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How Are They Doing? Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra Revisited

Arts in Community Education



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How Are They Doing?

Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra Revisited

In the October 1996 issue of *Harmony*, Michael J. Schmitz, a past president of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra (MSO) board, shared with readers an essay on musician participation in symphony orchestra management. In that essay, he detailed the MSO's experience in bringing musicians into the orchestra's decision-making process. The Institute was curious as to how this organization was progressing and recently held a roundtable discussion with MSO musicians, staff, and board members, including Mike Schmitz. An edited transcript of that discussion follows.

Institute: Please introduce yourselves and describe your roles within the Milwaukee Symphony organization.

Andy Buelow: I am the director of public relations and have been with the orchestra for 12 years.

Samantha George: I am the orchestra's associate concertmaster. I joined the MSO in 1999 and became active this year on the Players' Council and several committees.

Bill Helmers: I've been clarinetist and bass clarinetist for the orchestra since 1980. During that time, I've been active on many orchestra committees and currently chair the Players' Council.

Barbara Hunt: I've been on the MSO board since 1995 and currently chair the marketing committee. I have been a volunteer with the symphony since about 1984 and am also a past president of the Symphony League.

Steve Ovitsky: I am president and executive director of the orchestra. I arrived in Milwaukee in May of 1995.

Steve Richman: I've been chairman of the orchestra board for a little less than two months. I've been a subscriber for more than 25 years, a volunteer for about 15 years, and on the board for about 11 years.

Allen Rieselbach: I am a former president of the board—I guess today that role would be called chairman. I've been involved with the orchestra for about 10 years.

Roger Ruggeri: I am the principal bassist and program annotator for the orchestra. I've been here since 1962. I'm a long-time volunteer and have been a musician representative to the board. I've also volunteered on a number of board committees, including long-range planning and development, and endowment.

Mike Schmitz: I've been on the board since the early 1980s and am a past president.

Susan Stein: I'm senior vice president of strategic planning and philanthropy and have been on the staff since November 1996. I have attended MSO concerts since 1987.

Liz Tuma: This is my 26th year as a cellist in the orchestra. I've been active on committees since musicians first became involved in organizational matters.

Robert Wilkins: I am vice president and general manager of the orchestra which I joined exactly five years ago.

"I would describe the Milwaukee Symphony as one that is functioning at a high level, particularly in terms of the cooperation among the various arms of the organization."

Institute: As you all know, the Institute is interested in bringing to the attention of the whole symphony community organizations which we believe are functioning well—ones that take organizational matters seriously and work to steadily improve their organizations. So we would begin by asking you to describe your thoughts about the Milwaukee Symphony as a place to work and to volunteer. Steve, let's start with you.

Richman: I would describe the Milwaukee Symphony as one that is functioning at a high level, particularly in terms of the cooperation among the various arms of the organization. We continue to have a variety of challenges, including a constant financial challenge.

But our greatest progress has been in the way we function as a team. During the time I have been active with the orchestra, there has been dramatic improvement in the way the various parts of the orchestra understand one another's roles and how they work together.

Ruggeri: I would agree that the organization is working on a higher level than it once did. But it is rather like playing an instrument: you don't dwell on what is going well; you continually work to address the challenges.

Helmers: The process of including musicians on board committees was an excellent beginning because I've always felt that the divisions between staff, and musicians, and board members are rather artificial. For instance, Steve Ovitsky is an excellent musician. Steve Richman comes from a very musical family. Many musicians have skills other than playing their instruments. We come together in many different ways. So I think the more we can reach out into the community and among our own constituencies, the brighter the future will be for us.

Hunt: There is certainly much more interaction among all of the entities—musicians, staff, and all volunteers—than there was when I was president of the League in 1995.

Wilkins: One of my greatest pleasures has been watching the development of this organization from one of enormous distrust between management and the orchestra players to one in which we can deal together with very difficult issues. We don't always agree, but we deal with issues in a constructive, mature manner and almost always come to a positive resolution.

Schmitz: Let me give your readers a quick historical overview. Originally, I think the board viewed its role as being the orchestra's fiduciary custodians. Board members took their responsibilities in terms of community obligation, rather than having a genuine passion for the organization. As a result of working to bring together our musicians, staff, and board, we now have an organization that functions in ways that few other nonprofits in this city do. Today we have an organization that is passionate. It feels good in both our minds and in our hearts when this organization succeeds. That is one of the keys.

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Ovitsky: It is almost laughable to think about the MSO as an orchestra that once moved from organizational crisis to organizational crisis. We've come together in so many ways. So the challenge now is to make sure we do not stagnate and be simply competent without continuing to grow. We have talked a good bit about that and think that the further integration of the music director into our organizational planning and development is probably the next step.

Institute: We agree that the organizational role of the music director is beginning to be a central issue in symphony orchestras. Artistic decision making has generally been the responsibility of one person, and people are beginning to wonder if there are alternatives.

Ovitsky: As artistic leaders for their orchestras, many music directors have been true visionaries. But they have often not participated in discussions such as this. That's why we think it is one of the next steps for our organization.

Tuma: While I agree that we, as musicians, have made a lot of very good connections with board members and management on issues that face the orchestra, the question of artistic direction has not been much in our hands. We have an artistic liaison committee, but it doesn't have a power base, it is merely advisory. If we have a discussion and want to go in the direction to include the music director in the long-term artistic vision of the orchestra, musicians really should participate.

George: It is really important to strike a balance. I've played in an orchestra that was self-governed with the musicians making basically all of the decisions. What I experienced was that everything became a compromise. There was not a clear vision. No one knew who was really in charge. One thing that I enjoy about the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra is that the musicians are able to be involved. But at the same time, I feel that we have strong leadership from the music director and management.

Helmers: If one views the Milwaukee musical community as a whole, there are initiatives happening that are not necessarily under the umbrella of the MSO. There is an entrepreneurial spirit out there in the community and both musicians and board members are involved in more than one organization.

Institute: What you all are saying is that setting the artistic direction for an orchestra is a complicated matter.

Hunt: Let me throw something in from a marketing point of view. You have to be able to market your orchestra so that people fill the seats. You also have to satisfy the musicians and the music director. You have to assure that what you are doing is high quality and valuable to the patrons. It is a delicate balance.

Richman: One thing that I've learned is that communication is a very big part of this. It is critical to have a mutual understanding of where everybody is coming from. So the first challenge is including the music director in the same process of communication. I recognize that does not speak to who makes the decisions. I'm a board member who is passionate about music and my instinct is to want very much to be involved in the musical decisions. But I also know that there are a lot of people around here who have much more experience than I do. No matter who makes the decisions, I'd like to see the music director more involved in our organizational development process.

Ovitsky: I'm fascinated. When I raised the issue of the music director being an active participant in the process of organization development, I was not thinking in terms of programming. Yet, everyone immediately picked up on programming decisions and artistic decisions. What is expected of a music director in today's orchestra is very different than planning programs and conducting concerts. But in many cases, music directors are not part of the process of developing the orchestra's mission. They are pleased to know that long-range planning or strategic thinking is taking place, yet they often have their own artistic vision of an orchestra which may not necessarily be what will work in the market. In the same way that the players were brought into the process with the board, and the board was brought into the process with players and management, the next step is getting the music director further involved in the discussion.

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Ruggeri: As I listen to this conversation, it seems to me that an underlying challenge for this entire organization is an adversarial societal perception of symphonic art music. Symphonic music, in my view, is one of the most accessible kinds of things. There is power, speed, brilliance, complexity—all things which our society, on the whole, really likes. Yet too many people are only willing to take it in at pop concerts or in film scores.

Schmitz: What we are really talking about is participative management which does not come naturally to a music director. The key to getting the music director involved in an organizational sense has to come from the executive director, the same way that a number of years ago board members worked to get the musicians involved.

Richman: I have found our current music director to be extremely intelligent and savvy about the issues we are discussing. He is easy to communicate with, and now that he and his family are living here full time, he wants to participate even more.

Ovitsky: Issues change as we successfully take small steps and then larger steps into uncharted territory. So I am looking at the question generally as to what the role of the music director should be in an American orchestra. And because we in Milwaukee are a forward-thinking organization, what better place to explore?

Institute: Let's shift gears a bit and turn our attention to the role of the symphony organization outside the concert hall. What types of activities does the MSO undertake in music education, in outreach?

Ovitsky: We do a number of things to engage the community. Over the course of a year, we do 32 weekday educational concerts with the full orchestra in the hall. Schools buy tickets and bus the kids to the concerts. We do a series of high school concerts, one of which involves a competition for high school choruses throughout Wisconsin. The winners get to perform with the orchestra at a pair of high school programs. And for 10 years, our Arts in Community Education Program—which we call ACE—has had ensembles go into the schools and has had the orchestra perform concerts for specific grade levels. The concept is that we should be teaching arts, not only music, as it relates to the core curriculum of each grade. We began in kindergarten and sequentially moved up grade by grade. We are now in 20-some schools and have developed hundreds of small-group presentations. Each grade level has its own academic theme and each ensemble is designed for a specific grade level. Liz plays in two ensembles, and Roger plays in two ensembles.

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Tuma: I play in a cello quartet for the first grade. We're the storytelling group. We play and have a narration that goes along with the music. The theme of our third-grade group this year is architecture and music. We developed a program that talks about the building blocks of music as they relate to architecture. About one-half of the orchestra is involved in the ACE program.

Ruggeri: Within ACE, I play with both a kindergarten group and a middle-school group. And I think one thing that is very important is the extensive preparation that goes into all of the orchestra's education programs. There are teachers' guides. There are docents from the Symphony League who go out and prepare the classes. Everyone who presents a program goes through a training process with an educational expert.

Ovitsky: Even though I am the executive director and not a member of the orchestra, I am playing horn in an ACE group this year with our associate principal horn and a piano student on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. We're working with fourth graders and the concept is how people in different parts of the world came to Wisconsin. Our pianist is Venezuelan and one of her parents is from Poland. Our horn player is from Prague. Our program ties into what the students are studying in their social studies courses.

Institute: Is it possible to measure the effectiveness of the ACE programs?

Ovitsky: We take the assessment of the program seriously, too. At the end of each year, a music education specialist from the faculty at the University of Illinois comes in to assess what the kids have learned and how they have developed over the course of the year. That direct feedback goes into our curriculum planning for future years.

Institute: It is apparent that the Milwaukee Symphony is well thought of in the community. Let's turn our gaze forward and talk a bit about what you see as challenges to your continued organizational growth.

Stein: Let me give you some background about the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. The MSO was formed in 1959, but until 1985, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra performed in Milwaukee on 10 Monday nights. You can imagine the impact of that fact on both our subscriber base and on our endowment! So effectively, we are a 16-year-old orchestra operating the 20th largest budget in the 35th largest metropolitan area. We are not currently providing ample revenue for our core classics product because we have an inadequate endowment, not enough product at the right time for our patrons, and because some of the people and institutions which supported the Chicago Symphony never made a switch to making the Milwaukee Symphony their orchestra.

George: We also need to diversify our audience. We're all looking to draw an audience of 25- to 45-year-olds with different kinds of backgrounds. We want to make ourselves attractive to people who live downtown or work downtown.

Ovitsky: We have a family series on Sunday afternoons that has been sold out for three or four seasons in a row. We want to expand to pairs of those concerts

but cannot because of significant restrictions as to when the hall is available to us. We know which programs can be expanded to meet demand, but we sometimes don't have a hall to play in. For example, the hall is also not available to us over Christmas, so we go on the road with a Hometown Holiday Tour which attracts substantial sponsorship. We are very good at attracting funding for our education and outreach programs, but we are continually challenged to attract funding for the core of what the orchestra does.

Richman: One thing that speaks very well to the organizational growth of the Milwaukee Symphony is the involvement of musicians in our fundraising efforts. Musicians have been going out on calls and have suggested prospects. We have received several substantial gifts as a result of musicians' suggestions. They are truly a hidden resource in fundraising. They can also work marketing wonders. For example, last summer, Samantha and Roger visited my law firm and talked with some of the associates who are new in town. They demonstrated the same thing to my colleagues that they have demonstrated to the MSO board. We have a lot in common.

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Wilkins: The key is getting to know people. When we get out into the community and get to know people, it generates a different kind of dynamic.

Helmert: The point that Steve Richman made a minute ago about musicians being involved in fundraising or marketing is an important one to me because one of the things we constantly face is professional growth and development for our musicians. The typical career path for a musician is to graduate from a conservatory and at age 20-something arrive as a symphony section player. The orchestral practice, rehearsal, performance routine is initially exciting and probably fine for a few years. But the question quickly becomes: How can I continue to grow and develop as a musician? The growth of the Milwaukee Symphony as an organization and the significant new opportunities that musicians have—whether in the ACE program or in supporting committees that are working on marketing or fundraising—keep musicians engaged and interested in personal and career growth.

George: A lot of musicians in our orchestra also participate in outside musical endeavors. There are the Bach Babes and the Chamber Orchestra. We get to know people and fulfill ourselves in that way, too.

Institute: We are coming to the end of our time together. Let's go once around among you and ask

you to tell us what would be on your wish list for the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra for the next 10 years or so.

Tuma: I am proud to be a member of this organization now. I didn't feel quite the same way seven years ago or so when we were in such labor strife. We have made enormous strides. Wish list? When I came to this orchestra, we had a 48-week season. We moved to a 50-week season, but have tapered back. So I would wish that the organization could look toward developing a meaningful summer season.

George: I would wish that we could solve our venue issue.

Richman: I want to focus things to put us in better financial circumstances—grow our endowment, maximize our annual campaign, fill our seats. Then we might be ready to look at lengthening the season.

Stein: I would wish us success in encouraging the community to recognize the level of this orchestra for what it is. This orchestra performs consistently at a high level and does a lot of good work in the community. We need to translate that into financial support of what we do.

“In the years that I’ve been here, the tenor of the organization has changed from a closed system to a much more open system, responsive to the community and to one another.”

Buelow: In the years that I’ve been here, the tenor of the organization has changed from a closed system to a much more open system, responsive to the community and to one another. I’d like to see that process continue. I’d also like to see us be one of the first orchestras able to learn to sell what is unique about the symphony orchestra concert experience. Orchestras, in general, are not very good at doing that. We sell guest artists. We sell the conductor. But we don’t sell the experience itself.

Wilkins: As my colleagues in this room know, number one on my wish list is to have our own venue so that we have our destiny within our control and can maximize our ability to construct seasons, to sell concerts, and to increase our revenue.

Schmitz: Rather than adding to the list, I would like to comment on two things that have been said. In a business setting, if your principal product is hard to sell and hard to fund, you would have serious problems. And we do. We need to communicate that without our core orchestral product there would be no ACE program, no youth concerts. If we cannot fund the core product, there won’t be any other products. And I want to support the earlier thought that we must find a way to enlighten people between the ages of 20 and 40 about the experience of live symphonic performance. I refuse to believe that this generation will be the first one in 150 years that is not moved by Brahms’ *First Symphony*.

Helmers: I’d like to see everyone in the organization have the opportunity to sit down in a setting such as this one and really discuss and work for our future.

There are still a lot of musicians who do not participate, and I think that is a shame. I would also like to see us perform more great concerts so that everyone in Wisconsin has the chance to experience what brought us all here in the first place.

Ruggeri: I would wish that we would learn to market the players, not the orchestra. On a baseball team, you know who the players are. But an orchestra seems like a faceless megalith. People can't identify with that. There are actually many different kinds of people in an orchestra with whom potential audience members could identify.

Hunt: Roger, I would second what you just said. Building interpersonal relationships is extremely important. Even though we have changed a great deal, there is still a perception that we are somewhat insular. That could improve.

Rieselbach: Fill the hall, fill the hall, fill the hall. To have a superior orchestra, the community has to demand one. And to learn that they want one, they have to attend. We need to make a concerted effort to pull people from suburban Milwaukee into the hall and we need their financial support.

Ovitsky: To me, a very important thing is the fact that the music keeps getting better and better. Our renewal rates are terrific, so when people come, they come again. It's a question of reaching those people who are not attending now. As to a wish list, I would hope that we can correct a misconception that has held us back in some ways. Because Milwaukee has a county-owned, multipurpose hall and a united arts funding organization, all arts organizations are considered pretty much alike. The fact is the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra is very different. It is the largest performing-arts organization. We have a very different commitment to a constant stream of performances. Our education efforts are enormous. As Allen said, we need to continue to create the demand for an excellent orchestra. That is the goal toward which everyone in this room is working.

Institute: Thanks to each of you for your participation and your candor. As an organization, you have made great strides and have much about which to feel good. We will continue to monitor your progress, and we wish you well.

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Arts in Community Education

As we worked with members of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra (MSO) family to prepare the roundtable discussion that appears in this issue, we were struck by our participants' enthusiasm as they talked about their Arts in Community Education program, known to all in Milwaukee as ACE. So we set out to learn more about this program which is currently completing its 11th year and in which 40 percent of the MSO's musicians elect to participate.

Mary Wayne Fritzsche, the orchestra's vice president for education, explained that the genesis of ACE occurred in 1988 when the MSO formed a board education committee charged with creating new program directions to respond to community priorities. The committee included teachers, state and local school administrators, community leaders, and MSO conductors, musicians, staff, chorus members, and volunteers.

The committee began its work by engaging Artsvision (whose president, Mitchell Korn, authored an essay, "Orchestras That Educate," which appeared in *Harmony* #10) to conduct a community needs and resources assessment. "The study revealed that music education in local schools had critically declined and that the schools lacked the financial resources to meet the needs," said Fritzsche. She added that the study also indicated that the demand was for arts programs that could be integrated into students' everyday lives.

Armed with the results of the study, MSO staff and education committee members, aided by classroom and music teachers, and by local arts organizations, set out to develop and fund ACE, which was launched in 11 kindergarten classrooms in January 1991. The program is designed to bring learning through music and the arts into the classroom every day, across the school curriculum, with the goal of having an impact on children's overall learning and development.

Program Growth

This year, ACE is active in 21 Milwaukee-area schools, serving 7,200 students in kindergarten through eighth grade and more than 500 teachers. By the time the year ends, 50 specially prepared ensembles and individual artists will have made more than 400 ACE presentations. MSO musicians, associate conductor, and chorus members (as well as the orchestra's president, about which more later)

form 24 of these groups, with several musicians participating in more than one group. The ensembles include 40 percent of the orchestra's musicians, who individually contract with the MSO each season for ACE, independent of their orchestra service contracts.

For students in kindergarten through fifth grade, the ACE programs are structured around a coordinating theme for each grade. In addition to the ensembles' visits to the schools, annual MSO involvement includes:

- ◆ an evening family concert at each school,
- ◆ a specially designed full-orchestra concert at each grade level, to which parents are invited,
- ◆ teacher inservice training and summer curriculum planning,
- ◆ curricular resources and musical repertoire CDs,
- ◆ parent and teacher newsletters, and
- ◆ a culminating student project in each grade, used to assess students' learning in ACE.

At the middle-school level, an ACE artist team for each grade level works in partnership with a school team of arts and academic faculty to plan and implement the program which includes curriculum, artist visits to the schools, student visits to community arts venues, and a student project at each grade level.

Assessment is Key

From the outset, the question "Are we accomplishing what we set out to do?" has been an important part of ACE activities. Dr. Greg DeNardo, a music-education faculty member at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, has worked with the ACE program to establish the yardsticks against which to measure the program and to conduct annual assessments. These assessments measure ACE's impact on such items as students' cooperation, interdisciplinary and critical thinking, creativity, and listening and other perceptual skills. "We want to keep close track of learning outcomes," said Fritzsche, adding that the program evolves over time as all participants gain experience.

One Musician's Experience

During the current academic year, MSO President Steve Ovitsky, himself the father of a fourth grader, has been an active member of a fourth-grade ACE ensemble, appearing in eight performances. He explained that he was something of an 'accidental tourist' as he ventured into active ACE participation. "Our new associate principal horn, Krystof Pipal, wanted to play in an ACE ensemble. We couldn't find an immediate opening for a horn player, and I didn't want to disappoint Krystof. I, too, am a horn player, so I volunteered to form an ensemble."

Steve and Krystof enlisted pianist Elena Abend to join them in planning and presenting “Children of Wisconsin; Children of the World.” Krystof is originally from Prague. Elena, whose father is Polish, grew up in Caracas. And Steve’s grandparents are from Poland. “Our program combines the history of the horn with our Czech, Venezuelan, and Jewish roots, and reinforces the fourth-graders’ study of communities and immigration,” said Ovitsky. He lauded the involvement of Richard Kessler of the American Music Center in New York, who works with the ensembles to prepare their programs and presentations. “Richard starts by working with us to define what we want to say, and then helps us say it effectively in both music and words.”

In assessing his experience this year, Ovitsky acknowledges that rehearsal and performance time have made for some very busy days. But he would volunteer again to be part of an ACE ensemble. “I had attended ACE performances over the years, but actually participating in an ensemble gave me a much better sense of how much time, effort, and thought our musicians put into this program,” he observed.

Fritzsche, too, acknowledges the commitment that MSO musicians make to ACE, noting that musicians in 10 of the orchestra’s ACE ensembles have children who attend ACE schools. Summing up, she said, “Bottom line, ACE has helped us discover many talents among our musicians. It has provided professional development opportunities for our musicians, and has brought many elements of Milwaukee’s arts community closer together. Yes, we are very proud that Milwaukee is home to this important community education partnership.”