

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

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## The Problem Solvers: Orchestra Personnel Managers

A Roundtable Discussion



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### **Symphony Orchestra Institute**

1618 Orrington Avenue, Suite 318

Evanston, IL 60201

Tel: 847.475.5001 Fax: 847.475.2460

e-mail: [information@soi.org](mailto:information@soi.org)

[www.soi.org](http://www.soi.org)

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## The Problem Solvers: Orchestra Personnel Managers

### A roundtable discussion

As readers of *Harmony* know, the Institute believes that symphony orchestra organizations are unique and complex. No other organizational genre has been identified which, by tradition and extended practice, has such a complicated multi-party structure and diverse modus operandi. At the same time, symphony organizations as a whole have a quite homogeneous organizational structure which, in turn, perpetuates certain specialized roles involving almost generic duties. To understand how orchestra organizations function, and how they might better function, it is important to become acquainted with this standard organizational structure and the special roles it has engendered.

A special role in almost every North American symphony organization of any scale is the “personnel manager.” The personnel manager is generally responsible for overseeing all operating matters relating to orchestra personnel. Recently, the Orchestra Personnel Managers Conference held its annual meeting in Cincinnati, and we were fortunate to have seven personnel managers join in an elaboration of their day-to-day work and organizational roles. An edited transcript of that roundtable conversation follows.

**Institute:** Please introduce yourselves and share with our readers your background and current position.

**Doug Hall:** I am the personnel manager for the San Diego Symphony and the San Diego Opera. I won a french horn position with the San Diego Symphony in 1988, and subsequently inherited the position of personnel manager with the San Diego Opera, where I was also a player, upon the retirement of my predecessor. I also served as assistant personnel manager for the San Diego Symphony, and also inherited that personnel manager’s position.

**Llew Humphreys:** I joined the Utah Symphony in 1989 as a second horn, and have been orchestra personnel manager since 1994, serving as a player-manager.

**Jeff Neville:** My title is director of orchestra personnel for the Saint Louis Symphony which I joined in 1990, following 16 years as a trombonist with the Honolulu Symphony. During the last six of those years, I was also a playing

personnel manager with the orchestra. In Saint Louis, I am a nonplaying personnel manager, a member of the staff.

**Greg Quick:** I joined the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra in 1977 as principal bassoon, and the additional job of personnel manager found me in 1995.

**Carl Schiebler:** I've been personnel manager for the New York Philharmonic since 1986. Prior to that, I was in Saint Louis where I joined the Symphony as a horn player in 1962. I was also playing personnel manager there from 1976 to 1986.

**Linda Unkefer:** I am a nonplaying personnel manager with the Milwaukee Symphony and have been since September 1990. I started as a cellist with the Canton Symphony, and after serving on that orchestra's players' council was asked if I would take the position of personnel manager. I said "yes," and held the position for 13 years before moving to Milwaukee.

**Russell Williamson:** I am also a nonplaying personnel manager, and have been with the Atlanta Symphony for four years. I am a horn player and was a playing personnel manager with the Jackson Symphony from 1979 to 1982. I am probably the only one sitting here who actually left the symphony world and came back as a personnel manager. I worked for a chamber music group for eight years, and then looked at jobs totally outside the music industry. But I realized that I want to work with musicians because those are the people whom I understand and appreciate. So here I am.

**Institute:** As you introduced yourselves, you indicated that you were either playing personnel managers or nonplaying managers. Is that an important distinction?

**Schiebler:** No. I think that playing or not playing is a nonissue. There was a time when it was perceived as an issue, but I never agreed with that. I didn't think it was an issue when I was a player, and I don't think it is an issue as a nonplayer. It's a staff position. We work for management. But our job responsibility is the health and welfare of our orchestras, of the musicians.

**Quick:** I agree with Carl. I'm a player-manager and can't see any real difference. Except my wife reminds me that I have two full-time jobs! And my weekly schedule also reminds me of that.

**Unkefer:** The important point is how an orchestra is structured and what the workload is. As one who has been both a player-manager, and now as a nonplaying manager, I think I have a good understanding of what everyone does. My assistant personnel manager is a player and we divide our tasks with an eye to who is going to be more successful in a particular area.

**Institute:** To enlighten our readers about your unique roles within your organizations, can you define the role of the personnel manager?

**Neville:** My main job is to manage the members of the orchestra, to make sure that they are in the right place at the right time, and to create an atmosphere, or

workplace condition, that is conducive for them to do the best job that they possibly can. It is also part of my job to act as the musicians' advocate in management, to act as a communicator among the music director, upper management, and the musicians. To put it another way, my job is to facilitate the many circumstances that arise in the daily life of an orchestra.

**Humphreys:** Jeff, you pretty well nailed it on the head. But let me add that in Utah I am a player-manager with a symphony that is going through growing pains. I feel particularly sensitive to the issue of musicians who perceive management as inept in some way or other. I spend a lot of time communicating the abilities of the musicians to management, and I spend a lot of time explaining to musicians the circumstances under which management is operating. Two-way communication is very important, and I'm constantly chipping away at the wall.

**Hall:** I think that an orchestra's budget makes a difference in what the personnel manager's day-to-day role is. We went through a bankruptcy in San Diego and most of the musicians were hurt by the financial strain. I was one of them. So I am particularly happy to be part of the healing process. I can empathize with both the musicians and management. Part of my role is to make sure that the staff understands that the musicians have been through real hardships, and that the musicians understand that the staff did not go through those years and doesn't bear those scars, and is trying to create a healthy orchestra.

**Schiebler:** You are so right, Doug. Us versus them doesn't work. The stakes are too high. Orchestras reflect their communities, and whole communities have interests. The more we can facilitate communication, and openness, and trust, the better.

**Williamson:** Let me put it a different way, Carl. My job is to sit on the fence. I am paid by management to work for the musicians. What no one has said is that it is our job to follow the contract. We are the contract enforcers. We all have master agreements, and it is our job to make sure that everybody lives within the contract. We look after management's interests and we look after players' interests.

**Institute:** Let's pursue that "us versus them" idea for a minute. Is that line disappearing? Are your symphony orchestra organizations becoming more unified?

**Unkefer:** As many *Harmony* readers know, the Milwaukee Symphony went through some very difficult times in 1992. As a result of the labor agreement that was reached at that time, musicians are now members of all of our board committees. So for the last eight years, the level of management and musicians working together has increased; the level of trust has increased. The comfort level of the orchestra has really grown. The fact that musicians know what is going on on a day-to-day basis and serve on long-term planning committees makes my life a lot easier.

**Schiebler:** But I think we need to acknowledge that for personnel managers there is some pressure that comes with establishing open communications. It doesn't matter where the idea of open communications comes from—an orchestra committee, or a music director, or management—once the idea begins, there is pressure to come through. And I think a lot of times, personnel managers become the facilitators or communicators. We need to understand that the issues are changing. Today's issues are much more complex than those of 20 or 30 years ago. And everybody is trying to grow into the issues of now. Today's issues involve much more money and much more involvement from board members and professional staff. It seems to me that we need to examine today's issues and those of the future, and concentrate on finding the most responsible manner to go about solving them.

**Institute:** In light of the complexities and changing issues that Carl just described, is the personnel manager's role changing?

**Hall:** We are still facilitators of the contract. We may be experts about what changes should be made in the contract and we can make recommendations about things that do and don't work, but we're still facilitators.

**Williamson:** Doug, I think there is more to it than that. We have significant amounts of authority, or responsibility, to both our constituents—the orchestra and the management—to manage all of the things that aren't in the contract. For example, a musician has a problem scheduling time off for a personal matter. We take care of that and management is never involved. Or management has a need that only musicians can fulfill. We talk with a few people who discuss it with their colleagues, and suddenly it's a done deal. It happens because we make it possible.

**Neville:** I want to amplify the thought of complexity and changing issues. As you explained, we are currently attending a conference of orchestra personnel managers. And earlier today, we were talking about the family medical leave act and how it affects different orchestras. And it is mind-boggling how laws that affect us vary from state to state, and how each personnel manager must deal with those laws. So I think Doug and Russell put it very well. We are still facilitators and communicators. But, in dealing with musicians' issues, I don't think my job has changed that much since I first became personnel manager in Honolulu 16 years ago. Laws, however, have changed, and we have to adapt to those changes.

**Institute:** Let's change our focus a bit and talk about how your jobs fit within your orchestras' organizational structures. Does top management understand your job and give you the kind of support and authority that you need? And do you feel that you are contributing to the orchestra organization as a whole?

**Quick:** One of the best avenues of support that I get is coming to this conference. I am a personnel manager in a smaller orchestra and don't have a lot of people with whom to discuss my issues. So this conference is an important source of information which I can take back to my orchestra.

**Unkefer:** In my first four years in Milwaukee, I had three different general managers. For the last six years, I have worked with the same person. So I think it is key to have a general manager and a personnel manager who work well together. When a general manager really supports you, and treats you professionally, and allows you to make decisions, the job is much easier. So I think it is important to find good people and keep them in their positions. That is a very good thing for orchestra organizations over the long run.

**Schiebler:** Personnel managers, by their nature, tend to be pretty inquisitive. We're always responding to questions or players' needs and we are pretty good at going outside our organizations to find answers and the support we need. Most of us became personnel managers in a kind of accidental way. I was trying to play a horn in Saint Louis and was on the orchestra committee, so I knew something about negotiations, but there was a lot I didn't know. And over the years, I learned.

**Quick:** I think you find that it is probably fairly common that very early on many personnel managers had experience on an orchestra committee.

**Neville:** As a matter of fact, six out of the seven of us were on orchestra committees. But what I want to impress upon your readers is the fact that we deal with some very serious situations involving real people. Sure there are some formal courses we can take, but basically we need to keep our minds open to change. I think that if there is anything on which personnel managers get an A-plus it is dealing with change on a daily and hourly basis and responding to the needs of our orchestras.

**Hall:** Let me give an example. One of our players died and he didn't have a will, which resulted in an unhappy situation. So we polled our musicians to determine how many had wills. The answer was not very many, and consequently we have planned a benefit education program that will include having a lawyer talk about wills and living trusts. I think that's identifying and responding to the needs of the orchestra and being part of the organization.

**Humphreys:** I want to second what Carl said about getting into personnel management in an accidental way. Our personnel manager in Utah had some serious personal problems and our general manager asked me to step in. I had thought a lot about our problems, and had verbalized them to other people, and decided that it was time to put up or shut up. So I stepped in.

**Quick:** Although the circumstances were certainly not the same as the ones Lew just described, I was not expecting to be a personnel manager either. But the occasion arose, I was asked, and I said yes.

**Neville:** I'm a musician. I grew up loving music and I still love music. As a player-manager, and now as a nonplaying manager, I have a very strong sense of pride and dedication to the orchestras for which I have worked. From the contributions I have made, I have attempted to make them better organizations.

**Institute:** One final question. Can or should personnel managers take a more proactive role in improving communications throughout symphony orchestra organizations?

**Neville:** I think we need to focus on what we do best. Because if our part of the machinery works well, good things will come out of that. We can't be executive directors. We can't be general managers. We can't be board members. We have to do our jobs as best we can and hope that others will take note and build from there. I feel pretty strongly about this.

**Unkefer:** I'll second that. The better that we do our jobs, the more positive effect it will have on individual orchestra musicians. And from that, good things will happen.

**Humphreys:** I want to go back to what Jeff said about change. The whole process is evolutionary. The opportunities that I get to break down barriers between management and the orchestra are typically one-on-one opportunities, so it is important to remember that change does not occur very rapidly in symphony orchestras. As Jeff said, the best thing that we can do is to do our jobs well.

**Williamson:** I am probably echoing what has already been said, but we are the facilitators in the trenches. If we can convince one individual that there might be a different way of looking at a particular situation, we have made a contribution to the organization as a whole.

**Quick:** Being problem solvers is the most important thing we do as personnel managers, and is the way we advance our organizations. I have a job description that is 27 paragraphs long, but the bottom line of that job description is "just fix it."

**Institute:** That really sums it up and we thank you for being a part of the Institute's effort to educate readers about the standard structure of and specialized roles within North American symphony orchestra organizations.