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The Nashville Symphony



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The Nashville Symphony

The Nashville Symphony has served the famous “Music City” since the mid 1940s, and Alan Valentine has been its President and CEO since 1998. This case study surveys the growth and promise of the symphony early in Valentine’s tenure, leading to a major moment when a new home for the symphony opened in 2006. A wage freeze for staff and musicians as a result of the Great Recession was only part of the dire financial straits the organization faced. A historic flood in 2010 compounded the financial troubles and would test management of the Nashville Symphony. Highlighting the positive relations between Valentine and the musicians, the case concludes with an impending negotiation based on an essential financial restructuring for the Nashville Symphony.



NashvilleSymphony
SchermerhornSymphonyCenter

This case study was prepared by Michael Alan Anderson, Associate Professor of Musicology at the Eastman School of Music. 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.

A Symphony for the “Music City”

When Walter Sharp returned in 1945 to his native Nashville following the end of World War II, he was determined to start a symphony orchestra for the famed “Music City” of Middle Tennessee. With help from community leaders and local classical music aficionados, Sharp established the Nashville Symphony with an emerging, young conductor from New York, William Strickland, as its first music director and conductor. Four music directors took the podium after Strickland, before conductor, composer, and music educator Kenneth Schermerhorn assumed the position in 1983 until his death in 2005, serving longer than any Music Director and Principal Conductor in the symphony’s history.

President and CEO Alan Valentine has been at the helm of the Nashville Symphony since June 1998. At the time of his hire, the orchestra had the feel and profile of a small regional orchestra with 54 full-time musicians and a budget of around \$6 million. Members were paid around \$21,000 per year; the core was supplemented by part-time players and substitutes. The administration of the Nashville Symphony—20 staff members at the time—was located in an office apart from the hall in which the orchestra performed. Management operated from an old converted warehouse building, while the symphony held its concerts at the Tennessee Center for the Performing Arts. The administrative office space contained some 6,000 square feet including storage; no equipment could be left at the performing arts center. Valentine recalled that for performances, “we lived out of the back of a truck.”

Meantime under Schermerhorn’s baton, the Nashville Symphony rose to substantial heights of musical artistry for an orchestra of its size. This included a critically-acclaimed East Coast tour and institution-defining performance at Carnegie Hall in 2000 and a rewarding partnership with the Naxos of America label, which has now reached 30 recordings. A new and acoustically magnificent performance

campus—Schermerhorn Symphony Center—followed in 2006, named after its beloved maestro.

In the transition to a new music director, celebrated American conductor Leonard Slatkin assumed the artistic reins, and even greater musical achievements poured in. Slatkin conducted the Nashville Symphony when it brought home three GRAMMY® awards in 2007 for its recording of Joan Tower’s *Made in America*, a powerful and nuanced single movement work using “America the Beautiful” as a leitmotif. The orchestra also produced a 13-part series of interviews with living composers called *American Encores*,

which premiered on international syndicated radio. Since 2008, the Nashville Symphony’s current Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero has continued the upward trajectory of this orchestra with a steady stream of recordings, commissions, and world premieres. Recordings have now brought in 13 GRAMMY® Awards out of 24 nominations. The orchestra has placed special emphasis on partnerships with Nashville-based artists including bassist Edgar Meyer, banjoist Béla Fleck, singer-songwriter Ben Folds, and electric bassist Victor Wooten. These successes have come in part because of an organizational culture at Nashville that has developed between management and musicians over the last two decades. The lines of communication remain open, positive, and forward moving—not always the norm in the orchestral world.

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“Trust Me”

Alan Valentine remembers his early days and the “institution-defining performance” at Carnegie Hall. In the run-up to this important tour performance, conductor Kenneth Schermerhorn voiced his concern about the roster he had been given. He

did not want to play in Carnegie Hall unless it was with a “real orchestra.” The maestro insisted on 17 more players for repertoire selected for New York. Initially, Valentine planned to hire them as part-time musicians, though based on the quality of the candidates willing to audition, it was clearly preferable to convert the new positions to full-time jobs, and advertise them as such. A donor approached the CEO and asked how much more it would take to convert the new positions to full-time employment—it was \$750,000. A major endowment campaign titled “Symphony 2000” was scheduled around a \$5 million gift from this donor, along with the additional gift for the new full-time positions, to incentivize donations as the New York trip approached.

“It seemed like it was generally more important to figure out whose fault something was than to fix the problem, and I decided that needed to change immediately.”

***-President and CEO
Alan Valentine***

compensation. The question was a fair one, but threatened to drive a wedge into the organization. The CEO, when he was first hired, encountered an organizational culture of blame-shifting and fear-based paralysis. “It seemed like it was generally more important to figure out whose fault something was than to fix the problem, and I decided that needed to change immediately.”

Valentine sat down with representatives of the orchestra before the New York tour and made a

personal plea. “I’m relatively new here,” he explained. “You don’t know a lot about me. But so far I hope I’ve demonstrated that I communicate well and I own my mistakes.” Valentine wanted the orchestra representatives to go along with the expansion of the full-time ranks, but couldn’t make promises, even in the midst of the endowment campaign. “I do not have a crystal ball, and cannot promise you that your salaries will improve then, but I do know that when your contract comes up for renewal, we will be in a much better position to do something about your salaries if we have \$20 million in the bank than if we don’t. I can’t promise you we can afford to give you big raises, but the maestro wants to do it, and the donor wants to do it. Trust me.”

To secure the donor’s generous pledge and fulfill Schermerhorn’s artistic desires, Valentine opted to add the 16 full-time musicians for the sake of the Carnegie Hall appearance. The \$20 million goal of the fundraising campaign was also exceeded (by \$3 million). Nonetheless, tensions were rising between players and management. The musicians felt they were not being heard; they were only working on a promise.

The great success of the endowment campaign, gave the board confidence that plans for a new concert hall could be pursued and a new, much larger capital campaign launched—this time with a goal of \$120 million to fund the construction of the hall. The financial projections for operations in the new hall suggested that the 16 additional players could be kept as full-time players if the hall could be opened by fall of 2006. Player salaries, however, were still in question. At the first contract negotiation following the campaign of 2000, the administration was able to propose a five-year contract with a 15% raise in the first year and 5% raises for each of the four years to follow. Salaries had by then risen to about \$26,000, so this arrangement immediately took the orchestra members’ minimum scale to just over the \$30,000 mark for salaries, a psychological milestone for some but still uncomfortably low for

many. Higher salaries also meant that the symphony could attract better players for its auditions. It took time, but Valentine delivered on his promise.

The New Hall

The five years of contract stability were nearly simultaneous with the construction of Schermerhorn Symphony Center, which opened to great pomp in 2006. Meantime in the spring of 2005, Kenneth Schermerhorn was suddenly diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and within just over a month of the diagnosis, he was gone. This created a major problem for the orchestra. As the organization approached the grand opening of its new concert hall—arguably the biggest moment in its history—it had no music director or conductor for the debut performance in the hall. Valentine thus hired Leonard Slatkin to conduct the first performance. The inauguration was momentous in the history of the Nashville Symphony, exciting the community when innovative programming had hit a ceiling with audiences. Annual ticket sales more than tripled in the first season of the Schermerhorn's operation, from \$2.4 million to \$7.5 million. Downtown Nashville had reawakened to the community spirit generated by the impressive new hall, the tourist district crackling with energy for high quality performances. Valentine reflected on the opening year: "The orchestra went from being a vagabond band to being a destination. It changed the entire way the community viewed the institution."

The next goal of the Nashville Symphony administration was to continue to build an orchestra that was worthy of the great hall in which it performed. Recording was a way to reach new levels of artistic achievement. Prior to the grand opening of the new hall, Valentine convinced Maestro Slatkin to conduct the Nashville Symphony in a recording of Joan Tower's music in the summer of 2006. The orchestra had an institutional commitment to American music, already reflected in its season programming, and driven largely by Kenneth Schermerhorn and the vision that he and Valentine

shared that such a commitment could distinguish the orchestra and set it apart from others. In addition, Valentine describes how Nashville is known around the world as "Music City USA"—a place where lots of uniquely American music is created, recorded, performed, and distributed throughout the world—"so why shouldn't the Nashville Symphony contribute to that brand in its genre?". The CEO felt strongly that this emphasis should be expressed in recordings as well. The recording of three works by Tower on the Naxos label produced three GRAMMY® awards alone: Best Classical Contemporary Composition, Best Classical Album, and Best Orchestral Performance. The success of the recording session persuaded Slatkin to remain as interim artistic advisor to the Nashville Symphony and as its principal conductor for several performances per year, until the music directorship was filled.

Meantime, a contract renewal with the orchestra was on the horizon in 2007. As part of its aim to continue building the symphony to match the quality of its outstanding new performance space, the orchestra's management team was able to structure the new agreement with salary increase terms almost identical to the previous one; there was a larger bump in salary in the first year followed by 5% increases in subsequent years. A golden age seemed close at hand.

Wage Freeze

The successful contract negotiation of 2007 put the Nashville Symphony on a course of stability that was promising for its future. In late 2008 however, the stock market crashed from the subprime mortgage crisis, and the Great Recession followed, sending organizations of all stripes into a tailspin. The Nashville Symphony endured heightened stress

Downtown Nashville reawakened to the community spirit generated by the impressive new Schermerhorn Symphony Center.

because of its highly leveraged capital structure. The administration had used tax-exempt bonds to finance the new performance building. Funding raised from the public was then placed into a “liquidity pool” that could service the debt and eventually be redirected into the orchestra’s endowment. Any hope of coming out ahead evaporated in the wake of the economic collapse. The Nashville Symphony’s pool of investments lost \$35 million in value, and credit markets were frozen. Valentine and his senior staff had to think of ways to survive what they hoped would be a short-lived recession.

As a first step, administrative staff salaries were immediately frozen. Addressing the musicians would be more difficult. The economic decline took place in the second year of the five-year contract agreement. Valentine felt he had no choice but to ask the members of the orchestra for a wage freeze in the middle of their contract. Invoking the spirit of “shared sacrifice” that had become common organizational parlance in the financial meltdown, he proposed inserting a year of flat wages before resuming the contract. A year would thus be added to the agreement, and salaries would arrive at planned levels but a year late.

Alan Valentine had a strong record of communication with the musicians and was eager to get through these rough waters for the orchestra.

Valentine’s proposal met with resistance by the players, and the union (American Federation of Musicians local 257) sent a negotiator to Nashville to settle the impasse. The president and CEO by then had a strong record of communication with the musicians and was eager to get through these rough waters for the orchestra. Negotiations were brief and

amicable: the players agreed to a six-month wage freeze rather than a year as proposed. During these six months, the players agreed to meet regularly with the administration to see where the organization stood

financially. At the end of that period, the parties would see if another six-month freeze was appropriate.

By the middle of 2009, the financial setbacks had not improved for the Nashville Symphony, nor had the stock market recovered. The cost of the debt had tripled, and banks were reluctant to extend the organization’s line of credit more than three months at a time. The local union president came to Valentine’s office with sobering news: the orchestra members had no will to accept a freeze for the next six months. Valentine knew this was a crucial moment in his tenure. At the orchestra’s next rehearsal, the president and CEO asked Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero for ten minutes of time at the end to speak directly to the players. Valentine arrived and stood on the conductor’s podium. He gave this soliloquy:

“I don’t know whether you all are aware of this or not, but the union president told me there is no will in the orchestra to do what we’ve asked you to do. But I want you to know that the staff is in, everybody’s in . . . except the orchestra. The truth is our donors do not have the resources they once had. And I want to remind you that you were making \$21,000 per year when I got here, and there were only 54 of you. Today there are 82 of you and you’re making now 2.5 times what you made then. We also had only 3,500 subscribers when I got here, now we have 10,000 subscribers. You’re recording, you’re winning GRAMMY awards, you’re playing at a palace of music, one of the best halls in the world. I don’t know what about that track record would lead you to believe that I’m not telling you the truth now when I say I need your help.”

Valentine stepped off the podium, and about half of the members of the orchestra applauded. The CEO knew there was support among the

musicians for his proposal. At bottom, there was some level of trust. The union representatives met soon thereafter and agreed to Valentine's proposal to freeze salaries for another six months.

The Flood

The weight of salaries was only part of the crisis that Valentine faced in 2009. Ticket sales, fundraising, and capital improvements for the Nashville Symphony all took a major hit in the Great Recession. Further, both the orchestra's liquidity pool supporting the debt and its endowment were, by the end of 2009, worth half of their value from 2007. Then, an unpredictable event in the spring of 2010 added to this financial plight: unthinkable levels of rain—almost 14 inches—fell on Nashville in a 36-hour period on the weekend of May 1-2, 2010, shattering every record to date. The Cumberland River crested, bringing widespread flooding and billions in damage to downtown Nashville and across the Music City. Some 10,000 people were displaced from their homes, and human lives were lost too. Up to ten feet of water was recorded at the 1.2 million-square-foot Opry Mills shopping mall, which would have to close for two years. Another “Opry”—the Grand Ole Opry House stage—was underwater by the end of the weekend.

Not even five years old, Schermerhorn Symphony

More than 25 feet of black water had entered Schermerhorn Symphony Center, hitting the basement of the concert hall hard.

Center was also in danger. In the week following the storm, more than 25 feet of black water had entered the building, hitting the basement of the hall hard.¹ Two Steinway pianos were lost, and the console and blower room of the center's \$2.5 million organ were

under water—the expensive pipework survived. “It was like a river was running through our basement,” Valentine stated at the time.² The rising waters then

threatened the concert hall. The CEO and some colleagues were bailing floodwaters in hopes of saving this most precious asset. The black water miraculously stopped one foot short of entering the concert hall.

The immediate aftermath of the flood would be a test for the management of the Nashville Symphony and an opportunity to show organizational and civic resiliency. Valentine and his senior staff worked from cell phones and laptops in the Martha Rivers Ingram Garden Courtyard on the premises of the Schermerhorn Symphony Center. They were urgently trying to reschedule concerts in the weeks ahead, desperate to keep revenue alive despite the misfortune.

The only concert in the near future that could not be accommodated in alternative spaces in Nashville was a pops show with singer, songwriter, and guitarist Christopher Cross. Valentine asked his Vice President of Artistic Administration if he could call Cross and ask him to play a free concert with the orchestra. He agreed to waive his fee. Bass player Kevin Jablonski, who had just joined the Nashville Symphony, remembered all hands on deck during that fragile week after the flood. Stagehands created a platform stage for a memorable performance undertaking, just five days after the historic flood in Nashville. “We hardly missed a beat,” Jablonski said. On Friday, May 7, 2010, the orchestra played a free public concert with guest Christopher Cross on the steps of the Metro Courthouse in the city's Public Square. The orchestra's press release was full of heart: “Consider this a ‘thank-you’ to the entire city for helping friends, neighbors and fellow citizens through the unprecedented events of the last few days.”³ Residents of Nashville rose to the occasion, as thousands filled the Public Square for the concert. Positive press flowed: the headline in the local *Tennessean* newspaper the following morning was “Music, Muscle and Money: Nashville Opens its Heart.” A full-page picture of Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero conducting the orchestra accompanied the article. Within a week, the symphony had been at the center of a

¹ <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/2018/04/30/nashville-flood-2010-cumberland-river-opry-mills-mall-garth-brooks/566974002/>

² https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/06/arts/music/06arts-FLOODINGDAMA_BRF.html

³ <https://www.nashvillesymphony.org/media/press-room/press-releases/nashville-symphony-successfully-relocates-may-concerts-gears-up-for-friday-nights-free-outdoor-concert-at-metro-courthouse/>

show of community spirit and hope among Nashvillians after the historic flood. The organization had to dig deep again to confront what lay on the horizon following a one-two punch of the recession and flood. The total damage to the Schermerhorn Symphony Center would reach \$40 million. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) promised the Nashville Symphony help with restoration efforts in the amount of \$25 million. The orchestra also would be able to access \$11 million from a flood insurance policy. The state of Tennessee would guarantee \$2 million.

FEMA's \$25 million could only, by law, be paid as reimbursement for repairs after the fact, but repairs needed to start. This forced the Nashville Symphony to ask its lenders to finance the repairs until such time as the Symphony was reimbursed by FEMA. Only some of the banks believed that FEMA would ever provide the funding it promised. Valentine contended that restoration could not wait. Without full support from lenders in another precarious organizational moment, the organization was forced to sell assets in the liquidity pool portfolio to obtain \$25 million in cash. It also needed a restructuring of its debt. FEMA eventually came through with its pledged funding, but it was far too late. (No one could have predicted FEMA's support would have taken seven years to collect.) By selling off part of its liquidity pool to restore Schermerhorn Symphony Center when the stock market was relatively low, the Nashville Symphony missed out on the chance for its investments to recover when the market began its upswing. Valentine recalled: "We took the money out when it was worth 50 cents and put it back in at a dollar and a half. It was enough to kill any orchestra in this country."

No jobs were lost though, as everyone in every part of the Nashville Symphony was expected to help the organization through the crisis. If employees

worked in the kitchen or in food services, they were needed to get the kitchen and food services back up and running. The Nashville Symphony would not return to the hall for eight months. But it came back in style, preparing a concert on New Year's Eve with all the pomp and merriment of the annual worldwide broadcasts of the Vienna Philharmonic. Still, the flood had nearly made permanent the damage caused by the recession and made obvious that there were structural problems to fix at the Nashville Symphony. The culture of open communication and trust that Valentine and his administration had built with members of the orchestra would be tested in the years ahead.

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Strengthening Relationships Day to Day

Senior leaders at the Nashville Symphony believe that the organization is, at bottom, all about the musicians and the music they make. Without their contribution of talent, there is no symphony, no product. Because the players sit at the center of the organization's being, their voices are crucial to its success. Musicians formally participate in two committees—the Orchestra Committee and the Artistic Policy Committee. The former handles contract compliance issues, while the latter deals with artistic content, season planning, and the hiring of artists. Musicians especially value the opportunity to have input on the Artistic Policy Committee; they want to have a say in the pieces and acts that will appear in a 40-week season, as the offerings constitute a reflection of their tastes as accomplished artists. Players further participate in marketing, development, finance, and governance. In fact, 10% of the board is made up of musicians who are full voting board members. Kevin Jablonski, now a union representative for the players, has noted that this level of participation across the organization is more than mere player representation. He believes that musicians have a "real voice" to give input to the

organization on many fronts and can call for things that need to be changed.

Sonja Thoms is charged with nurturing the relationship between the administration and the musicians of the Nashville Symphony. Hired as the Senior Director of Operations and Orchestra Manager, Thoms ensures that the musicians are included in organizational

Sonja Thoms believes that trust is accumulated from countless positive interactions with musicians on a daily basis.

matters of all types. She says of her work with the players: "I want to make sure every day is a great day for them." Admittedly, her focus is ultimately on calming the waters so that negotiations around the Collective Bargaining Agreement are smooth sailing between the administration and player representatives. Thoms has

no power to affect the major terms of a contract, such as hiring, firing, salaries, and time off. Yet, she plays an important mediating role in the years between contracts, storing up trust among the players with gestures that show the musicians the high regard the organization has for them.

As Thoms explains, trust is accumulated from countless positive interactions on a daily basis. Thoughtful and inclusive actions in partnership with the orchestra become like micro-deposits into a joint trust account that may be needed when tough administrative decisions need to be made and where trust may normally be in short supply. Thoms interfaces with musicians on a surprisingly basic level, setting the tone between administration and players. She ensures that all scheduling on the horizon is communicated early and accurately and that music is available well in advance for preparation. With all the day-to-day interactions, mistakes are bound to be made. But Thoms stays upbeat and is not quick to blame: "When we mess up, we take ownership and try to find the solution." She also insists that dialogue be open

between management and musicians. She welcomes ideas on all topics from dress code modifications to logistical suggestions. She believes that to truly honor the partnership her team has with the orchestra, she must err on the side of transparency with any bits of information that could be shared. Thoms confesses that no amount of positive interaction can replace the administration honoring the terms of the Collective Bargaining Agreement. Since her arrival, Thoms has noticed that contract negotiations in Nashville are generally approached calmly and professionally, even though in most orchestras, the weeks leading up to a negotiation can be the rawest time between the parties. With the Nashville Symphony, Thoms has observed occasional heatedness, but she notes these sentiments between the management and players are mitigated by an expectation that points of difference can be discussed without mistrust of the other side. Once the contract is set, it is the job of both sides to live up to its binding terms. Having been through a recession and a flood, the symphony, Thoms has witnessed, operates with a "new level of grit. The instinct when a crisis arises is to roll up our sleeves and talk about it. We're not perfect, but this is atypical." Jablonski agreed: "Even when musicians disagree [with the administration], it at least feels like we're part of the conversation."

Restructuring and Salary Concessions

The trust between musicians and the administration of the Nashville Symphony would be put to the test in the recovery from the flood. When the organization sold assets in the portfolio to obtain \$25 million in cash for operating expenses, the senior administration knew that restructuring of the debt with banks was on the horizon. Relationships with

The trust between musicians and the administration of the Nashville Symphony would be put to the test in the recovery from the flood.

the banks were crumbling, and some would have to take write-offs on existing loans. With pledged funding from FEMA nowhere in sight, Alan Valentine needed to act quickly to shore up the balance sheet.

Some organizational moves were afoot in 2011 for the Nashville Symphony. As the Symphony prepared to negotiate solutions to the problem of the bond debt, a few people who were conflicted by virtue of their relationships to the lenders moved off the board, and some new people from law firms and accounting firms were put in place to help rescue the situation. A fundraising campaign called “Sustaining Greatness,” which was built on an earlier campaign for the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, was launched to raise funds to help plug the gaps in the current budget, though long term fiscal health was anything but assured. The symphony also hired a restructuring consultant from the outside, who spent a lot of time looking for places to take on more debt. The symphony was further advised to cut \$6 million out of current operating budget for 2012-13. Valentine began at the top of the organization, cutting his salary and compensation by 21%. He asked Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero, who had not quite been in his post for three full seasons, to take the same pay cut. Sacrifice would again have to come from everyone throughout the organization, though less drastically. From senior administration staff, Valentine asked for a 17% rollback in compensation to weather the financial storm. Other staff who made \$55,000 per year or more were subject to an 11% reduction in pay. Anyone below that threshold, a 6% cut. All who were approached agreed reluctantly to the proposed decreases.

Then came members of the orchestra. Consultants recommended a 37% cut from players’ salaries. The advisors counseled Valentine to stay out of the negotiation. They were concerned that the President and CEO would try to protect the orchestra, in a time when concessions were imperative for the health of the organization. Valentine worried that the salary

cuts proposed by the consultants were excessive and unreasonable – both from a practical point of view because of the hardship they would create for the players, and in view of the smaller cuts already taken by the management and staff. He recognized that the outside advisors did not understand how valuable retaining talent was to the orchestra, nor how challenging the task of building an orchestra was, nor how fragile or easily destroyed all of the past progress could be. He explained to one of the consultants: “You view the dollars we pay to the musicians as money that buys units of time, as though anyone off the street could do their jobs. I view the dollars we pay to the musicians as buying a level of talent. Just because the tuba player doesn’t play as often or as many notes as the members of other sections, you can’t do without a great tuba player when you need them. A brain surgeon doesn’t do brain surgery every day either, but when you need brain surgery, you want the very best, most talented brain surgeon in town doing that surgery.” Valentine knew that he stood a better chance of extracting salary concessions than the advisors would in this tense organizational moment. His hope was that the trust he and his administration had built in daily interactions and with the totality of his decisions in his 14-year tenure would have meaning for the members he was about to face. Yet, the orchestra had changed too. Not all of its members were around when he famously took the podium in 2009 to ask for a wage freeze. Only a fraction would remember the promises made before the trip to Carnegie Hall in 2000.

Valentine scheduled a meeting with the orchestra’s union negotiator.



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