

Can the origin of sponsorship and/or funding impact on artistic freedom?

by Laura Brownell (Canada)

Good afternoon. It is wonderful to be here with all of you today. In North America we have a custom of telling a joke at the beginning of a speech. I will be very interested to discover whether the little "question and answer" joke that I have for you today exists in other languages and cultures. It contains an image that is central to my topic for today.

The Question: Where does an 800 pound gorilla sleep?

The Answer: Anywhere it wants.

In North America, the image of the "800 pound gorilla" has come to symbolize something that is dominating and perhaps uncontrollable because of its great size and power. Many of the orchestras represented at this conference have an 800 pound gorilla to deal with in the form of a major sponsor or funder. (Before I go any further, I know that we have some funders in the room so first, I would like to state the obvious, which is "We are grateful for your support of this great art form. Thank you.")

But the question for the day is, can sponsors or funders have an impact on artistic decision-making in orchestras? The answer of course is 'yes.' These are complex relationships among parties with different and sometimes competing agendas. I will share with you some examples from the North American experience and will then explore some ways of dealing with these often challenging situations.

First of all, it is important to understand the sources and structures of funding for North American orchestras. Government funding plays a relatively minor role in U.S. orchestras. The private sector in each city takes responsibility for bridging the gap between performance revenue and the costs of operating the orchestra. Corporate sponsorship plays a role but orchestras rely heavily on individual philanthropy. Symphonic organizations have annual campaigns to raise operating funds as well as intermittent capital campaigns to raise funds for buildings and endowments. Orchestras take an annual "draw" on the endowment to help fund operations but try not to dip into the principal amount which is ideally at least triple the size of the annual operating budget. Canadian orchestras have significantly higher levels of government funding and smaller endowments but must still engage in private sector fundraising.

Reliance on individual philanthropy can create some interesting dynamics. Several U.S. orchestras have a single lead donor who literally gives millions to the organization on an ongoing basis. It is understandable that such an individual would want to be involved in artistic decision-making. Often a donor will express a preference for a particular composer or guest artist – a request that might be relatively easy to grant without altering the artistic vision of the organization. Occasionally, however, the wishes of the donor can create serious internal strife. The most colorful such case in recent memory was a situation in which a very generous lead donor had a practice of hand-picking the orchestra's music directors, with a view to finding inspiration not only at concerts but also in the close personal relationships that inevitably developed between her and the Maestro. When the time came recently to search for a new music director, the musician representatives on the search committee were utterly opposed to this donor's selection. As a result of the disagreement, musicians were fired, grievances were filed, and a great deal of uproar ensued. You will be pleased to hear that they got it sorted out but things were pretty wild for awhile.

As serious as that situation might sound, a far more serious problem occurs when a major funder decides that the union has become too powerful, costs are out of control, and the orchestra must be downsized. This has taken place all too often in recent years. It can happen with both government funders and private donors. My understanding is that it is a global phenomenon. The euphemism of choice in North America is "restructuring." Restructuring can take the form of reductions in salaries, shortened concert seasons, and smaller orchestras. Many good jobs with competitive annual salaries, fringe benefits, and job security are restructured into bad jobs with musicians hired on a per service basis from a pool of local freelancers. The artistic impact of "restructuring" can be devastating because the downsized orchestra can no longer attract the best musicians, conductors and guest artists and often plays with too few musicians on the stage. These things are at the heart of what defines an orchestra as an artistic entity.



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As musicians, what can be done to ensure that donors and funders support your orchestras rather than tearing them down?

Unions and managements must both play a role in finding solutions. At the level of the individual orchestra, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is responsible for managing relations with major donors in a positive way. A good CEO will inspire and motivate donors and funders by inviting them to invest in the artistic vision of the organization, not by focusing on the financial 'bottom line.' You, as musicians, have a role to play as well. If you allow managers to monopolize these key funder relationships, you do so at your peril. You must reach out to those who support your orchestras. Thank them for their support. Talk to them at receptions. Play at their daughters' weddings. The individuals and agencies that support this art form should be motivated to interact with you, the artists, not just the managers. No one ever bought a ticket to watch someone manage an orchestra.

At the national level the managers along with the unions must advocate for the symphonic field to government and private sector funding agencies. This is where the two sides – management and labor – share an enormous amount of common ground. We must work together to make the case for the preservation of symphonic orchestras as an indispensable part of the cultural and economic infrastructure of our cities.

I would like to conclude with a powerful story of conflict and evolutionary change in the relationships among orchestras, funders, and our union, the American Federation of Musicians.

In 2002 Canadian symphonic musicians were at a critical juncture. They had experienced big strikes and big contract gains in the late nineties, followed by backlash in the form of lockouts, bankruptcies, and major concessions in the new millennium. Canadian orchestras are dependent on government agencies for about 25-30% of their funding and at that time, the funding community was frustrated by the ongoing labor unrest. The funders had led much of the backlash against the union and were in no mood to provide desperately needed additional funding without reasonable certainty that new money would translate into healthier organizations. The various stakeholders in the symphonic community recognized that they had to find more effective ways to work with those who controlled the purse strings.

The Soundings project was born out of this need. It was a joint union-management initiative with a focus on artistic vision, community connection, and revenue-side solutions. By working together, the union and the orchestra managers were able to say to the funders, "We will get our house in order. But we can no longer balance our budgets on the backs of musicians. Money will not solve all of the problems, but the problems cannot be solved without money."

Today, in 2008, Canadian musicians are enjoying the fruits of those efforts. Orchestras are thriving because management practices have improved, the union and management are working together, and the funding agencies are providing increased levels of support.

But the work is not done. The entire performing arts sector continues to lobby for adequate, stable government funding for large organizations. The sector has asked funding agencies such as the Canada Council to ensure that their granting policies will have a positive impact. Back in the 1970's and early '80's, the Council would routinely provide debt reduction grants to orchestras in order to erase budget deficits. In time, the Council decided – not without justification - that these "bailout" grants were rewarding poor management practices. Unfortunately, the Council turned instead to a policy that proved to be even more harmful. They began to punish orchestras that were experiencing financial difficulties by reducing their grants. This inevitably led to the period of severe labor unrest that I have just described.

There is a third way. Just as people must have food and shelter before they can begin to work towards self-actualization, arts organizations must have adequate core funding in order to focus on artistic vision and community connection. If an orchestra gets into financial difficulties, donors and funders should respond with concrete and meaningful assistance, not by withholding gifts or reducing grants. We all – managers, funders, musicians, unions – have a responsibility to our communities to manage our relationships in a positive way, for the good of the field.

Thank you for letting me share these thoughts and experiences from the United States and Canada.