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Musical Chairs: Rostering Break of Reality



INSTITUTE FOR
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Musical Chairs: Rostering Break of Reality

The ways that professional musical ensembles organize themselves vary according to the size, function, and mission of the enterprise. Orchestras and military bands, for example, may arrange traditional contract hires or even full-time employment, while smaller ensembles are usually more flexible in how they pay and retain their members. This case examines the rosters system developed by Break of Reality, a cross-genre chamber quartet. The group's two co-founders are core members of the organization while the other two seats rotate among seven independent contractors. The advantages and drawbacks of Break of Reality's roster system form the substance of the case. As is common in artist-run ensembles, the co-founders of Break of Reality have taken on administrative roles. The reader is tasked with drafting a recommendation that evaluates not only the current model for hiring ensemble members but also the organizational structure of Break of Reality.



This case study was prepared by Blaire K.S. Koerner. *The 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.

Breaking Out

Percussionist Ivan Trevino and cellist Patrick Laird formed Break of Reality in 2003. Consisting of three cellists and one percussionist, and self-described as “a cello quartet gone mad,” the group’s signature musical style bridges classical, rock, and indie rock. Performing their own arrangements of Bach to Villa-Lobos and covers of Metallica, System of a Down, and Radiohead, their concerts incorporate both acoustic and electronic works, as well as an element of improvisation. When electronics are included, it is only for amplification, reflecting one of the group’s core artistic missions to stay true to the natural sound of the cello.

Considered “too loud” for traditional recital halls, Break of Reality sought other types of venues to match their audacious musical style. In 2007, the group

“[Break of Reality] songs go from 0 to 60 in a split second, turning on a dime to take you from a quiet chamber recital to a thundering arena rock concert: Fans of both Nine Inch Nails and Kronos Quartet will be pleased.”

– *New York Press*

collectively moved to New York City and cultivated a fan base by playing in coffee shops, malls, rock clubs, and in Central Park. Trevino and Laird composed original music for the ensemble and recorded four full-length albums over the next few years: *The Sound Between* (2006), *Spectrum of the Sky* (2009), *Covers* (2012), and *Ten* (2014), which have sold 50,000 copies combined. Online exposure increased the group’s popularity even further. The ensemble placed recordings on streaming sites such as Spotify and Pandora Radio,

offered on playlists spanning cellist Yo-Yo Ma to heavy metal bands. They shot videos and uploaded them to YouTube, such as their rendition of the *Game of Thrones* theme song, which generated millions of

views and was hailed by the *Huffington Post* as “the best rendition of the theme song you will ever hear.” Break of Reality’s music has also been featured on a variety of radio and television programs, including National Public Radio, Public Broadcasting Service, and *Dateline NBC*. Distancing themselves from traditional chamber music, Break of Reality does not use a program in its performances, opting instead to communicate directly with audiences. As Trevino describes it, the group seizes every opportunity to “share a story about the music and the concert, and we hope to leave them with a good personal connection.”

With the increase in popularity came touring opportunities for Break of Reality in a variety of venues across the United States, including the California Worldfest, Alaska Center for the Performing Arts, and with Laredo Philharmonic Orchestra in Texas. The group has traveled internationally as well, having played in South America, Malaysia, and Japan. In 2015, Break of Reality embarked on a tour of Central Asia, including stops in Turkmenistan and four cities in Kazakhstan. In a rare ambassadorial opportunity on behalf of the United States Department of State, they returned the next year to the region to help celebrate 25 years of diplomatic relations. The connection to the government continued in 2017, when the group was a guest of the U.S. Embassy in the Philippines. As a part of the American Music Abroad Program, Break of Reality conducted free music workshops and performances in Zambales and Manila for a week, sharing their unique style with the hope of keeping instrumental music “alive and relevant,” in Trevino’s words. As a part of its tours, Break of Reality has also incorporated educational initiatives, visiting hundreds of national and international schools to perform with music students and encouraging them to think creatively about how traditional instruments might be used.

Roster System

The pure artistic innovation of Break of Reality has attracted interest from many institutions and groups around the world, resulting in an intense touring schedule. While a successful band might schedule 75 or 100 gigs per year, Break of Reality averages 40 engagements on a monthly tour and up to 80 during a longer tour. The touring demands have caused inevitable conflicts with members' schedules, particularly those who did not foresee the success of the group. Trevino and Laird remained with the band, but eventually the two other cellists were unable to commit and left the ensemble. The two open chairs were then filled by a rotating group of musicians, leading Trevino and Laird to develop their "roster system."

Professional chamber ensembles have a few ways of organizing their personnel. Smaller ensembles, such as quartets and quintets, often only have core members and book engagements only when everyone is available. As an ensemble increases in size, so does the chance that conflicts may arise. Larger groups, like chamber orchestras, might contract with a substitute to fill in for a member on a special occasion, so that a performance can remain in place. However, it is understood that the core member is the current position holder and will return with the next performance. Break of Reality's roster system takes these models a step further.

Break of Reality is an S Corporation, which is a particular IRS designation for small businesses that allows profits and losses to pass through to a personal tax return. The business itself is not taxed. Within the S Corporation structure of Break of Reality, Ivan Trevino and Patrick Laird are both shareholders. A gig will only be booked if the two of them can be present, as they do not have substitutes. However, the two remaining cello positions in the quartet are treated as independent contractors—self-employed musicians who are drawn from the group's list of possible

fill-ins. Trevino and Laird gathered this list of players through informal auditions and recommendations from trusted colleagues. The two core members would rehearse with auditionees and invite them to perform a concert with them.

The group's personnel system is thus one that involves a stable and a rotational aspect. Concerning the two rotated positions, Trevino and Laird have high expectations for the musicians they hire, requiring them to have strong playing abilities and an infectious collaborative spirit. The hired cellists need to have the versatility and seamlessness to shuttle among classical, rock, and folk sounds. In addition, these contractors must be able to perform the music from memory. Not unlike how a band operates, Break of Reality utilizes a setlist for all of its concerts, which remains relatively constant but may sometimes be altered depending on the length of the performance, the venue, or the audience. When hired, a new cellist will be assigned to a chair in the ensemble and be responsible for that chair's book. Since the group rehearses just a few times prior to each engagement, the contracted member must arrive well prepared and be willing to make quick adjustments. This explains the high expectations of Trevino and Laird in the audition process. As Trevino has remarked, the switching of personnel from gig to gig should keep the model "refreshed, and not add unnecessary stress." For the last four years, Break of Reality has rostered seven cellists for the two spots.

Over the years, a system of seniority has developed, one that gives the right of first refusal to those who have been with the ensemble the longest. Once the personnel has been secured, the group meets a few days prior to the gig to rehearse. Rostered members are well compensated. They can expect around 20% of the amount paid to Break of Reality for any given engagement. No more than 20% of the event income (including merchandise) goes into the ensemble's account to assist with future travel arrangements,

marketing, etc., while the four players divide the remainder evenly.

Flexibility in Personnel

One of the greatest benefits of Break of Reality's roster system is the flexibility it offers to both the ensemble and the individuals. Because the two co-founders need only to confirm their own schedules before seeking two other members from a deep list, there is a greater chance that the group can accept gigs and develop tours. Trevino and Laird understand that when they hire members for an engagement, the musicians regard Break of Reality as just one part of their multi-faceted careers. The co-founders can also take advantage of their system to hire performers who best match what is needed for a particular opportunity or set of pieces. There is little to no concern about where the musician is stationed. Even Laird (New Jersey) and Trevino (Texas) are not proximate. Not only do all seven of the roster members participate in numerous other organizations and chamber opportunities, but they reside all around the world. Three roster members live in New York, while others hail from Minneapolis, Germany, and Australia. The costs to meet up with the ensemble are figured into venue or sponsor fees. All the better to find the right person for the job at hand.

Laura Metcalf was the first rostered member of the ensemble who was not part of the original quartet. She was initially hired as a substitute prior to the breakup of the quartet. Although she performed brilliantly for Break of Reality and was a fine personality match for the ensemble, the New York-based Metcalf became fatigued as the group's only substitute. Problems particularly centered around a different performance endeavor—her own string quintet, Sybarite5. Prioritizing the needs of the quintet over her substitute engagements, Metcalf began declining Break of Reality gigs with more regularity. Trevino and Laird's decision to deepen the roster was a relief for Metcalf: "One of the big things solved by

the roster system is the ability to balance other career opportunities. There was a time I wasn't sure I could continue. I'm thankful we've come to this system." The shift to a more revolving roster not only helped Metcalf sustain her role as a contributor to Break of Reality, but also opened new doors to quality cellists who were good matches for the repertoire and personality of the group.

The "revolving door" of two rostered cellist spots has certainly presented its share of challenges. One can guess that the wide geographic distance between players allows for minimal physical interaction and rehearsal time prior to a show. Other professional ensembles with geographically proximate members can be more cohesive with added contact time outside rehearsals and concerts. The stronger personal bonds may, in turn, have positive effects in performance. As Trevino has said of Break of Reality's contracted cellists, "it boils down to trust. We expect our players to know their parts and to be ready for the few rehearsals we have, because sometimes we only get a few hours." Within those few hours of rehearsal, which can sometimes take place in Laird's home or in a hotel room on the road, there is little time to make adjustments large and small. With a pool of seven musicians to fill two spots in the quartet, numerous combinations of personnel are possible, and there is constant pressure with every gig for all players to adapt quickly to the ensemble at hand.

Break of Reality's rotation of members can be both frustratingly frequent and stagnant. The group's three-

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– Laura Metcalf, roster member

week tour of Asia in 2015 featured the same members of the ensemble for all 46 tour stops, which was ideal. But there are other short periods when Trevino and Laird might wish the group to remain cohesive

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– Ivan Trevino, Break of Reality co-founder

for longer. The group has indeed been subject to members being “swapped out” on the road, such as their 2013 tour to support a crowdfunding campaign through Kickstarter. On this month-long tour of the western United States, three different cellists were needed to fill one chair, which presented the added pressure of getting multiple members “up to speed” for a single program. Alternatively, the group can lose some of the dynamism

offered by the roster system when seniority is considered. Because Trevino and Laird give the right of first refusal to the cellist with whom they have spent the most time, there are others on the list who may wait months to return to the group for a concert. In auditions, the co-founders therefore emphasize the ability of their enlisted cellists to memorize programs and be up-to-date on the material whenever contracted for a gig.

From the perspective of the cellists as independent contractors, Break of Reality’s flexibility in scheduling may mean an inconsistent source of individual income. The seniority process and the variable number of concerts per year leave some roster cellists with low expectations for income from the group. Even Metcalf, who holds the senior position and usually accepts most gigs, expects a range of only 10-20% of her income to come from Break of Reality. Less senior cellists understand that they need to find most of their annual work elsewhere.

Administering Break of Reality

The bilateral structure of the quartet (core and roster members) not only provides distinct employment classifications for Break of Reality members, but also affects how the ensemble operates and makes decisions. As is evident, the two full-time members, Trevino and Laird, accept all administrative responsibilities of the self-managed group. Holding the titles of president and vice president respectively, Laird and Trevino are in full control of the ensemble and determine its strategic direction. Trevino handles all press relations for the band, preparing marketing materials, drafting press releases, and taking interviews with news outlets. Laird plays a less public role, taking care of day-to-day operations involving correspondence, accounting, and finance. While most would expect a string quartet to acquire not-for-profit organizational status, Break of Reality operates as a for-profit enterprise. The group receives income from five main sources: performance gigs, album sales, streaming sites, sheet music sales, and merchandise. Laird’s responsibilities include maintaining and growing these streams of income for the organization.

Having seven independent contractors in the roster system is no easy administrative task for Laird, who has to accurately maintain records for each one as well as for Trevino and himself. He solicits W-9 forms and files individual 1099-MISC tax forms annually. He also tracks all reimbursements to these musicians. International musicians require other tax forms, and visas must be kept up to date. If the IRS makes any changes to the filing system, as it did in 2016 when the filing deadline for 1099-MISC was moved ahead in the year, Laird must stay abreast of the changes and adjust accordingly. In the area of touring, there are of course a host of travel preparations, including the transportation of instruments, which may mean the purchase of airline seats for cellos as necessary. International tours can add another layer of administrative complexity. Laird has to ensure everyone’s passports are up to date and has to be

attuned to travel laws governing the transport of instruments.

By taking full responsibility for the band, Trevino and Laird have allowed the roster members to simply come and go as performers. They do not assign any administrative duties to the hired cellists, even if the contractors are intimately familiar with the enterprise. Metcalf prefers this structure: “I don’t enjoy doing administrative work. I really trust the two of them [Trevino and Laird] as they are both really smart and savvy. They make the decisions for the whole group, but if I have suggestions or ideas, I know they will listen.” So while the core members do not give administrative assignments to rostered performers, they often encourage open lines of communication about the business with the members during the times when core and rostered players meet. Trevino views the ensemble as an extended family where, no matter who is on a gig or how long they have been a part of the ensemble, opinions are valued. The co-founders have a weekly or bi-weekly status meeting to discuss all of the facets of the business. The structure of the enterprise as it stands calls for a heavy workload, but Trevino and Laird know the benefit of organizing the ensemble exactly as they see fit.

Branding the Band

The rotation of cellists in Break of Reality has affected the group in the area of branding. As the fan base of Break of Reality has grown, people started to become familiar with individual members of this unique ensemble. But substitutes in the two cellists’ chairs left many fans wondering who the core members of the ensemble were. Group photos on the Break of Reality website and on social media often did not match the individuals witnessed in live performance. On YouTube, fans of the group openly inquired where certain players were and if they had been replaced permanently. Followers of Break of Reality expected consistency in the musicians from concert to concert, like one would find in a rock band. In his marketing

of the organization, Trevino broke the silence about the composition of the ensemble to his audiences. He decided to inform the audience of their open roster setup while introducing members at their concerts and in response to online questions. Once fans were aware of the structure of the group, their questions died down. Trevino felt strongly that the different faces of the same group were an asset and not a liability for Break of Reality: “At the end of the day, no matter who is playing at any time, it’s still the same band and sound. That heavily outweighs any of the other issues.”

Visual marketing materials, ranging from photos and posters to press kits, do not attempt to capture all of the personnel permutations of the ensemble, although Trevino is careful to provide proper credit to individuals when named in social media, press releases, or publications. When it comes to group shots, Trevino has decided to keep things simple. Rather than pay for professional photos with all of the members or various combinations, Trevino only distributes photos from the group’s original shoot. The images are therefore consistent, and marketing budgets can be redirected elsewhere. This system worked until Break of Reality’s 2017 U.S. Embassy tour of the Philippines. In preparation for this tour, contractors required publicity photos of the exact members who would be performing on tour. Break of Reality had to pull in Australian cellist Meta Weiss, who was conveniently in the United States already, for a photo shoot in order to meet the Embassy’s demands.

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– Ivan Trevino

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Due to the administrative burdens of the group brought on by an increasingly rigorous schedule, Trevino and Laird are seeking a full-time assistant for Break of Reality. Before the job description is written, the group will hire a consultant to evaluate the current business structure in general and its roster system in particular. The consultant will consider what is gained and lost from having seven cellists on a list for two spots in the ensemble. There are a number of perspectives that can be brought to this evaluation. Picture yourself in the role of the consultant and draft a recommendation to the co-founders addressing the questions below.

- Compare the opportunities that a roster system offers for the quartet with ensembles of a similar size that contain only core members. What are the drawbacks of Break of Reality's particular roster system?
- Currently, Break of Reality engages with seven roster members. On one hand, having seven musicians on call increases the chance that one will be available for gigs, but also increases rehearsal time and administrative workload. Should fewer cellists vie for the two spots? What would be a reasonable number of roster players in the case of Break of Reality?
- Should the rostering of members for individual gigs remain seniority-based or should a more equitable system (or lottery system) be put into place? A seniority system grants the right of first refusal to those who have played with the group the longest, but also disproportionately leaves out equally qualified cellists, in theory. Those regularly left out will find the position with Break of Reality an unpredictable or unreliable source of income. How could the seniority system affect the roster if the senior player routinely turned down gigs? Should that person continue to receive the right of first refusal?
- Although crucial administrative decisions lie with the president and vice president of Break of Reality, Trevino and Laird welcome input from roster members on the operation of the ensemble. Should the hired cellists, particularly "senior" ones, have more of a say in the direction of the enterprise? How can all roster members voice concerns to their musical colleagues who run the business?
- Ultimately, should the roster system remain in place? If so, are there small ways to improve the arrangement? If not, should the band move to four full-time member-employees or to an alternative model?
- Is it appropriate and beneficial for two core artistic members to serve the administrative roles of president and vice president of Break of Reality? Should the group consider hiring a full-time administrator, who could, for example, alleviate the daily paperwork and stay abreast of changes to the state and federal laws governing small businesses?



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