

At the Core: **Contract Negotiations at the Hartford Symphony Orchestra**

How can a symphony orchestra in a medium-size market survive in an environment that has put pressure on its existence? This case profiles the Hartford Symphony Orchestra (HSO), which serves residents in the state of Connecticut and southern Massachusetts and represents one of the largest orchestras in New England. Several unique elements of its organizational structure are revealed, before focusing on a set of contract negotiations that hinge on its “core” of 33 members. As a consultant, you will review the steps taken to create sustainability for the organization, but will be tasked with deciding how to handle a contractual crossroads for the core players, who, on one hand, make the most valuable artistic mark on the HSO, and yet have drained financial resources unnecessarily for the organization. As a result of the substantially changed market landscape for the arts in Greater Hartford, should these valuable and committed players accept a large cut in compensation or should the HSO suspend its operations altogether? Are there alternatives to settling the contract dispute?



HARTFORD
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

This case study was prepared by Michael Alan Anderson, Associate Professor of Musicology, Eastman School of Music. Eastman case studies are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.

Background

In 1934, Francis Goodwin II applied for funding from the newly-instituted Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which promised assistance to the unemployed—in this case, struggling musicians. Goodwin’s application was granted, and the “Civic Symphony Orchestra of Hartford” would become a fixture in Connecticut. More funding was secured through the targeted Federal Music Project of the 1935 Works Progress Administration, part of the new domestic programs established in President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. The orchestra was renamed the “Hartford Symphony Orchestra” the following year and began to tour widely across New England. Its home base settled at The Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, where it still performs today.

The HSO has a history of attracting big names to its concert stage, which in turn has vaulted its prestige. The orchestra performed under the baton of Fritz Mahler for nearly a decade and has welcomed such talented musicians as Artur Rubenstein, Ella Fitzgerald, and Yo-Yo Ma. In 1954, the HSO gave the American premiere of Carl Orff’s *Carmina burana*, now one of the mainstays of the choral-orchestral repertoire.

The 1980s represented a golden age of sorts for instrumentalists in and around Greater Hartford. Members of the orchestra have never been full-time employees of the HSO; rather, at this time, most instrumentalists had other contract commitments with the Hartford Ballet, and the Connecticut Opera, in addition to their time with the orchestra. The wages of these workers were thus not an encumbrance on any one organization, with the ballet and opera companies occupying at least eight weeks of the year with performances. In the early 1990s however, the Hartford Ballet and its school of ballet were not making financial ends meet and shifted from a live orchestra to taped music for its performances. It was forced to

close its doors in 1999 after 25 years. Connecticut Opera did not fare much better. The recession of 2008 paralyzed the 67-year-old organization, and it shut down its operations in 2009. The pressure was on the HSO to stay afloat as a quality arts provider in Hartford. The orchestra’s management knew that its players had already suffered substantial losses of income.

The Core, a Lockout, and Musicians “On Board”

Most orchestras have a roster of core players who contract for a large number of “services” throughout the year. A rehearsal, a performance, or, in some cases, an educational or community presentation will count as a “service.” The size of the core orchestra suffices for only some of the repertoire it plays. For works requiring larger forces, such as most symphonies of the nineteenth century, instrumental reinforcements supplement the core. On the advice of a study committee comprising board members and musicians, the HSO established a core orchestra of 21 players in 1986 by merging the symphony, the Connecticut Opera, the Hartford Ballet, and the Hartford Chamber Orchestra into one organization called Core, Inc. In fact, many regional orchestras were following this path at that time in hopes of becoming full time. The 21 players featured a string complement (violins, violas, cellos, basses) and single winds. Musicians who were members of the Hartford Chamber Orchestra (a separate organization) were given preference for joining the core, as their chamber orchestra repertoire was to become part of Core, Inc. This group was drawn from a subset of 55 players who were under a “basic” contract to play symphonies, opera, pops, and children’s concerts.¹ Core Inc. dissolved by 1991.

The HSO management provided the core roster with a large amount of contracted services, which included anything from major concerts to school

¹Beyond the “basic” 55 were 23 string players at the rank of “Service,” who were hired to play large orchestral works. Another eight players had a “Right of First Refusal” contract; they were offered work if their instrument was needed (other wind instruments, harp, and keyboard, for example).