahti Symphony Orchestra

by

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### ***Explorations of Teamwork: The Lahti Symphony Orchestra***

**A**mong the Institute's many friends across the country are a large number of symphony orchestra musicians. Many of them are very forward-thinking about orchestras as organizations and curious as to how things work in organizations beyond their own.

Tina Ward and Robert Wagner are among musicians who have received funding through the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to study various aspects of artistic leadership. Through a happy confluence of circumstance, they discovered the Lahti Symphony Orchestra—in Finland—and paid a visit. We were delighted when they offered to share their explorations.

Fifteen years ago, the Lahti Symphony Orchestra—at the time a largely unknown and unheralded organization—held a workshop to explore the orchestra's problems and to discuss what a utopian vision for the future might include. As Wagner and Ward explain, this initial workshop led to many more and unleashed a torrent of creativity.

This is a story of hope, ingenuity, and success. Suffice it to say that the Lahti Symphony now plays in the spectacular Sibelius Hall, has recorded 43 CDs—several of them winners of prestigious awards—and has toured internationally.

An interesting wrinkle to this story is the fact that the Lahti Symphony's chief conductor, Osmo Vänskä, is the music director designate of the Minnesota Orchestra.

Read on! And consider what a utopian vision for your own orchestra might include.

## Explorations of Teamwork: The Lahti Symphony Orchestra

**Tina Ward:** November 1999. For the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, the month featured a guest conductor from Lahti, Finland, in his first engagement to conduct a U.S. orchestra. I am a clarinetist in that orchestra and very early into the first rehearsal, I was struck by Osmo Vänskä's energy, passion, and musicianship. He politely asked the orchestra for what he wanted and honestly admitted if he had made a mistake. During a break, he came over and introduced himself to the entire clarinet section (not a normal event during a rehearsal), explaining that he had been a professional clarinetist before he became a conductor. After an exchange of collegial pleasantries, he offered to send us some Finnish clarinet music. A few weeks later, a large package addressed to the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra clarinet section arrived from Finland. I was most impressed by Vänskä's personal and prompt follow-through.

In 2001, I received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to study artistic leadership in orchestras, and Osmo Vänskä returned again to conduct the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. Because I was planning to visit several European orchestras later in the season as part of my artistic leadership project, I asked to meet with Vänskä after a rehearsal. Our discussion quickly turned to the Lahti Symphony Orchestra, of which he has been chief conductor since 1988. He explained for me the process through which that orchestra's musicians and staff engage in meaningful and productive discussions. Lahti became a destination on my itinerary because I wanted to learn more about this orchestra's explorations of teamwork. Some of the material that follows is taken from the conversation I had with Vänskä in Saint Louis in October 2001.

**Robert Wagner:** For the past four seasons, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra (NJSO), through a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, has made \$50,000 available to enable musicians to gain additional leadership or professional skills. The NJSO has a reputation for innovative thinking in the American symphony industry and has embarked on an artistic leadership search,

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as opposed to the traditional music director search. As the orchestra's principal bassoonist, it seemed to me that we musicians would probably be called upon to assume new and additional roles in the artistic leadership of the orchestra. Although I knew something about the models of the London Symphony Orchestra and the Berlin Philharmonic from articles I had read in *Harmony*, I wondered how the musicians in those and other "musician collective" orchestras felt about their systems. I applied for part of the NJSO's funding and made two trips to Europe in the spring of 2002. Tina and I traveled together on the trip which included the stop in Lahti.

## **The Lahti Symphony Orchestra**

The Lahti Symphony Orchestra, in its present form, was founded in 1949, and in recent years has gained an impressive international reputation. The orchestra has won two Grammy Awards, a Grand Prix du Disque, and three Cannes Classical Awards. The 67-member orchestra, supported by an administrative staff of 10, tours internationally and performs in Sibelius Hall, which opened in March 2000.

In 1988, the organization began to hold workshops centered on team building, problem solving, and visioning. Initially, attendance was voluntary, and only a few orchestra members attended the first session. Later, attendance of all musicians and staff became mandatory. During their conversation in Saint Louis, Tina asked Vänskä if this process might be partially responsible for the remarkable success the orchestra has experienced over the last decade. Here is some of what he shared:

In Lahti, we have done a lot to create teamwork, where all the members are very, very important. Even the second violin player is a human being! Since 1988, we have worked for that. The whole orchestra participates in retreats without instruments two or three times a year. . . .

We try to put things in focus—to think about what's been done well, what hasn't been done well, and what we want to do about it. We consider all kinds of problems—nonmusical and musical. For example, problems brought up have included the ventilation system not working very well, problems with our library, and difficulties with information from the offices.

We divide the orchestra into smaller groups of five to seven members, and we pose problems to those groups. The groups then have two or three hours to find some solutions for the problem. . . . The next day, there is a list of what we decided, and we follow what has been worked out in the retreat. This has been most important to Lahti. . . .

***"In 1988, the organization began to hold workshops centered on team building, problem solving, and visioning."***

I think too often the tradition is that people make beautiful sounds together, but they say they are not interested in anything else. They are not interested because no one has given them the real chance to be involved. I have been so surprised how clever the people sitting in the orchestra are. There are a lot of good ideas. I have one brain. But the orchestra together has 70, or 90, brains. So it's not clever if one is using only his or her individual brain.

We have always made some time in the retreats for Utopia. We look at something that is out of reality—something we don't think is too practical. Things have been suggested like rehearsing only on rainy days, or three times more salaries. Very early on, someone said, "My Utopia is that we can do internationally very-well-reviewed CDs." We had never recorded anything at that time, and people started to laugh. Now we have five, six, seven international awards . . . but it was only thirteen years ago when this idea was like a joke.

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Another idea was to build a concert hall next to a lake. Now we have it. It opened in March 2000. . . . So think seriously about what you want to do, and in five years or so, those dreams are going to be what happens. When 70, or 90, brains are thinking what we need to be in five years, someone is going to have a great idea.

Armed with those thoughts, we planned our trip to Lahti.

## **A Visit to Lahti, Finland**

We arrived in Lahti in late March 2002. The streets were icy; the sidewalks were covered with gravel to aid in keeping one's footing. Lahti, Finland, is situated about 60 miles northwest of Helsinki, at the southern tip of Lake Vesijärvi and connecting to a chain of lakes extending more than 170 miles to the north. At the time of our visit, the lake was frozen, and it would be another month before the thaw.

According to the Chamber of Commerce brochure, Lahti has two major claims to fame. The area offers three championship ski jumps, including one of the highest in Europe that attracts top ski jumpers from the entire continent to train and compete. The second claim—just as highly touted—is the Lahti Symphony Orchestra.

With a population of about 100,000, Lahti has faced significant challenges over the last several decades, including an industrial downturn which left the waterfront abandoned, and an unemployment rate as high as 17 percent. Despite these challenges, the Lahti Symphony Orchestra has grown dramatically over the past 15 years. Clearly, something special and unique was happening here.

As we began our conversations with members of the orchestra family, we learned that the tide turned in 1987. Tuomas Kinberg, who was then a violinist with the symphony, a union board member, and an orchestra committee member, attended a “workshop for the future” unrelated to orchestras. Based on his experience, he wanted to start something similar with the symphony and approached the orchestra’s manager to determine if he might help create workshops that would involve everyone in shaping the future of the orchestra.

Kinberg explained to us that before the orchestra began holding these workshops, “We used to have meetings to criticize things. People got angry. It didn’t help us at all. Quite the opposite. We needed to get the people in the orchestra to express themselves not only by the work that they do—the playing—but about other things because there are so many things which have to be discussed.”

The first workshop had only a small number of participants, including musicians and the general manager. They discussed the problems the orchestra faced, and what a utopian vision for the future might include. The word quickly spread that participating in the workshops was a good thing to do, and soon the musicians demanded them.

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## **Growth of Workshops and Orchestra**

Within a few years, the workshops included all the musicians, the chief conductor, the orchestra manager, the office staff, and even the cleaning staff. What was unique was the institution’s commitment to the empowerment of each member of the organization, ensuring that everyone in the organization had a voice in helping to shape the future. As cellist Ilkka Uurtimo explained, “This is like one team. All together with everyone supporting the same thing. Everyone is important; the goal is the same for everyone.”

In 1993, Tuomas Kinberg gave up his seat in the violin section to become the orchestra’s general manager, and the importance of the workshops continued to grow. He works with the five-member orchestra committee to plan the workshops and select the topics for each. He explained that topics are discussed in breakout groups of six or so, with each group having a mixture of musicians and staff. Each group selects its own leader who reports back to the workshop at the end of the discussion time. According to Kinberg, 80 percent of the participants express themselves during the breakout groups. “They are very skillful at this now because it has been done so many times. I’m so proud of what we can do.”

How important has it been to the Lahti Symphony Orchestra to have workshops in which participants could dream and share their visions of the future? During our conversation, the orchestra’s concertmaster, Jaakko Kuusisto,

recalled the early workshops: “The orchestra was not recording at the time, but one vision was to have an international recording contract, an owned concert hall, international tours, and more players. And all of that lined up in the next 10 years or so.” He laughed as he explained to us that one vision (reportedly from the lower brass section) was that there would be a good highway from Helsinki to Lahti which, though it had nothing directly to do with the orchestra, has also come to be.

## From Vision to Reality

The story of the building of the spectacular Sibelius Hall in Lahti clearly outlines this organization’s determination. The inspired vision of a new hall on the waterfront came out of one of the earliest workshops. When the Finnish government announced support for the national timber industry by declaring “The Year of Wood,” the Lahti Symphony Orchestra quickly came up with a brilliant idea. The organization suggested building a hall complex, including a conference center and restaurant, as a flagship of Finnish woodworking. It was initially difficult to convince the economically struggling city of the value of a new hall, but the City Council finally passed the resolution on the seventh vote. With the support of the timber industry and national funding, the small town of Lahti has arguably the most beautiful concert hall in Finland. Encased in glass, and acoustically engineered by Russell Johnson and Artec Consultants, the striking new hall sits on the lakefront and has spurred redevelopment of the neighboring rundown factories.

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Equally impressive is the symphony’s discography. The orchestra currently has 43 recordings available on the BIS label, and its recording of the Sibelius Violin Concerto has sold 80,000 copies. Quite a feat for an orchestra that had never made a recording when the workshops began.

Other visions that have become realities include more players for the orchestra, sold-out concerts in Helsinki, and a chartered plane for a tour in Sweden.

In recent years, the city of Lahti itself has been instrumental in enhancing the orchestra’s leadership knowledge. Technically, members of the Lahti Symphony are city employees, and the city requires all employees in leadership positions to participate in ten four-hour leadership training sessions. All principals in the orchestra must, at some point, take the training. The groups are a mix of occupations, and the training does not consider the special circumstances of being a leader within an orchestra. In describing the training, Jaakko Kuusisto, the concertmaster, told us:

It was a very, very general thing. We noticed that the problems are pretty much the same in all jobs. Mostly it helped to understand better

how to communicate with colleagues about professional things in a personal way. I think it helped me to learn to talk to people in a way that they would feel comfortable, and to take into consideration how they would feel when I said this or that. And I noticed during the training that I had not really thought about those things at all. It's very easy to assume that other people think the way you think about some professional item.

Throughout our trip to Lahti, we asked our hosts what is it that makes the Lahti Symphony Orchestra unique. One of the best answers came from cellist Ilkka Uurtimo, who talked about the support the musicians receive and give:

We know that everybody makes mistakes, but there is no one telling you that maybe this wasn't your best evening. I think that is very supportive. And it grows through Osmo Vänskä. He gets the beat wrong, also. But we forgive him. Sometimes the atmosphere in orchestras is one where you are very easily punished for errors you make that affect the others. But that doesn't happen here. Substitute players who come here for a week or a month or so would tell you the same thing. They very often play in other Finnish orchestras, and they will tell you that it is completely different.

As we left town on the new superhighway that connects Lahti to Helsinki, we thought again about what Vänskä had told Tina in Saint Louis:

*“Sometimes the atmosphere in orchestras is one where you are very easily punished for errors you make that affect the others. But that doesn't happen here.”*

Values, standards, principles, conscience—know what is correct and work for those things. Know what is correct, even though sometimes you cannot do it. . . . If each individual can think what is good for the whole—not only what is good for me—then the whole orchestra is ready to find some other solutions. Instead of telling a musician, “The whole orchestra plays better without you; go away,” we should say, “We will try to help you if you help us.”

We wondered what effect the process that has been used in Lahti might have in an American orchestra? Certainly there are cultural and operational differences between American and Finnish orchestras. In Lahti, the process started with fewer than 20 participants and expanded to include the entire organization. Together they created a vision and accomplished their wildest dreams. It seems to be a process worthy of exploration by American orchestras.

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*Robert Wagner is principal bassoonist of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, is chair of the orchestra committee, and serves on the orchestra's artistic planning committee. Bob also is secretary of the board of directors of the American Symphony Orchestra League. He holds bachelor's and master's of music degrees from the Juilliard School and is on the faculty of Princeton University.*