

Not as we thought: transitions into the orchestral workplace

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Abstract

Winning an orchestral position is cause for celebration. The result of long-term, intensive study and, often, countless auditions, new players are understandably enthusiastic about their future. But are the realities of orchestral life what they had expected? Building on previous research with established orchestral players, this paper discusses a case study within a larger ethnographic study of the orchestral workplace. The case study discussed here was intended to develop a better understanding of the issues facing new players, and involved casual and permanent orchestral players in their first year of orchestral work. Results indicated a level of disappointment with orchestral life. Although many aspects of this disappointment had been voiced by established players in earlier studies, the rapidity with which negativity was voiced by new players was surprising, and suggests that more could be done to support them.

Context

My earlier research has focused on the professional practice of musicians, and on the difficulties of achieving and sustaining a career in performance. The ethnographic study from which this paper derives is quite different in that it focuses instead on musicians who have 'made it' into performance roles. In particular, the study looks at the culture of the orchestral workplace. It examines the relationship between players, management and the board; artistic decision-making and creative input; communication; self-identity; orchestral etiquette, and attrition. Fresh from the exhilaration of audition success through to the end of their first year, the case study involved casual and permanent players new to the orchestral workplace.

The Rise of the Concert Orchestra

An understanding of the concert orchestra is crucial to an investigation of the orchestral workplace. Concert orchestras originated in the nineteenth century, when the publication of music sparked demands for the performance of popular repertoire and contributed to a change in the role of Kapellmeister from composer and musical director to, simply, musical director. At the same time, opera houses epitomised the trend from private to public ownership. These changes had a significant impact on the status and role of the instrumental musician, and on the interface between musicians, audiences and directors. Music ceased to be an intimate social necessity and became “a remote, esoteric delight thundered out by vast orchestras or dispensed by virtuoso players and singers. It became increasingly the pleasure of a cultured *elite*” (Raynor, 1972, p. 355).

In the post-war period of the mid-nineteenth century, numerous amateur and semi-professional orchestras, choirs and associations were formed, and many musicians travelled extensively to give concert tours. Despite the potential for difficulty with the technical demands of new works, amateur concert orchestras provided a vital source of exposure for composers and soloists. Operatic orchestras employed professional musicians and tended towards a much higher standard than their amateur counterparts. The orchestras had very busy schedules: for instance, the Leipzig orchestra played each year for 110 opera performances and a similar number of plays. Consequently, public concerts originated (and remained particularly popular) in cities that did not contain opera houses.

Until 1840, theatres in London were permitted to produce only works that included music; therefore music in theatres provided regular work for musicians. Many of the musicians employed in pit orchestras, choral festival orchestras and at the theatre also performed works for the concert orchestra: conductor Franz Lachner scheduled Beethoven symphonies during intervals at the Vienna court opera theatre from 1830 until 1834; and Otto Nicolai—conductor of the Kärntnertortheater from 1841 to 1847—formed an orchestra with all of the

instrumentalists from the Vienna state opera for the performance of symphonic works.

Initially headed The Philharmonic Academy, the orchestra is known today as the Vienna Philharmonic.

Professional musicians from the remaining court orchestras began to organise concerts in addition to their regular duties. In fact, many of today's semi-professional and professional concert orchestras were founded in the period following the mid-1800s: for example, the Berlin, Vienna and New York Philharmonic orchestras; the Halle orchestra; and the Birmingham and Chicago Symphony orchestras, most of which were either linked to an opera company or were limited to an annual season of approximately fifteen concerts. As a result, nineteenth century concert orchestras such as that of the London Philharmonic Society and the semi-professional Gewandhaus orchestra—which was amalgamated with the Leipzig opera orchestra—increasingly performed larger-scale works with a conductor, and at a much higher standard than previously heard.

Orchestral Musicians

In a letter dated 1911, Busoni described orchestral players as akin to “a suppressed crowd of rebels. ... Routine gives their playing the varnish of perfection and assurance. For the rest, they loathe their work, their job and, most of all, their music” (in Bonavia, 1956, p. 242). A search of research databases and the media reveals numerous articles which describe the difficulties of orchestral life, so why do players aspire to become orchestral musicians? The career of the instrumental musician from the 18th century to the present is marked by a diminution in ecclesiastical and court control, the popularity of dazzling virtuoso instrumentalists, and the emergence of the concert orchestra. The dismissal (and subsequent availability for work) of many court musicians enabled numerous noblemen to maintain court orchestras; it became a hallmark of social status to maintain one's own orchestra inclusive of the prestigious wind instruments.

Crucially, concert orchestras moved musicians from the pit to the stage, where there was a new element of glamour for musicians who performed increasingly demanding repertoire. Initially part-time and seasonal, salaried full-time orchestras arose in the first half of the twentieth century. Although musicians are poorly paid in comparison with other professionals, orchestral work provides a full-time income. An orchestral position is one of very few opportunities for a musician to be fully employed as a performer, and orchestral positions are few and far between.

The achievement of a full-time performance career is the realisation of one's identity as a performer. When people comment that a talented young player will 'go far' if they continue to work hard, they are not referring to a teaching career or an arts administration role. The reality is that people study music to become performers. This is communicated to beginners, members of youth orchestras, and tertiary students alike. Non-performance roles are, sadly, seen as second-rate.

Process

The case study, which involved two orchestras, included casual and permanent players in their first year of orchestral employment. New players were initially contacted by orchestral management following a successful audition, and interviews were held prior to the commencement of work and every three months thereafter. In addition, existing players in their first year of employment were invited to participate in focus group interviews. The study drew extensively on data from previous research with established orchestral players (Bennett 2005). Whyte's hierarchy of interviewer responses (in Ticehurst & Veal, 2000) was used with a modified grounded theory approach, and the interview instrument was refined as themes emerged at each stage. Analysis, which was ongoing, utilised a simple database and colour coding. Questions centred on three key themes: 1) inter-orchestra organisational issues (such as seating and rostering); 2) management issues (such as communication, corporate structure and conditions); and 3) self (such as career, stress and well-being).

Results and Discussion

Initial case study results suggest that first-year musicians are dissatisfied with aspects of orchestral work and conditions. The key issues of flexibility and mobility, mentoring, communication, and ownership are discussed in the following section.

Flexibility and mobility

Faulkner's 1973 survey of orchestral musicians found that most become "anchored in their organization, experience no or little mobility, and, unless they feel entrapped, adjust and become committed to their work in a stable work setting" (in Menger, 1999, p. 5). There are many more musicians than there are performance positions, and the emphasis on performance careers impedes the ability of performers to move to non-performance roles where additional skills are required. Salmen (1983/1971) described much the same lack of mobility for eighteenth-century orchestral musicians, partly because of geographical considerations. Likewise, the vast distances between cities are a challenge for Australian musicians, for whom changing orchestras most often necessitates moving state. None of the study participants expected to remain with their orchestras indefinitely, and anticipated that they would leave behind family and/or friends to take up their next post.

Several participants raised issues relating to professional development, which would logically be valued as a means of retaining employees and raising standards; according to Nadel (1998), "controlled growth and investment in staff" are key factors in achieving sustainable practice (p. 3). Players viewed their continued development as integral to their orchestral work, rather than as a lack of commitment to their orchestra; however requests to take occasional unpaid leave for professional development were not met favourably. This was such a concern for one player that, despite having won a position, he had yet to sign his contract.

The lack of opportunity to pursue further study and/or solo and chamber music was also highlighted by established orchestral musicians. Linking the lack of opportunity to orchestral

attrition, the musicians voiced concerns about diminishing technical standards due to the requirement to constantly learn new notes: “In an orchestra, for example, playing every day, it does disturb your development.”

Communication

The issue of communication was raised by every participant. Communication from the management team and the company was viewed as inadequate. New players did not receive any kind of induction and were largely unaware of the vision or structure of the orchestra, with the result that they did not consider themselves part of the organisation. This was particularly true of casual players, who expressed feelings of isolation: “I just come in and play. I have no idea what’s going on other than notes on a page ... I don’t think I have any value other than filling a seat.” Communication problems were also raised in relation to late roster changes, players’ rights, venue locations and parking. Information was primarily sourced from other players: “They [management] know that I have friends in the orchestra, so I guess they think I’ll get it [the information] from them.” Within the section, new players struggled with issues such as seating rotations and practice parts.

Overwhelmingly, new players expressed a need for formal mentoring, which occurred in some sections on an informal basis: “I sat next to [name] for the first six months, and she mentored me. She would say: ‘Practice this page’, or ‘Try this fingering’. I wouldn’t have made it without her.” It was also agreed that new players shouldn’t be seated together: “If you’re both new players, you’re both lost.”

Ownership

A British survey of 498 orchestral players concluded that orchestral work “can be spiritually exhausting ... all but the most devoted tend to become increasingly disenchanted with their lot. ... Under [circumstances] such as these the orchestral musician’s life becomes a series of dull chores” (Metier, 2001, p. 79). Participants were asked to choose the one thing they would

change if they were given a magic wand. Surprisingly, no mention was made of salary or promotion, and few players talked of practical considerations. The comment which sparked the most interest and discussion was: “Attitude. I’d change their [players’] attitude. So negative all the time ... putting away their instruments before the rehearsal even ends, and looking at their watches and reading magazines ... the trouble is, eventually you become the same.”

The source of orchestral players’ discontentment will be further explored as the study progresses; however artistic and organisational input can already be articulated as contributing factors. Musicians tend to be independent, self-motivated thinkers with skills far beyond their performance expertise. The routine existence of life within an orchestra together with a lack of career mobility, lack of personal practice time and irregular hours, contributes to dissatisfaction with the role (Crouch & Lovric, 1990; Loebel, 1982). Dissatisfaction was described by an orchestral musician who contributed to Smith and Robinson’s (1990) study: “[t]here are in most symphony orchestras long periods of frustration. I don’t think that any orchestra, no matter how great the conductor, can provide anyone with a continuously stimulating and exciting experience” (p. 118). The sentiment was further highlighted by Yffer (1995) in his bibliographic account of life as an orchestral musician: “[o]ut of perhaps 150 concerts a year, the number that were truly enjoyed by the players on account of an inspiring conductor can be counted on the fingers of one hand” (ch. 5, p. 2).

An orchestra is a singular entity which aims to create a cohesive sound. This in itself negates the potential for individual ‘voices’. It isn’t enough to state that orchestral players are dissatisfied; the words spoken by players are simply the empirical manifestations of their feelings. The key is to find out where the dissatisfaction begins. Of course, the dissatisfaction expressed by new players could be interpreted as the successful socialisation of new players into the workplace: adopting the concerns and attitudes of the group. Negative stereotyping of non-players such as orchestral managers is particularly relevant to ‘survival politics’ in the

current climate of industrial reform. Player-management or player-conductor friction could well be one of the few ways for players to 'have their say', and it is possible that orchestral friction will decrease only when musicians become more involved in the non-performance aspects of their orchestras.

In fact, the involvement of musicians in artistic and strategic planning, educational and community programs has the potential to benefit both the organisation and the musicians. Mirroring the move by several London orchestras who function as self-managed organisations with musicians partially responsible for artistic and strategic management, the musicians of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra accepted pay cuts in May 2003 in return for a new organisational structure that placed central artistic decisions in the hands of a new artistic vision committee rather than with an artistic director. The committee draws upon the expertise of musicians to facilitate concert programming and orchestral management. The orchestra's managing director, Bruce Coppock, proposed that "[o]ne of the key frustrations for musicians, typically, is they are not engaged, other than playing, in the real artistic planning and development of an orchestra" (in Perken, 2003, p. 1). The involvement of musicians in the operational side of orchestras may assist with the facilitation of professional development opportunities in line with non-performance roles: adding to the stimulation of the role and to the skills and knowledge of musicians.

Concluding comments

Lack of artistic input and individual creativity together with unsociable hours and low salaries have been noted in previous studies; however these are not the only issues facing new players. The initial results from this study confirm that new players are particularly affected by the negativity in the orchestral workplace, inadequate communication, lack of professional development opportunities, and feelings of isolation. Contributing to players' dissatisfaction is the realisation that, behind all the glamour, an orchestra is also a workplace.

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