

Culture Shock: **The Merger of the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra & Music School**

Collaboration is inherent in the art of music making. Whether performing as a member of a chamber ensemble, premiering a new work by a living composer, teaching, or learning music, musicians are bred to work collaboratively. In the spirit of collaboration, should arts organizations with shared goals consider joining forces to improve efficiency and effectiveness? What are the benefits of large-scale collaborations and what are the best practices for a successful merger of two not-for-profit arts organizations with similar objectives? This case profiles the merger between the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra (RIPO) and The Music School (TMS). Completed in 2000, the merger of the two organizations represents the first and largest successful merger of a professional orchestra with an existing community music school in the United States. After a look at the genesis of the merger, the early challenges, and the evolution of the new organization, you will be asked to identify ways to enhance collaboration between the divisions of the enterprise. For what reasons should two organizations consider a merger? What are the successes and missteps of the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra & Music School merger? How might a new management team build a single healthy business from two related arts organizations?

RHODE ISLAND PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA & MUSIC SCHOOL

This case study was prepared by Eric Michael Laprade. 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

The Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra & Music School (RIPOMS) is one of only a handful of musical arts organizations in the United States consisting of a professional orchestra and community music school managed together as a single enterprise. As the only professional symphony orchestra and the only comprehensive community music school in the state of Rhode Island, the organization is one of the primary sources of live orchestral music and community-based arts education in southern New England. The mission of the organization—“To enrich and transform Rhode Island and our region through great music performance and education”—places equal priority on education and performance.

Founded by conductor Francis Madeira, the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra (RIPO) gave its inaugural concert in November 1944. It is the oldest continuously operating professional performing arts organization in the state. Early in its development, the organization considered music education as part of its core values, which led to the development of a youth orchestra program, annual education and family concerts, and in-school music performances. Now under the leadership of music director Larry Rachleff, the RIPO has developed into one of the finest regional orchestras in the nation. Guest artists have included such notable names as Renée Fleming, Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, Sir James Galway, and Isaac Stern. In 2000, the orchestra received national attention when it was selected via blind audition to perform at the conference of the League of American Orchestras.

Alan Fox founded The Music School (TMS), independent from the RIPO, in 1987. Fox had recently moved to Rhode Island and was surprised to find that the state lacked a community music school. He identified and hired faculty members, created a board of directors, and rented a facility for the school.

TMS quickly developed into a highly respected source of arts education in Rhode Island, offering private lessons and opportunities in chamber music and jazz ensembles. Since merging with the RIPO in 2000, the school has received national recognition. It serves over 1,600 students every week and maintains a faculty of over 70 teaching-artists. The school has been honored by the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities and is the recipient of a Creative Communities Award.

A Seed for the Merger

In 1998, the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra’s board of directors began to chart a vision for what the orchestra would look like in the year 2020. A common thread in the discussions was a need for a robust and thriving education program. While the orchestra had a solid financial position and strong board governance, its audiences were aging and its storied youth orchestra program was struggling. To grow and strengthen the orchestra’s core, the board prioritized investment in music education programs and future supporters of classical music. Similarly, it committed to making classical music more accessible and more relevant to community members. Current RIPOMS

board member and former RIPO board president Marie Langlois reflected on the board’s mindset leading up to the merger: “We were very concerned about the quality of experience that children were having in the youth orchestra. And I think we also felt that if kids didn’t have opportunity to learn about music and to play instruments,

According to the National Endowment for the Arts Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, from 1982 to 2008 the number of youth in America with access to arts education in their schools decreased from almost two-thirds to less than half.

Source: *Arts Education in America: What the Declines Mean for Arts Participation*. Compiled by Nick Rabin and E.C. Hedberg. National Endowment for the Arts. Office of Research and Analysis. Washington, D.C., 2011.