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An Orchestra Outside of the Box

by

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We would be willing to hazard a guess that most readers of *Harmony* number among their discography several entries recorded by the Orchestra of St. Luke's. But we would be equally willing to guess that most readers know little of this orchestra as an organization.

In the essay that follows, author Marianne Lockwood, the orchestra's president and executive director, gives us an inside look at the New York orchestra organization that thinks outside the box because, as Lockwood tells us, "we don't even have a box."

Lockwood has been on the scene since St. Luke's founding as a chamber ensemble in 1974. She chronicles the organization's growth and development and details the many partnerships in which St. Luke's engages. She also explains the control that the musicians have over their working lives.

For the first 10 years of its existence, the Orchestra of St. Luke's did not have a music director. Lockwood tells readers about the ongoing evolution of the organization's thinking about artistic direction. In a final section, she discusses the growth and development of the governance structure and the ways in which the orchestra is planning for its future.

This is an enjoyable read, but it is also one that invites readers to ask, "Are there aspects of this model that might work for us?"

An Orchestra Outside of the Box

“As Funds Disappear, So Do Orchestras.”¹ “How to Kill Orchestras.”² “Orchestra Survival: It’s Not Simply the Economy Stupid.”³ Headlines from three articles that appeared recently in the *New York Times*, purportedly chronicling a decidedly gloomy outlook for our orchestras.

I have been on the periphery of the mainstream orchestra world for some time and have helped create an organization that looks at this world from a different point of view. The Orchestra of St. Luke’s, in New York City, has evolved differently from most other American orchestras and may offer a valuable alternative model, given its basic philosophy and operating practices.

St. Luke’s was created in 1974 as a large chamber ensemble of mixed winds and strings (approximately 15 musicians). It came into being with the lofty mission to play all repertoire—from Baroque to contemporary—in many configurations: chamber ensemble, chamber orchestra, chamber opera. Michael Feldman, who was the artistic director, the musicians, and I were soon told that we couldn’t do this; we couldn’t be all things to all people.

Luckily this did not deter us and within two years, we had also started a large arts education program consisting mostly of fully produced small chamber operas (Haydn, Handel, Offenbach). Within five years we had enlarged the ensemble enough to constitute a large chamber orchestra (50 to 60 musicians) that came into full being as the resident ensemble at the Caramoor Music Festival in nearby Katonah, New York.

We continued to play chamber music and to produce operas for children, but our presence at Caramoor changed the face of the orchestra. We found ourselves performing with world-renowned conductors and soloists who recognized that there was something different about this group: the musicians listened to each other as much as they listened to the conductor. In fact, they played as if they were a chamber ensemble.

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For example, at his first rehearsal with the orchestra, Leonard Bernstein stopped after a few measures and asked how many of the musicians had gone to Marlboro? He later told me that he had done more with St. Luke's in two hours than he had done with another orchestra in two weeks.

And so the word went out that this was a rather unusual orchestra. Our ensemble came to the attention of Carnegie Hall and we were engaged to perform some of their Handel, Bach, and Strauss festival productions. As an orchestra, we never looked back, and Carnegie Hall became our primary home.

From the beginning, it was clear that we would have to structure ourselves in a different way if we wanted to create a special place for ourselves in a city as difficult as New York, and if we wanted to keep these musicians together, happy, and aware of their distinction. Three main categories that describe this structure: collaborations, artistic leadership, and the organizational structure.

Collaborations

Early on in our evolution, we realized that as a part-time, freelance orchestra (musicians paid on a per service basis), with minimum resources for self-produced concerts, it behooved us to find as much work as possible to keep our musicians playing together as St. Luke's, while we also helped them, and us, pay the rent. We soon became known as the premier orchestra for hire in the city, and this gave rise to an extremely varied mix of artistic experiences.

The majority of our musicians deliberately choose to work this way. They accept the risks of less financial and job security in return for the freedom to pick and choose the work they want.

From the beginning, the organization and the musicians were free to take or reject any work that came our way. The downside of such an arrangement was the occasional engagement of questionable artistic merit and the "orchestra for hire" stigma. The upside was being able to provide unusual, challenging repertoire; conductors and soloists we could never afford ourselves; often high-profile events; a steady stream of recordings; and financial stability. The musicians have to this day never tired of the extraordinary scope of activity this means for them. As Simon Rattle said about us a few years ago, "It would be hard to find a group that was so comfortable playing Bach one day and Ellington the next." Or Mozart and Metallica (yes, with St. Luke's at Madison Square Garden!).

Not only is the repertoire diverse and varied, the venues are also. Churches, synagogues, museums, galleries, schools, parks, and other public spaces host

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St. Luke's. Our community is as upscale as Carnegie Hall and as downscale as P.S. 19 in Queens. Our audience knows that they can hear us play Baroque music in Temple Emanu-El on the Upper East Side or new music downtown in the Dia Center in Chelsea. We are not confined to, or defined by, the four walls of a concert hall. It has probably been easier for us to think "outside of the box," because we don't even have a box!

Of course New York provides a special landscape for this varied existence, but even smaller communities contain a myriad of activities that could benefit from such a versatile ensemble.

This nomadic life started out as a necessity when the Church of St. Luke's, our original home, burned down, and we were forced to find other places to perform. This way of life is now integral to who we are and has earned us the sobriquet: New York's *own* chamber orchestra.

One of the most important aspects of this way of doing business is that, in many cases, these venues become partners. We develop relationships whereby we work with our host organizations to bring them programs that speak to their needs while also addressing ours. Rarely, if ever, do we pay rent (including our series at Carnegie Hall). So not only do these collaborations bring us new audiences, they provide us with a much more economically viable way of doing business.

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Most of the partnerships consist of series in which we have artistic input and subsidize the direct costs of the performances. The other collaborations in which we take part range from strictly "fee engagements" (which are usually one-shot events with no input from us) to long-term relationships such as the Caramoor Festival where, although we have no formal artistic input and bear none of the costs, we and the presenter nevertheless have stakes in the outcome. We will work more closely with our long-term presenters to accommodate their schedules and, where possible, to help them with marketing. In all of our collaborations with outside presenters, we provide a comprehensive production support system—contracting, library, scheduling, space, and instrument rentals.

Under these various arrangements, we perform almost 100 events a year—a sizable season for a so-called small- to medium-sized organization. For example, the 2002-2003 season consisted of 96 performances, as follows:

- ◆ 45 performances for which we selected and provided all artistic forces and collaborated with another institution in the presentation, including:
 - ❖ 4 full orchestra concerts at Carnegie Hall and 3 at other venues,

- ❖ 21 chamber music performances at various venues, and
- ❖ 17 educational performances.
- ◆ 40 performances for which the orchestra was hired by another organization that generally provided conductor and/or soloists and assumed all costs of presentation. These included:
 - ❖ the Caramoor Festival,
 - ❖ Carnegie Hall for its choral workshop and family and educational series,
 - ❖ the Maazel/Vilar conducting competition,
 - ❖ various choruses, and
 - ❖ the City of New York for its 9/11 memorial celebration.
- ◆ 4 recording sessions where all artists, including the orchestra, and all other costs were paid by another party, for example, Renée Fleming's most recent release for Decca.
- ◆ 2 recording sessions during which we self-produced a CD.
- ◆ 1 brief tour to Mexico.

In addition to these 92 events, the musicians were paid for associated rehearsals for the orchestral events. Rehearsals for the chamber music events were included in the fees paid.

Artistic Leadership

Because the group was originally constituted as a chamber ensemble, it was imbued with some of the characteristics that would continue to inform it as an orchestra. The musicians were vocal about their needs and desires. There was originally an artistic director who identified the musicians and programmed the seasons, but did not conduct; there was actually no music director until much later. From the beginning, there were no minimum attendance requirements, and the musicians themselves were responsible for the hiring and firing of their colleagues. These ways of working subsequently became part of a master agreement between St. Luke's and Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM).

A word might be in order about this master agreement which we negotiate with the musicians and AFM Local 802. It covers much of what the other single-engagement orchestra agreements do: wage scales, working conditions, hiring and firing practices, etc. Where it differs from most other agreements is in the musicians' control over hiring and firing, and the fact that there are no minimum attendance requirements and no formal audition process. Nowhere in the agreement was there reference to a music director until very recently. The agreement recognizes the unique structure of St. Luke's with reference to its three divisions: the A list composed of the 21 chamber

ensemble members who have the right of first refusal on all engagements, and who receive significant over-scale compensation and health benefits beyond those provided through the basic union contract; the B list composed of 20 orchestra members who get first call after the A list, and who are entitled to over-scale payments; and the C list composed of 56 orchestra members who get first call after the B list to fill out the orchestra. The C list members are paid the negotiated minimum scale.

The master agreement calls for two committees: an artistic committee of seven musicians elected by the chamber ensemble members, and an orchestra committee elected by the A and B list players. Contract negotiations take place with the orchestra committee, representatives from the union, and the administrative staff. Given the relationship we have with the musicians, St. Luke's has never needed to have a lawyer present at these negotiations.

“Almost 10 years after the creation of the orchestra, the musicians realized that they did want, and could benefit from having, a music director.”

Almost 10 years after the creation of the orchestra, the musicians realized that they did want, and could benefit from having, a music director. Their (and the key word is “their”) first choice was Sir Roger Norrington. Our musicians had been blown away when he first conducted the orchestra and felt he had the sensibility they were looking for. Since we had relatively few concerts of our own to offer him, it was clear from the start that his role would not be a traditional one. He was quite happy with that. When illness precluded him from continuing with us after three years, the musicians decided to take their time looking for his successor and were satisfied with various guest conductors. There was one, however, who would have their unanimous support if we could engage him: Sir Charles Mackerras. To our delight and surprise, he was happy to take the post as long as it didn't involve much more than conducting a few concerts. Of course, this fit in very nicely with our own needs, and we had three very happy years with him.

Then an interesting thing happened. The musicians had begun to realize just how difficult it was to run themselves. They were beginning to face some difficult personnel issues; we were approaching our 25th year, and a large number of the players had been with the orchestra from the beginning. They were also aware of the importance of a clearer artistic identity. They began to think about someone who would indeed be more involved with them. Of course, they still wanted that someone to be a colleague, not a supervisor.

It seemed unlikely, if not impossible, that such a person could be found. So it was some surprise to me when they started talking about Donald Runnicles. “He is a musician's musician.” “We don't play under him, but with him. He is directing, but it is a shared journey.” “It's like playing chamber music.”

And apparently this was mutual. He in fact wanted to *play* chamber music with them. He wanted to be involved as part of a team to work on a shared vision, repertoire, and personnel. He didn't want this to be a position in name only. He also, very shrewdly, didn't want the title music director, because he felt that we hadn't really defined that position yet, and that perhaps this was something we would all work on together. Instead he would be our principal conductor.

The musicians recognized the validity of this thinking, and have started the process by including him in the hiring and firing clauses of the master agreement—the first time ever that they have agreed to do such a thing. Runnicles, along with the ensemble members, can suggest new ensemble members, and he has two votes to their one. Likewise, he can initiate non-reengagement for artistic reasons. He also has two votes to each ensemble member's one should the situation require the determination of a review committee (composed of seven ensemble members from the affected section—strings or winds/brass).

The existence of this new process has already helped us deal with a very sensitive and difficult situation.

Through the artistic committee, the musicians have regular meetings with Runnicles, usually with me and our artistic administrator present, and often a few board members as well, to discuss all aspects of the organization. These meetings happen at least three times each season, supplemented by informal gatherings over food and wine. The committee also meets separately as needed to discuss the more day-to-day issues.

I recently came across an interesting memo from one of our musicians talking about the role of the music director in today's orchestras. This musician serves on both our artistic and orchestra committees and also plays principal in a major orchestra, so he sees both sides of the picture. The memo was written almost three years ago, just after we had appointed Runnicles as principal conductor. In the memo, he refers to a conversation with board members and musicians from two other major orchestras:

“He wanted to be involved as part of a team to work on a shared vision, repertoire, and personnel.”

I suppose that I could officially say that this discussion was thought-provoking, since I've been thinking about it ever since. A major problem is that, by-and-large, these guys [music directors] are not *there* most of the time. The void many orchestras feel is left by the 'part-time' music director has not been a great problem for us, since it has normally been filled here by St. Luke's and the artistic committee in conjunction with our administration. We should continue in these roles, even in matters where the music director has the final authority. The traditional music director (who is an anachronism today) has not felt the need to explain himself—that level of control

implies a certain responsibility to the organization that should never be exercised in isolation. No major decision should ever be made by a music director without first discussing it with, and hearing comment from, the artistic committee. I feel it's important for us to adopt this policy in the context of granting a music director the final say in certain artistic decisions. In this way, we can obtain the focus and leadership we desire without worrying about conflicting purposes within our organization.

I think this defines very well the musicians' and our approach to this sometimes sensitive issue. And it's interesting to note that so far this has not been a problem for us with Runnicles. I keep expecting the honeymoon to end, but we're about to start our third year together.

In addition to the role of the artistic committee and Runnicles' role as principal conductor, artistic leadership comes on a day-to-day basis from me and from Elizabeth Ostrow, our director of artistic programming. Together we help shape, prod, and mold St. Luke's. Not knowing any better, my rather naïve philosophy has always been that there are no limits to what St. Luke's can do. What started as a lofty (and to many an unrealistic) mission has in fact been surpassed many times over.

"Flexible" and "versatile" are two words we hear over and over again describing St. Luke's. I think they apply as easily to the musicians as to the way we look at the whole organization.

Organizational Structure

St. Luke's started with two and a half administrators (myself, our artistic director Michael Feldman, and a part-time secretary) and a group of young, virtuosic musicians. Our board of directors was composed of our three closest friends. The organizational structure was loose to say the least! We evolved more or less organically with this structure expanding as needs and finances made it possible.

At this time, we have a staff of 15 that works very much as a collegial team with me as the leader and often with daily contact with the musicians. The artistic committee meets on a fairly regular basis with our director of artistic planning and me, and with our principal conductor whenever he's in town. A great deal of informal meeting goes on as well.

The board eventually enlarged itself to 24 members and constituted executive, artistic, finance, development, education, and operations committees. The board also produced expectations for each trustee. These include first and foremost a love of music and attendance at the concerts. There is a minimum give-or-get financial obligation and the understanding that trustees will fundraise on our behalf. In several cases, trustees have professional skills that are helpful to the organization, especially in the area of financial controls.

This board also works in a very collegial fashion, with the chair and me acting as co-leaders. Because I have been with St. Luke's since the beginning, I ultimately make many of the major decisions following discussion and consensus from the staff and the board. I am extremely lucky in that I have the trust and respect of the board and know that they will support me even when I might be taking the definition of "flexible" a little too far!

"Most of the trustees know many of the musicians personally and regularly end up backstage following performances."

There are two musicians on the board, and I encourage active participation from other musicians at every board meeting. Most of the trustees know many of the musicians personally and regularly end up backstage following performances.

St. Luke's has not had an operating deficit for the past eight years, and our accumulated deficit was the result of a settlement payment to the founding artistic director when a remarkably amicable parting of the ways occurred about seven years ago. That deficit has been substantially reduced, and we have begun a three-pronged campaign to raise \$15 million in support of new projects, arts education, and general operations.

With the help of the Mellon Foundation, as part of its orchestra program, we have worked on several initiatives that relate directly to our organizational structure. Given that one of the objectives of the Mellon program is to improve organizational culture and the relationships among musicians, staff, and board members, I decided that part of our grant should go directly to the musicians, and that they should decide how to spend it. This proved to be a very interesting exercise! The artistic committee members (musicians, staff, and board members) met six times over the course of the first year to work on this. We considered several different scenarios and finally decided that part of the funds should be used to provide the musicians (A, B, and C lists) with bonuses. Since each musician's bonus was based on the number of engagements he or she had accepted over the course of a year, it was also conceived as an incentive—the more you played with St. Luke's, the larger your bonus would be.

We also agreed that funds would be used to pay for additional artistic planning time with Runnicles and the musicians. Although the musicians on the artistic committee are not paid for their regular meetings, the feeling was that given the additional number of meetings now required, they should be paid an honorarium. Finally, we also covered the costs of the trips to the various forums held by the Mellon Foundation over the course of the year.

These forums turned out to be a wonderful education for me. For two and a half days, the board chair, the executive director, and two musicians from each Mellon orchestra met with consultants to explore various issues identified by the participants. This was the first time I had had occasion to spend such

concentrated and focused time with my colleagues in other orchestras and to get a sense of how they were governed. The musicians and I all came away from the first of those forums quite surprised at what we learned: many of the issues these other orchestras were grappling with (i.e., the role of the music director as described above by our musician, the often confrontational interactions of musicians with administrators, etc.), were not issues for us at all. In reflecting on how they perceive our structure, the musicians themselves have this to say.

An ensemble member says: “St. Luke’s is a culture in which the exchange of ideas is encouraged. Frank discussions about everything from production issues to fundraising to artistic goals happen regularly. We are a group, a family so to speak, in which everyone benefits from the work of our individual members and constituent groups.”

And from a musician on the B list: “The rewards of working with my colleagues are increased manifold by nearly everyone’s effort to more fully participate in decisions that affect the long-term health of the group.”

We began to realize that while we were already, instinctively, doing many of the things these other orchestras were working towards, we were doing it in a rather amorphous way. To be much more effective, we needed to formalize and codify our structure. The Mellon forums are giving us the tools and the guidance we need to establish what St. Luke’s does in a more defined, systematic, and proactive way.

For instance, by the end of last year, it had become clear that one of the tasks we needed to undertake was a strategic plan. We had successfully completed a long-range plan several years ago. But with the various developments taking place (new principal conductor, new board chair, a much more active artistic committee, an endowment campaign, several new artistic initiatives, and my eventual retirement), it was time to pull this all together and provide a cohesive structure for it.

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Exactly what that structure will be is yet being worked on, but as we begin to look at our structure in a more deliberate way, there emerge some patterns that would seem to apply to groups of varying sizes and abilities.

Musicians can find an artistically satisfying and financially stable lives in a freelance situation. If a group of musicians, and this could be anywhere in this country, is provided with a varied and flexible musical life (chamber music, educational programs, accompanying dance and opera, orchestral performances), each member will be busy and productive.

The organization must obviously be entrepreneurial, not institutionally based. It must actively seek collaborators (schools, churches, museums, opera, and dance companies), and it must put itself in the position of offering services that forward the artistic interests of *other* organizations. As such, it can and should operate efficiently, with a small staff and low overhead (at St. Luke's more than 85 percent of all revenues are spent directly on program expenses).

Since there are no minimum attendance requirements and the musicians are not on salary, there is no minimum annual cost for players. Therefore, the organization is not put at risk in an economic downturn. It can contract without threatening the musicians' livelihoods. For example, last year we needed to reduce our budget by almost 10 percent to offset funding losses. We were able to do that internally by trimming overhead and some nonessential services. The musicians were not affected in any way. Of course, if the number of "fee engagements" is reduced during hard times, that will affect the musicians. Over the last couple of difficult years, we have been able to maintain our productions at the same levels.

An entity that promises artistic excellence, effective management, and a great deal of flexibility, along with imaginative programming and an entrepreneurial spirit can provide year-round employment, a solid revenue stream, and access to classical music for diverse communities. While I do not propose that the St. Luke's model replace the symphony orchestra, I do suggest that there are many communities that might give it a second glance.

Marianne C. Lockwood is president and executive director of the Orchestra of St. Luke's, which she helped found in 1974.

Notes

- ¹ Kinzer, Stephen. 2003. As Funds Disappear, So Do Orchestras. *New York Times* (May 14, Section E): 1.
- ² Holland, Bernard. 2003. How to Kill Orchestras. *New York Times* (June 29, Section 2): 1.
- ³ Oestreich, James R. 2003. Orchestra Survival: It's Not Simply the Economy Stupid. *New York Times* (June 29, Section 2): 33.