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The Toledo Symphony: Players as Staff Members A roundtable discussion



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The Toledo Symphony: Players as Staff Members

A roundtable discussion

The Symphony Orchestra Institute is watchful for the road less traveled. We are always on the lookout for innovative practices in orchestra organizations. And in Toledo, Ohio, we found an orchestra in which some players also serve as part-time staff members. Thanks to the efforts of Toledo Symphony President and CEO Bob Bell, and Executive Vice President for Development Kathy Carroll, we were able to gather a group of these player-staff members to share their story. But first, a bit of background.

As explained in a recent grant application, Toledo is a medium-size, industrial city in the Midwest. It is not a tourist area, and the landscape is flat. However, the quality of life is good because area residents understand and reward hard work. The city has its own university, and the University of Michigan, Bowling Green State University, and the Oberlin Conservatory are all within short driving distances.

Against this backdrop, the Toledo Symphony was founded just more than 55 years ago by music teachers and musicians. Throughout its history, the orchestra has worked to serve and support a broad geographic area, and the orchestra now serves many smaller communities within a three-hour radius of Toledo.

However, the Toledo Symphony finds itself in a position similar to that of many other regional American orchestras. Its musicians' salaries are low in comparison with those of many other skilled professionals. In the early 1980s, Bob Bell had an idea, and offered percussionist Keith McWatters the opportunity to supplement his work as a player with a part-time position as sales manager for the orchestra's ensembles. Today, McWatters holds the full-time position of orchestra manager, and plays with the orchestra.

At this point, we will ask Kathy Carroll, as moderator, seven musician-staff members, and an invited member of the board of trustees to pick up the story.

Kathy Carroll: Please introduce yourselves and share with *Harmony* readers a bit about your roles with the Toledo Symphony.

Patricia Budner: I am from the Cleveland area, and have been a violinist with the Toledo Symphony for 25 years. I also spend several hours each week working as an assistant to the orchestra manager. In addition to that, I have a lot of

Bob Bell Talks about the Toledo Symphony

Bob Bell joined the Toledo Symphony as a timpanist in 1957. In the intervening years, he has also served the orchestra as personnel manager, librarian/stage manager, associate director, acting managing director, and managing director. In 1997, he was named president and CEO. Since 1984, when he became managing director, the Toledo Symphony's income has increased more than 200 percent, ticket sales have increased more than 135 percent, and annual fund giving has increased more than 300 percent.

Bob has been an active participant in many Toledo civic endeavors, and has received the Toledo Arts Commission's Community Impact Award, the Mayor of Toledo's Citizen Award, and the State of Ohio Governor's Award for the Arts. We asked him to reminisce about the genesis and evolution of the Toledo Symphony's dual-role practice for musicians. His thoughts follow.

One of the staff appointments I made during my first years as chief executive officer of the Toledo Symphony was to ask Mel Harsh, a member of the brass section, to take responsibility for writing concert program notes. This assignment quickly evolved into preconcert talks and other duties connected with program planning and concert narration. Although there was initial resistance from some staff members who questioned his (a musician's) skills for writing and understanding office practice, Mel has become one of the dual-role orchestra members most appreciated by our audiences and staff. Increased compensation was a consideration, but it was not the primary reason for offering Mel this position, nor was it his pivotal reason for accepting. Rather, it was my belief in the value of his knowledge and intellectual insights, which I trusted would add strength to orchestra administration.

As the orchestra has evolved in the past several years, growing and attracting more resident musicians, there has been an underlying, fundamental commitment to provide as much opportunity and compensation as possible for each member of the orchestra. Whenever staff opportunities occurred, it has been the practice to look "within the family" for a mutually beneficial arrangement for musician and administration. It is not unusual for orchestras to have librarians and personnel managers who serve in both playing and non-playing roles. And it is not unreasonable to expect to find a range of other talents that can be useful and beneficial to the organization, while, at the same time, offering opportunities for musicians.

private teaching experience, studio recording experience, and am currently interested in the healing aspects of music and sound. My bachelor's degree is from Bowling Green State University, just south of Toledo.

Stewart Clark: I joined the orchestra in 1990 as a french horn player. In 1995, I began selling tickets once a week to make some extra money. That grew into a role as one of the salespeople for orchestral events, which, in turn, evolved into selling advertising for the program book and phone sales. On the organization chart, they call me events sales manager, so if it's sales, I'm "it."

Melissa Knecht: I am a violist in the orchestra, and am also director of education and outreach. Over the years, I have played in a number of orchestras, both in the U.S. and abroad. I did my undergraduate work at the University of Michigan in music, and completed a master's degree in viola at Indiana University. While I was working on my Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, I was also playing with the Toledo Symphony and became very interested in the psychology of music as it applied to professional musicians. I began to develop some ideas about education and the orchestra, and I approached Bob Bell with a proposal. He was willing to listen and that developed into my job.

Daniel Harris: I joined the orchestra as bass trombonist in 1995, and had been a substitute with the orchestra for 10 years or so before that. I'm also the trombonist in the symphony brass quintet. My educational background is not all in music, although I do hold a performance master's from Yale and a D.M.A. from the University of Michigan. My undergraduate work was in Russian language and literature, and I also hold a J.D. from the University of Michigan Law School. I became grants administrator for the orchestra in July 1999, and the season before that, I was chair of the orchestra committee.

Melvin Harsh: I've played second trumpet in the Toledo Symphony for nearly 25 years. In addition, I'm the orchestra's program annotator. I do the previews, and speak to audiences before many of the concerts, as well as doing speaking engagements in the area. My education includes undergraduate work at the State University of New York at Fredonia, and a master's and D.M.A. from the University of Michigan. For a long time, I have been in an artistic advisory capacity, and now I'm officially the orchestra's artistic administrator.

Aaron Keaster: This is my fourth year as a member of the double bass section, and as an assistant librarian. I joined the Toledo Symphony after completing a performance master's at Indiana University. I am originally from Columbia, Missouri, and completed my bachelor's degree at Wichita State University. I've played with the Wichita Symphony, the Evansville Philharmonic, the Terre Haute Symphony, and spent five months on a cruise ship with the Royal Cruise Line Orchestra.

Keith McWatters: No cruise lines for me. I'm a Toledo boy! I grew up here, earned my bachelor's in music education at the University of Toledo, and started playing with the symphony in the late 1970s in a small role with the percussion

section. I began my administrative duties, in the early 1980s, as a sales manager for the ensembles, and then in the mid-1980s became personnel manager. I am currently the orchestra manager, still fulfilling the duties of personnel manager, and am still a percussionist.

Byron West: I'm vice chairman of the Toledo Symphony board. By profession, I'm an architect. I grew up with classical music, as my mother was an accompanist for such opera musicians as Rise Stevens and Robert Merrill. Piano lessons were an unsuccessful part of my childhood, but I discovered the clarinet and the saxophone when I was about eight. Starting in my teens, I played nightclubs six nights a week, played college campuses, and toured with Bob Hope. I think I still appreciate classical music more than jazz. But I can't play it. I play jazz.

Carroll: Thank you. The Institute has provided us with a series of questions to get our conversation started about your dual roles with the orchestra. So I would ask you to describe how you became involved as a staff member, and whether you think this practice is unusual in North American symphony orchestras?

Harsh: I was approached by a member of management and asked if I would be interested in writing previews and program notes in the capacity of artistic administrator. I knew other orchestras had these positions, and I had not really thought about whether they were filled by people outside the orchestra or by musicians. I accepted the offer because I thought it sounded interesting. It's as simple as that.

Clark: I didn't think that having an administrative job in addition to being a musician was unusual when I started, but I've come to realize that it is, of course. That's why we're talking about it! And I think the reason that we are able to do this is because Bob Bell

is an executive director who came up through the ranks right here in Toledo, starting in the Youth Orchestra. So there is a history of the person at the top encouraging his staff to look to the orchestra as a resource when positions, and especially part-time positions, are open.

Budner: I think our audience needs to understand that many of these jobs—such as the one I had in the library some years ago—are for only a few hours a week. I can't imagine a symphony being able to hire a person for that little bit of time and have those terms accepted. So I could certainly understand asking an orchestra member to fill the position.

McWatters: This is going to make me sound as old as Methuselah, but I was in college and taking private lessons from Bob Bell when the idea of an administrative position came up. At one of my lessons, he asked if I would be interested in doing a bit of sales. Bob's main thrust, as Pat mentioned, is that most of these

“I knew other orchestras had these positions, and I had not really thought about whether they were filled by people outside the orchestra or by musicians.”

are part-time positions. In our orchestra, the wages for playing are also almost part-time. And Bob's idea is to offer the administrative positions to "family" first as a way of getting and keeping good players for the Toledo Symphony. And I would note that not every musician who is offered an administrative position accepts the job.

Budner: I happen to be an example of that. I have said "no" to other staff position offers in years past that I felt wouldn't suit me as well as the one I have now.

Keaster: When I joined the orchestra, I knew my musician's job was really part-time. So I mentioned to Keith that I would be interested in doing some other work if something came up.

McWatters: And now you are working in the library. As I said, family first.

Carroll: What do you see as the benefits of your player-staff member role?

Keaster: For me, the best benefit is the flexibility of my office schedule. Who is going to be more flexible with an orchestra player's strange schedule than the orchestra itself? Before I started here, I was working for a temporary agency to find flexible hours. This is much better than that.

Clark: I needed the money when I started at the office, and I still do. I like what I do, and I don't think there is another organization out there that needs a part-time sales person who absolutely has to have time off between 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m., depending on the day. So, I would second Aaron in saying that working at the symphony is perfect.

McWatters: There is a real upside for the orchestra in having the various managers, including Bob Bell, along for the runouts and other performances that we do. If we were managers who were less involved, we might be at home relaxing while the orchestra was out working. We would have no sense of how difficult the job is. How important is it for Mel, as artistic administrator, to be on the job to see if certain musical choices work? How important is it for Stewart to be on the site of a sale? After the concert, he's there to shake hands and meet the presenter and to work on next year's presentation. We're all there to experience what works and what doesn't.

Knecht: I would add that there is a lot of work that I can do on education programs during rehearsals.

McWatters: It helps me to do both jobs better—as a player and a manager—to see both sides of what is going on. And I think those of us in this room might agree that to be able to see both sides is an enhancement to what we do.

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Mellon Foundation Grant Enhances Orchestra's Future

In 1999, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation initiated a grant program for orchestras with two stated goals:

- ◆ to help orchestras attain distinctive artistic visions, and
- ◆ to foster cultural change within individual orchestras.

The Toledo Symphony was one of seven U.S. orchestras to receive a three-year grant in the initial round of awards. In the first year, Mellon Foundation funds have been used to support five initiatives:

- ◆ Thirteen musicians applied for and have received professional development grants. Projects include research, performance, recording, and composition, as well as several that focus on intensive study or teaching.
- ◆ Orchestra members are planning a concert to be staged during the 2000-2001 season. The repertoire and a conductor have already been selected, and orchestra members are also involved in promotion of this program as a musician-designed concert.
- ◆ During the current season, the orchestra performed Shostakovich Symphony No. 4, a work of high artistic challenge, but with a cost beyond that normally provided in the artistic budget.
- ◆ Education programming efforts have been brought together in a unified department. With the support of grant funds, two staff positions—one part-time and one full-time—were established and filled.
- ◆ The orchestra's Web site has been significantly enhanced as part of the program to expand the Toledo Symphony's reach.

Addressing the professional development grants, Toledo Symphony president Bob Bell noted, "It's a wonderful partnership among the Toledo Symphony trustees, staff, and musicians. The process of receiving, reviewing, and awarding these grants really reflects the spirit of the Mellon Foundation's challenge to integrate everyone in advancing the artistic and institutional development of this organization."

Carroll: Do you ever sense any resentment or envy from your fellow players? Or that other members of the orchestra think you have been "co-opted by management"?

Harsh: If you had asked me that question two weeks ago, I would have said no. But now there is a question as to whether we are pariahs because of our dual positions.

Clark: Let me try to explain. Last fall, one of our player-managers left Toledo to become executive director of another orchestra. Instead of replacing him with a full-time staff member, the work was divided among several of us. Dan, Melissa, and Pat were brought in, and Mel and I got more to do. That seems to have ignited discussion among some members of the orchestra who then called the American Federation of Musicians Symphonic Services Division to report that the musicians were being co-opted and bought off by management.

Harsh: And yesterday, a representative of the Symphonic Services Division paid us a visit. The concern seemed to be whether, as player-managers, we should attend orchestra meetings because we might stifle people from bringing up their concerns.

Budner: There was an orchestra meeting last night which Dan and I attended, and I related that we were surprised that people were worried about us in these roles. I, personally, don't have any trouble being me whether I'm a manager or a player, or anything else for that matter. I'm going to be me whether I'm talking to the third percussionist or to the orchestra manager, even if that is the same person.

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Clark: I've thought about this a lot since yesterday. There is a tradition in American orchestras that musicians are on one side and management is on the other; that it is an adversarial situation. I think a lot of musicians, if you engaged them in conversation, might say that there must be a better way, but they are actually very comfortable with the adversarial model. It's comforting. They know that there are “good guys” and “bad guys.” With people like us straddling the fence, the situation is more gray.

Harris: Having been chair of the orchestra committee before I came to my present position, I would say that after a certain point in that role, one is not surprised by too much of anything, whether from one's colleagues or from someone in management. Which is to say that there are always a lot more perspectives out there than one might think of on one's own. When I made the transition, there were certainly some people who raised the question of whether I was being co-opted. That is probably still a question for some people, but not for others. So I don't know that one can generalize about the orchestra as a whole. One of my great satisfactions in playing in this orchestra has been the rapport among those of us in the low brass section. That is a source of real professional satisfaction for me, and that has not changed one whit as a result of the position I have now.

Knecht: One of my first observations when I came to Toledo was to wonder why I didn't feel the usual hostility between management and musicians that I had observed in some other orchestras. I wondered, were the musicians simply nicer? It was interesting for me, as a part-time player, to stand back and observe the

Toledo Symphony which is an interesting model because Bob Bell is a manager who thoroughly understands the musician's background. While I find the idea of yesterday's meeting discouraging, I have found some positive results of the dual roles since I became director of education. A number of musicians have approached me to give me advice and direction to make positive educational changes for the good of the orchestra. They see me as similar to themselves and believe that their voices can now be heard.

Carroll: Are we building a bridge between management and the orchestra? And has your joint work improved the situation?

McWatters: I think what Melissa was getting to was that there may be a contingent who think we are spies, but there is also a contingent who see us as a conduit. They might suggest, "Hey, when you are in on Monday, will you tell Bob . . ." or "Can you get this message to Kathy?" Things move along so much more smoothly, so much faster.

Keaster: I want to backtrack a bit to what Keith said about the importance of being able to see how things worked on the stage; whether certain things did or didn't work. I think an upside from the musician's standpoint is that it can be very easy to just show up on stage and not think of anything else, not think about all of the things that are going on behind the scenes. And I think this is a real opportunity for us to see how much work is involved on the other side, preparing for these concerts to happen. It gives us a real sense of orchestra ownership to be involved in both aspects.

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West: From the board perspective, it seems to me that Bob has made some very good decisions about making these assignments internally. From my exposure to musicians over the years, my perception is that, as a group, they are frighteningly bright. To think that all they can do is play instruments is nonsense. Because they have such great capabilities, to be able to deploy them internally is just marvelous.

Harris: I also want to pick up on a couple of things Keith mentioned. I do think there are bridges. At the same time, I don't think they necessarily exist to the same extent for every person in the orchestra. That's part of what has to be our work in progress. When one listens to people at orchestra meetings, the degree of suspicion or anxiety is often inversely proportional to the amount of knowledge. That is not to say that if everyone had complete knowledge they would agree, but I think that there would be a much greater understanding and greater comfort level.

Harsh: Dan, you and I both know, that like people in most jobs, orchestra members are good at griping. And there is not much verbal play between management and the musicians. And By, as for the board, other than seeing

your names in the program, I really don't know you. I don't know how you are chosen, what your role is, or what your influence is. Communication is a problem.

West: Communication is always an issue. I've never been in an organization where one of the primary issues wasn't communication. So I am not surprised to hear that it is an issue in the Toledo Symphony. As far as the board goes, every board's function, regardless of whether it is the symphony, a museum, or any other organization, primarily is to secure the fiscal stability of the institution. So board members devote a lot of time to fundraising and trying to see that the dollar side of the house is in order. But we don't meddle in artistic matters. I think it would be wonderful if we could have an event where board members and orchestra members had a chance to get to know one another in a casual setting.

Harsh: Someone mentioned yesterday that we couldn't even have an orchestra picnic and have everyone show up!

Clark: What we've been talking about, I think, is communication across a divide. In this orchestra, I think the management maybe does it better than the musicians, simply because some of us are in the office. Bob Bell is from the ranks. Bob and Keith often discuss how a particular decision will affect the players. Andrew Massey, our music director, considers the orchestra members when he is thinking of programming. On the other hand, the musicians who aren't working in the office don't really have an idea how a symphony orchestra is maintained, funded, and sold. I've heard some very naïve comments from my colleagues, such as, "They should just sell more tickets down there and then we can all get a raise." A lot of the musicians would, I think, appreciate knowing what goes on in the office. But I actually think some of them are afraid to know too much.

Budner: It is a real eye opener to work at the office. Those of us who have experienced the office work do know, perhaps, a little better. Even then—and I'm just speaking for myself here—there are a lot of things that someone as part-time as I am still doesn't see. But no one should underestimate the office work.

Harris: It seems to me that the issue is: how can we improve the quality of what we are doing? We need to work on strengthening communications not only between players and management, but also among ourselves. I think that all of us need to know a bit more about what the rest of us are doing in order to do our own jobs better.

Carroll: Let's broaden our outlook a bit. If another orchestra were considering instituting our practice of having some musicians serve in dual positions, are there any words of wisdom you would offer them?

McWatters: We have talked about how musicians feel about those of us who serve dual roles. But one also needs to consider how staff members who are not musicians react to the dual-role players who may not always be in the office during normal business hours. When we are out until 2:00 a.m., we may not be

in the office until 10:00 a.m. And someone has to answer the phones and take messages when we are not there. It is important for non-musician staff members to be invited to rehearsals, to sit on the stage, to come to concerts that have been challenging to put together. And it is equally important for players to be invited to staff meetings, receptions, and board meetings. And for those serving dual roles, it is important that they not take advantage of the generous flexibility they are offered.

Clark: I think any organization that is thinking of trying dual roles might want to think about it this way: Every staff needs a core of people whose job it is not only to accomplish certain things, but also to be there all day long. Those of us who are both musicians and staff have specific things we are asked to do within a given time frame. If we can do them in less time, or if there is a week when not much of our time is needed, we are not pressured to be in the office. When I first started working on the staff side, I felt some animosity about what time I came in and what time I left. But when I could show results, that animosity lessened because people understood that I was getting the job done. Any orchestra looking to try dual roles should be prepared to educate the staff from the beginning. And musicians who might be interested in doing staff work need to understand that it is a real juggling act. When do you stop doing the office job and practice? Because one certainly cannot do the orchestra job without practicing.

McWatters: That is a very important point. The music comes first. I think we would all agree that we're players first. It is nice that we can make our livings totally in music by combining responsibilities. But any orchestra considering dual roles for players must understand that the music comes first, and orchestra members must not be asked to circumvent those responsibilities for office work.

Knecht: I think it would be interesting if other orchestras were to study the Toledo Symphony, which has some real-world experience in management crossover. Other orchestras should try a few ideas with their own personnel to find out what happens. I have to wonder if providing opportunities for orchestra musicians—as part of their contract—to participate in small management commitments, or volunteer committee assignments, would result in a sense of increased ownership towards the orchestra. In turn, maybe even more positive feelings of job satisfaction would develop.

McWatters: I think everyone in this room would agree that what we are doing in Toledo might not be right for every orchestra. Several of us have mentioned the importance of Bob Bell's understanding of both sides of the bridge. But dual roles do work for this orchestra, both on and off the stage. And I have to believe

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that there are other orchestras in this country that could benefit greatly by having musicians serve in part-time staff roles. I agree with Melissa, and would encourage others to consider giving it a try.

Carroll: On behalf of the Institute, thank you for your time. We are proud of what we are doing here in Toledo, and you have each helped to share our story.