INTRODUCTION

AN OVERVIEW OF ORCHESTRAS *and* ORCHESTRA GOVERNANCE

IN SIMPLEST TERMS, orchestra governing boards developed in the United States as a means to finance the difference between the cost of presenting concerts and the revenues derived from ticket sales for those concerts. In some cases, the musicians themselves started the orchestra, gave concerts, and ultimately attracted the attention of patrons who then organized to assume financial responsibility for the orchestra. In other cases, a single patron or group of patrons decided their community should have an orchestra and established one, taking financial responsibility from the outset.

The Early Days

Among the orchestras in active membership today with the American Symphony Orchestra League, the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston appears to be the first to have had a formal governance structure with by-laws dating back to 1816. The organization was actually begun as a choral society that contracted the services of orchestra musicians. A board of governors was elected from the (male only) membership, and they engaged conductors, selected repertoire, and paid an annual assessment to underwrite the difference between earnings and expenses. If, after assessments, a deficit remained, the governors simply dug deeper into their pockets and paid the difference.

The Philharmonic Society of New York (today's New York Philharmonic), founded in 1842, is the oldest continuously operating orchestra in the United States. It was formed by musicians and functioned as a cooperative. Musicians paid an initiation fee and an annual assessment. Instead of receiving salaries, they divided up the revenues after production costs were paid.

The system of sharing net proceeds prevailed with the turn of the century when annual deficits became more prevalent than surpluses. The Society was reorganized in 1909 when a group of guarantors agreed to assume responsibility for funding the deficits and managing the orchestra. The musicians then became salaried employees.

That a full-time professional orchestra required ongoing subsidy was clear from the outset to Major Henry Lee Higginson. He established the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1881 and sustained it personally for 37 years before this responsibility was vested in a board of trustees. Philip Hart, in his excellent account of the development of American orchestras, *Orpheus in the New World*, records the basic philosophy of Major Higginson as expressed by him to the orchestra and its audience in 1914:

"In my eyes the requisites about the orchestra were these: to leave the choice and care of the musicians, the choice and care of the music, the rehearsals and direction of the orchestra, to the conductor, giving him every power possible; to leave to an able manager the business affairs of the enterprise; and, on my own part, to pay the bills, to be satisfied with nothing short of perfection, and always to remember that we are seeking high art and not money; art comes first, then the good of the public, and money must be an after consideration." [1]

In Chicago, it was the artistic vision of conductor Theodore Thomas, combined with the business acumen of his brother-in-law, industrialist Charles Norman Fay, that created the Orchestral Association, incorporated to establish and support the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. From its beginning in 1891, the Chicago Orchestral Association was an independent organization, with authority and responsibility vested in a group of citizens. The Association was the employer of the conductor, the musicians, and the management.

According to Hart, Fay's plan was to secure annual financial commitments for a period of three years from community leaders to underwrite the initial losses incurred in starting the Chicago Symphony. The Association engaged 85 musicians for a season of no less than 20 weeks, scheduling two concerts per week.[2]

Although the Association originally viewed its investments as start-up funds, it quickly became clear that box office receipts would never be sufficient to cover costs. Maintenance of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra would depend on the Association's willingness to fund the "deficit" on a continuing annual basis.

Money vs. Art

The founding fathers of American orchestras were fully aware of the tensions that might exist between financial and artistic control. In Chicago, Theodore Thomas was vested by contract with "the power and responsibility for attainment of the highest standards of artistic excellence in all performances." [3]

Boston's Major Higginson, in describing the need for a board of trustees to assume responsibility for financing the Boston Symphony, wrote: "The hardest of all is that they must keep their hands and tongues off the conduct of the art side, or they will make trouble." [4]

Decades later, musicologist and social commentator Jacques Barzun was even more explicit when he wrote in *Music in American Life:*

"In short, what art, and particularly music, needs in our age is a variety of patrons, individual and corporate. All of them must be willing to be misunderstood; and all of them must be manhandled when they forget that although money talks, it must shut up like everybody else while the music goes on." [5]

The Growth Period

The numbers of musicians who organized to perform symphonic music and the patrons who were willing to provide financial support for symphony orchestras in America continued to increase.

The first half of the 20th century witnessed tremendous expansion in numbers of symphony orchestras in the United States. While some were permanent, fully professional enterprises from the start, far more orchestras were composed of avocational musicians or a mix of professionals and non-professionals. Many of these community orchestras came into being through the efforts of a local conductor or musicians; others were formed because a group of music lovers decided that the community needed an orchestra to establish its cultural identity. Emigration of European musicians enriched the ranks of American orchestras as well.

Nor did the Great Depression have an adverse effect on American orchestras. According to Grant and Hettinger in *America's Symphony Orchestras,* the opposite was true. No major orchestra discontinued operations during the Depression and some had larger audiences and higher ticket renewal in 1932-33 than they did in 1928-29. In the post-Depression period, the Federal Music Project of the Works Progress Administration itself organized some 36 American orchestras.[6]

American Symphony Orchestra League

The proliferation of community-based, "civic" orchestras prompted Leta Snow, founder and manager of the Kalamazoo (Michigan) Symphony to ask whether there would not be some benefit to regular communication among these orchestras. Her answer, in the affirmative, led to the establishment of the American Symphony Orchestra League in 1942.

The League lists 40 orchestras as charter members. By the mid-1940s the membership had grown to several hundred orchestras. Today, nearly 900 symphony and chamber orchestras, in 50 states, 3 territories, and the District of Columbia, are members of the American Symphony Orchestra League.

Initially, the League developed as an association of community orchestras. There already existed an informal organization of managers of the major professional orchestras. The two groups joined forces in the late 1940s to repeal a federal tax on ticket sales when the major orchestras realized the potential grass-roots political power of hundreds of small orchestras in virtually every congressional district in the country.

By the early 1950s the ties became official and the American Symphony Orchestra League assumed an expanded mission to serve and represent all American orchestras, large and small, amateur, semi-professional, and fully professional.

The League's Services

The American Symphony Orchestra League works to ensure the artistic, financial, and organizational strength of American orchestras, and fulfills its mission, in part, by strengthening the human resources available to orchestras.

Recognizing that professionals and volunteers alike need to acquire industry-specific skills, knowledge, and experience, the League provides comprehensive education and training programs. Offerings for managers and administrative staff range from single-day seminars to a year-long Orchestra Management Fellowship

Program. The League's Orchestra Management Seminar has been the cornerstone of orchestra management training for 40 years. Conductor training, from early identification and nurturing through more advanced mentoring and showcasing of talent, is an essential part of the League's work.

Through its Division of Volunteerism, the League specializes in leadership development for orchestra board members and volunteer association members. Tools like this *Guide to Orchestra Governance* and the Board Self-Evaluation Program are designed to enhance the effectiveness of board members in their work for orchestras.

The League provides a communications network for orchestras through meetings, conferences, and publications. A simple eight-page bulletin first published in 1942 has evolved into *SYMPHONY*, a bimonthly magazine distributed as a membership benefit to nearly 20,000 professionals, board members, and volunteers.

To help inform planning and decision-making in individual orchestras, the League assumes responsibility for the collection and dissemination of information on all aspects of orchestra finance and operations, saving orchestras time and money. Consulting services are available to address specific problems, to assist orchestras that find themselves in crisis, and, with the Orchestra Assessment Program, to encourage the avoidance of crisis.

Government relations and advocacy at the federal level are areas where collective action coordinated from a central office has proven to be more effective than assorted individual efforts. As demonstrated in the 1940s campaign to repeal the federal ticket tax, the breadth and scope of the orchestra field represent a powerful grass-roots network.

In addition to dealing with the practical, day-to-day operating concerns of American orchestras, the League identifies, researches, and provides a forum for discussion about issues that will affect the future development and health of symphony orchestras.

Orchestras pay annual membership dues to the League. Many services are available as a benefit of membership; some require payment of special fees. Dues and earned revenue account for approximately two-thirds of the League's income. The balance comes from corporate, foundation, and government grants together with contributions from individual orchestra board members, management and artistic staff, volunteers, and professionals in the music industry.

While communication about the League's programs and services is generally directed to the chief elected officer and chief staff officer of an orchestra, individual board members are encouraged to participate in League programs and are welcome to contact the League directly for information and assistance.

Facing the Future

The history of orchestral life in America reaches back to the mid-19th century. From our earliest days, certain concerns were evident: the need for subsidy to fund the differences between box office receipts and operating costs; the tensions between artistic development and financial responsibility; the definition of roles for trustees, conductors, managers, and musicians.

Today's orchestras face additional challenges. The proliferation of arts activity across the country, coupled with dwindling leisure time, has increased competition for audiences. The deplorable state of music education in American schools has caused orchestras to take an even greater role in educating not only children but adult audiences as well. Shifting demographics make efforts toward inclusiveness essential to attracting future talent, leadership, audiences, and support. Among the largest orchestras, there is increased competition for talent, media and tour opportunities, and positioning in the international marketplace. At the federal level, direct government support remains wholly inadequate to the needs of most orchestras. Indirect support is a frequent target in discussions of tax reform and deficit reduction. Even the most generous of state and local governments can be dangerously unpredictable in funding for the arts. Education, health, and social concerns frequently outrank the arts as corporations and foundations list their priorities. Costs, including the cost of generating income, continue to rise.

None of these issues is unique to a specific orchestra in its own particular environment. Rarely does an orchestra governing board confront a problem that another board has not already experienced in some manifestation. The difference among orchestras lies far less

in their problems than in the creative ways they have chosen to approach, address, and solve their problems. Nor do the size and scope of an orchestra necessarily determine the value of lessons to be learned. While developing orchestras may look to more established ones as models in certain areas, many large institutions would be well-served to find out how smaller orchestras have, for example, fulfilled their responsibilities to community service and made themselves indispensable to the populations that support them. "What do other orchestras do?" is a question to be asked frequently not only in management, but in orchestra governance as well.

Finding new ways to increase both earned and contributed income may well always be the most formidable challenge facing orchestra governing boards. Among successful orchestras, the primary focus of the board is always on income because it provides the means to improve artistic quality and community service. Less successful orchestras find their boards prefer to concentrate on ways to reduce expenses. The most effective boards never lose sight of the importance of quality and service, the only reasons why the orchestra can seek and expect to receive community support.

Catherine French
President and Chief Executive Officer
American Symphony Orchestra League