

II. HEALTH AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

6. Support to orchestra musicians

Bo Olsson (Sweden)

President, Federation of Swedish Musicians (FSM)

A high level of psychological stress, and sometimes even anxiety, is a part of everyday life for orchestra musicians. That is a fact. And this is not enough, the individual player also have to be physically fit, something that requires a continuous training which may well be compared with that of a top athlete. Compare the support given to, for instance, a professional football player, to that given to a professional orchestra musician: I think it is safe to say that the musicians support system comes out second!

So there is no doubt that a lot can be done to improve support for orchestra musicians.

Is there a reason why orchestras often fails to give a reasonable support to their employees, the musicians? Yes, i think so. Historically, orchestras has been created by assembling a group of highly gifted and skilled individuals. When that was done, a structure was added to handle basic administrative routines, nothing more. The task of developing and supporting both the group and the individuals was, roughly speaking, left to the orchestra itself.

There are of course many examples that this system of self-governing has been successful: many of the worlds top orchestras has a structure based in this tradition, and has also managed to develop means and systems to support the members.

But in many orchestras, this is not the case. I think one core issue is the way the profession itself is perceived. How many other groups of highly educated and trained professionals would accept a more or less non-existent support system as employees?

As a friend with a deep insight in the orchestra world puts it: "the human resource departments in our area are best described as anorectic."

I think it is important to stress that this has nothing to do with bad will from orchestra managements in general, but has its prevailing background in the false notion that the orchestra as a body is self-going and self-tuning in every aspect.

So, what could and should be done? There are some obvious points:

- The need of individual support and training schemes provided by the employer to cope with both psychological and physical demands. As i mentioned before, there are many good practices in the world of sports to use as models.

- A planning procedure that results in working schedules compatible with a social life for the individual musician.

- A general job security which gives the individual a reasonable safety in life, both economical and social. A recent study published in the Scandinavian Journal of Public Health shows a strong correlation between job insecurity and health problems.

These are some of the important issues that need to be discussed, but I would nevertheless like to but some light on a subject that, maybe, is not that obvious: the need to include the musicians in the orchestras strategic process and development. To include all colleagues in a common strategy is basic for all successful organisations.

To do so is more important today than ever before. We all know that there is an ongoing discussion around the future for orchestras: how do we find ways to open up to society, to reach new audiences and prove that the art of orchestra music has a role in the 21th century?

It is not difficult to find a lot of good examples worldwide, and given the knowledge we all have, I see no need to list all those good practices.

But, is all this clear, safe and sound for the viola player in the sixth stand? (by the way, I'm a viola player myself) No, I don't think so! In my experience, many projects aimed to give orchestras a new direction and openness fails, because the orchestras musicians don't understand what is going on. We are of course not stupid, but excluded from the strategic perspective: information is given what to play, when to do it, but not why!

So, how do the individual player react when she, or he, don't know why? Of course with confusion, but worse, often with a feeling of exclusion: Something is going on here, but no one is talking to me. This is a problem affecting not only the individual but also the orchestra. Can this be avoided? Yes, but only if the strategic process is a question for the orchestra as a whole. And it is not enough that the goals are presented in a paper or through a meeting with the orchestra. The process includes many steps: knowledge of the orchestras goals, understanding them, accepting them, acting upon them and finally contributing to them.

Why did i chose to focus on including musicians in overall processes in this presentation? I did it because I'm am convinced that it is a important part of supporting us as orchestra musicians. It is also necessary for the future of orchestras and, at the end of the day, for us as individual musicians : we need to be included, not excluded, not only for selfish reasons but also for the future of orchestras.

