Life and Work in Symphony Orchras

Jutta Allmendinger; J. Richard Hackman; Erin V. Lehman


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The professional symphony orchestra is a unique workplace, one rich with paradox. Orchestra members are superb musicians, among the fortunate few who are actually able to make a living performing Western classical music. Yet the work itself requires that most of these talented individuals play in “unison” most of the time, under the direct and close supervision of a conductor. As organizations, professional symphony orchestras are highly complex: a mélange of musicians, volunteers, and paid staff whose contributions must be closely coordinated to accomplish the orchestra’s work. Yet the authority for managing that work typically is partitioned among three different leaders—the music director, the managing director, and the chair of the governing board—whose interests are not necessarily aligned. Native musical talent is, and always has been, spread more or less evenly between men and women. Yet symphony orchestras historically have been exclusively male ensembles, and the movement of women into orchestras in recent decades has been a slow, stressful process for male and female players alike. Finally, symphony orchestras are a source of great pride to their communities and nations. Yet many orchestras are constantly on the brink of financial disaster, with orchestra resources and player remuneration ever subject to shifting philanthropic and political priorities.

In this report, we summarize findings about these and other issues from our recently completed empirical study of seventy-eight professional symphony orchestras in the United States, the United Kingdom, the former West Germany, and the former East Germany. After briefly describing how the study was carried out, we address the following five questions:

1. In what ways do orchestras in the four countries differ?
2. What are the career patterns of symphony orchestra musicians?
3. What is happening as more women join symphony orchestras?
4. What helps make an orchestra into a great musical ensemble?
5. What has happened to orchestras in the former East Germany?

**How Was the Study Done?**

Data about symphony orchestras and their national contexts were collected in 1990 and 1991. After selecting a sample of seventy-eight orchestras, we gathered and studied published information about orchestras and support for musical culture in the four countries. We then visited each orchestra to obtain data from orchestra files, to conduct interviews, and to make observations.

**What Types of Orchestras Were Included?**

We studied only professional symphony orchestras, which we defined as ensembles (a) whose primary mission is public performance of those orchestra works generally considered to fall within the standard symphonic repertoire and (b) whose members are compensated nontrivially for their services. Both concert and broadcast orchestras are in our domain, as are orchestras that perform specialized works such as operas or pops programs in addition to the standard repertoire. Excluded are chamber ensembles, orchestras that perform operatic or theater works exclusively, university orchestras, and amateur orchestras.

The population of symphony orchestras in each country was enumerated by listing all orchestras that advertised at least one open player position between 1985 and 1989. We used player salary budgets to select approximately equal numbers of major and regional orchestras from each country. Orchestras in the United Kingdom were further classified into three groups: London cooperatives, BBC orchestras, and regional contract orchestras. Of the eighty-one orchestras invited to participate, seventy-eight agreed.

**What Kinds of Data Were Collected?**

Four types of data were obtained for each orchestra: archival information, interviews, observations, and player surveys. Archival information included published histories, press reports, and information from an orchestra's files such as concert programs, rosters of players and managers, financial data, and attendance figures. During our orchestra visits, we interviewed players, officials of governing boards or agencies, and support staff. (In some orchestras, it was possible to interview the
music director or principal conductor; in most, it was not.) When possible, we also observed orchestra rehearsals and/or concerts.¹

We sought permission from the management of each orchestra (and, when appropriate, from the players’ orchestra committee) to administer a questionnaire to a sample of players. Surveys were anonymous, although they did identify the respondent’s orchestra, section, and status as either a principal or a tutti player. They were distributed to a sample of fifteen players in each orchestra: two first violins, two second violins, one viola, one cello, one bass, two woodwinds, two brass, one percussion, and three principal players (one each from the strings, woodwinds, and brass/percussion).

Who Helped?

Assistance in gaining access to orchestras was provided by the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), the American Symphony Orchestra League (ASOL), the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB), the European Conference of Symphony Orchestras (ECSO), the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM), and the Regional Orchestra Players Association (ROPA). We are especially indebted to the following individuals: Kenneth Baird (then with the ACGB), Brad Buckley (ICSOM), Rosemary Estes (then with ROPA), Catherine French (ASOL), Ken Haas (Boston Symphony Orchestra), Lew Waldeck (then with the AFM), and Nick Webster (then with the New York Philharmonic).

Portions of the research were financially supported by the Max Planck Institut für Bildungsforschung and by the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration. Larissa Kowal-Wolk and Rebecca Roters assisted with data collection in the German nations, Jay Tucker translated research materials and coded archival data, and Ben Dattner, Adam Galinsky, and Tuck Pescosolido conducted library research and gathered follow-up data.

In What Ways Do Orchestras in the Four Countries Differ?

Perhaps the most noticeable difference among the four countries is in the density of orchestras. As is seen below, East Germany had seventy-six professional symphony orchestras in a country slightly smaller than the state of Tennessee, a higher density of orchestras than any other country in the world. Although West Germany had slightly more orchestras, three times as many people shared each one; in the United
States, there were seven times as many citizens per orchestra; and in the United Kingdom, there were almost twenty times as many.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Orchestras in 1990</th>
<th>Area Covered per Orchestra (square kilometers)</th>
<th>Citizens Served per Orchestra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Germany</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>1,435</td>
<td>218,945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Germany</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>2,792</td>
<td>691,011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>70,487</td>
<td>1,839,098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17,436</td>
<td>4,046,285</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows some of the major differences among orchestras in the four countries, and between major and regional orchestras in each country. Only in the United States do all symphony orchestras perform concerts exclusively; the other nations have several orchestras whose main mission is broadcast performances. Only half of the German orchestras perform concerts exclusively; many also perform for opera and theater productions. As might be expected given their multiple missions, the average size of German orchestras is larger than that of orchestras in the two English-speaking nations.

Regional orchestras in all countries tend to be more recently founded than major orchestras, to have a larger percentage of women players (especially in the United States and the United Kingdom), and (for East and West Germany only) to have a larger percentage of foreign workers. Major orchestra players in all countries have served in their orchestras, and in their positions, longer than have regional players, as have musicians in German orchestras (especially East Germany) relative to those in U.S. and U.K. orchestras.

Are Orchestra Structures and Operations Different Across Countries?

The answer is a clear yes. Among the questions we asked managers (in interviews) and players (on the survey) were several about how their orchestras operated as organizations. Players’ reports about six key features of their orchestras are summarized in Figure 1. The figure also shows the differences between major and regional orchestras in the United States, as well as those between London cooperatives, BBC orchestras, and regional contract orchestras in the United Kingdom. We review the major findings for each of the six measures shown in the figure below.²
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>East Germany</th>
<th>West Germany</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of orchestras in sample</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerts exclusively</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera and/or theater</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average orchestra size</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average date founded</td>
<td>1818</td>
<td>1867</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>1917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orchestra composition (averages)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of women players</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of foreign players</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player demographics (averages)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in orchestra</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in position</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of previous orchestras</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. The integrity of the orchestra as an ensemble—the degree to which it is an intact and stable ensemble, with clear and well-accepted norms about player behavior.

All orchestras score relatively high on this measure (the scale for this and all other measures ranges from a low of 1 to a high of 7). Orchestras in the two German nations have greater integrity as ensembles than do those in the two English-speaking nations, and major orchestras score higher than do regional orchestras.
2. Player involvement and opportunities—whether players have information and influence in the orchestra, share in its leadership, and have opportunities to improve their position.

Of the four countries, player involvement is highest in the former East Germany and lowest in the United Kingdom; but there are very large differences on this measure within the latter, with the London cooperatives scoring higher than any other group.

3. The adequacy of the orchestra's financial and material resources.

American and West German orchestras have more resources than do those in the United Kingdom and in East Germany, especially major U.S. orchestras. Within the United Kingdom, BBC orchestras are described as having more adequate resources than either the London cooperatives or the regional contract orchestras.

4. Player recognition—the degree to which excellent playing is rewarded.

Overall, players report that excellent playing is recognized and rewarded, especially in German orchestras and most of all in the London cooperatives.

5. The fairness and effectiveness of the orchestra's recruitment, auditioning, and selection processes.

Players also give favorable reviews to their orchestras' recruitment processes, especially in the two German nations. Major orchestras score higher than do regional orchestras in both the United States and the United Kingdom.3

6. The authority of the music director—the degree to which the music director is the only real boss in the orchestra.

Music director authority is highest in the United States (especially for major orchestras) and next highest in East Germany. Especially noteworthy is the score for the London cooperatives: players in these orchestras are indeed the masters of their own ensembles.

How About Player Motivation and Satisfaction?

As will be seen below, there also are some significant between-country differences in player motivation and satisfaction. Before examining them, however, let us position symphony musicians in the larger world of work. Over the last decade, we have administered surveys to a wide variety of groups and organizations. Three questions have been addressed in all of them:
First, how high is *internal work motivation*? Are people self-motivated to perform well, or do they rely on rewards or punishments administered by others, such as bosses? On the survey, people are asked how much they agree with statements such as “I feel good when I learn that I have performed well on this job” and “I feel awful when I do poorly in my work.” People who agree with such statements are internally motivated.

Second, how high is *general satisfaction*? To what extent do people agree with statements such as “Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with this job.”

Third, how high is satisfaction with *growth opportunities*? People are asked how happy they are with “the amount of personal growth and development I get in this job.”

For the first question, the level of internal motivation, symphony orchestra musicians push the top of the scale; their average score, across all orchestras and countries, is 6.2 out of a possible 7. No group or organization we have studied scores higher. Orchestra players are, indeed, fueled by their own pride and professionalism.

The news is mixed for the other two questions. For general satisfaction, orchestra players rank seventh among the thirteen groups we have studied:

1. Professional string quartet (highest; average score 6.5)
2. Airline cockpit crews
3. Economic analysts in the federal government
4. Mental health treatment teams
5. Airline flight attendants
6. Federal prison guards
7. **Symphony orchestra musicians** (average score 5.4)
8. Industrial production teams
9. Beer sales and delivery teams
10. Amateur theater company
11. Operating room nurses
12. Semiconductor fabrication teams
13. Professional hockey team (lowest; average score 4.4)

And for satisfaction with growth opportunities, orchestra players rank ninth:

1. Professional string quartet (highest; average score 6.2)
2. Mental health treatment teams
3. Beer sales and delivery teams
4. Industrial production teams
5. Economic analysts in the federal government
6. Airline cockpit crews
7. Airline flight attendants
8. Federal prison guards
9. Symphony orchestra musicians (average score 4.9)
10. Operating room nurses
11. Semiconductor fabrication teams
12. Professional hockey team
13. Amateur theater company (lowest; average score 4.1)

How Does Player Satisfaction Differ Across Countries?

With the above rankings as context, we now turn to between-country differences in player satisfaction. Figure 2 gives the findings for six different aspects of players’ satisfaction with their work, using the same format as in Figure 1.

General satisfaction.
Players in German orchestras are, overall, more satisfied than are their colleagues in the English-speaking nations—especially relative to those in the United Kingdom. Among U.K. players, general satisfaction is highest in the London cooperatives and lowest in the regional contract orchestras. There are no differences on this measure between players in major and regional orchestras in the United States.

Satisfaction with job security.
West German and U.S. players report being most secure in their jobs. Least secure are East German musicians, which is understandable given that the political events leading to reunification were well underway when we collected our data. Members of U.S. regional orchestras are more worried about their jobs than are their colleagues in major orchestras. Finally, members of the London cooperative orchestras are more concerned about job security than are players in BBC and regional contract orchestras—even though the London players are the most satisfied with their pay (see below).

Satisfaction with pay.
Overall, players are not happy with their compensation. Most satisfied are West German players, those in major U.S. orchestras, and those in the London self-governing orchestras (where players compensate
Figure 2. Player satisfaction

themselves on a per-service basis). Least satisfied are members of East German orchestras and players in U.S. and U.K. regional orchestras.

Satisfaction with orchestra management.
Symphony players also are not well satisfied with their managements, especially in BBC and regional contract orchestras in the United Kingdom. Players in U.S. major orchestras score lower on this measure than do those in regional orchestras, despite the fact (or possibly
because of the fact) that major orchestras have more managers on staff to support them and their work.

**Satisfaction with coworker relationships.**
Players report being generally well satisfied with the quality of their relationships with colleagues, and there are no significant differences on this measure among countries. Players in major U.S. orchestras, however, are relatively less satisfied with their collegial relations than are regional orchestra musicians.

**Satisfaction with opportunities for personal growth and development.**
Players in the United Kingdom are least happy with their opportunities for personal growth at work: growth satisfaction is lower for BBC orchestras than for the London cooperatives, and lowest of all for the U.K. regional orchestras. In the United States, by contrast, regional orchestra players are more satisfied with growth opportunities than are players in major orchestras. This finding, perhaps, reflects a real difference in mobility opportunities for these two groups of musicians—a matter to which we turn next.

**What Are the Career Patterns of Symphony Orchestra Musicians?**

We addressed this question in two ways. One, we analyzed the vacancies that developed in orchestras in the four countries between 1985 and 1989 to determine where departing players went and where new players came from. Two, we asked the sample of musicians who responded to our survey to report how long they had been with their present orchestras, how long they had been in their present positions in those orchestras, and the total number of symphony orchestras in which they had been employed. (We did not ask about nonorchestra employment, such as teaching and chamber ensemble playing.)

**How Frequently Do Players Change Orchestras?**

Not often. As is seen in the top panel of Figure 3, the average number of departures each year from all orchestras in each of our four countries is around four, except for U.S. orchestras, which averaged slightly more than six vacancies per year. Relative to other professions, there is not much career mobility for symphony orchestra musicians.
Figure 3. Orchestra vacancies and how they are filled

Figure 3 also shows that, for all four countries (and especially for the United Kingdom), more women are arriving in orchestras than are departing from them. This points to the gradual gender recomposition process that is occurring in symphony orchestras in all four countries, about which we have more to say later.
These data about vacancies, which are collected from orchestra records, are confirmed by musicians’ survey reports about their career histories, as is seen below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Under 40</th>
<th>40 and over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years in present orchestra</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>21 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in present position</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>19 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of orchestras</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, older players have served in their present orchestras for over twenty years and in the same position in those orchestras for almost all of that time. The typical player has been employed by only one or two orchestras other than the one in which he or she presently is serving. Younger musicians of course have shorter tenures in their orchestras, but they also do not exhibit much movement from orchestra to orchestra. Among all players in all four countries, older players in East German orchestras have the fewest career moves; younger players in U.S. orchestras have the most.

**Where Do Departing Musicians Go?**

The middle panel of Figure 3 shows that retirement is far and away the most common reason for departure among major orchestra players: 53% of all departures from major orchestras are due to retirement or death. For regional orchestras, departures are due mainly to players moving to other orchestras (45%) or to leaving professional music entirely (41%).

**Where Do Arriving Musicians Come From?**

The bottom panel of Figure 3 shows that most new arrivals in major orchestras come from other orchestras. By contrast, 86% of the regional orchestras’ new arrivals come either directly from school or from freelance work.

Although there are many exceptions to the picture painted by the averages reported above, it is nonetheless possible to identify a typical career pattern for an orchestra player. A young musician is likely to arrive at a regional orchestra directly from school or from freelance playing relatively early in his or her career. After a few years in that orchestra, the player may win an audition at a major orchestra.
or may abandon professional performance as a career. Most players who do move to a major orchestra may change orchestras one more time, or even twice, but eventually they settle in and continue in their position in that orchestra until retirement. Symphony orchestra playing is assuredly not a profession characterized by a great deal of career movement.

**What Is Happening as More Women Join Symphony Orchestras?**

As was seen in the top panel of Figure 3, one major change that is occurring in professional symphony orchestras is a steady increase in the proportion of players who are female. Because we had data from orchestras that varied widely in female representation, we were able to analyze the relationship between proportion of women and (a) the attitudes of individual players (the male veterans as well as the newly arrived females), (b) orchestral processes (such as the quality of players' relationships), and (c) the organizational features of orchestras. Our findings, summarized briefly below, are reported in detail in other publications.4

**How Does the Proportion of Female Players Vary Across Orchestras and Nations?**

Women first began to be accepted into symphony orchestras in the United States in the 1950s; it was not until the late 1970s that they began to appear in more than token numbers in British and German orchestras. The representation of women in orchestras as of 1990 is shown in the top panel of Figure 4.

Of the seventy-eight orchestras in our sample, only eight employ women and men in approximately equal numbers; the proportion of women in the orchestras we studied ranged from 2% to 59% female, with a median of 21%. As Figure 4 shows, the four countries varied substantially in female representation: the United States is highest, with a median of 36% female players, followed by the United Kingdom (30% women) and then the two German nations (16% women for both).

When women enter professions that previously have been dominated by males, they usually appear initially in lower-status organizations. We find this true as well for symphony orchestras. In each of
Women’s Representation in Orchestras in 1990

Representation of Women in Sections

Figure 4. The representation of women
the four countries, there is a significantly higher proportion of women in regional than in major orchestras. Here are the data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Proportion of women in 1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major Orchestras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Germany</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Germany</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is seen in the bottom panel of Figure 4, there also is variation in the representation of women within orchestra sections. These data were obtained by comparing the number of women in each section with the number that would be expected given section size and the overall number of women in each orchestra. The figure shows that women are overrepresented in the smaller strings (that is, the violins, violas, and cellos); they are underrepresented in the woodwind, percussion, bass, and (most of all) brass sections.

What Happens as the Proportion of Female Players Increases?

Given that professional symphony orchestras have from their inception been almost exclusively male, it is not surprising that the arrival of women in more than token numbers is generating some stress for orchestras and players.

To explore this phenomenon, we sorted the orchestras in our sample into five categories based on the proportion of the total membership that was female. Then we examined players' perceptions of their orchestras, and their own satisfaction with their life and orchestral work, across these five categories. Statistically reliable trends were obtained for nearly all measures as the proportion of women increased. Figure 5 shows the findings for six representative measures: two organizational features (integrity of the orchestra as an ensemble and adequacy of the orchestra's organization structure), two orchestral processes (the quality of the interpersonal relationships among players and the stability of the orchestra), and two player attitudes (degree of job involvement and satisfaction with job security).

Almost all of our measures show an initial decline as the proportion of women in the orchestra increases. For some of them, that downward trend continued uninterrupted (see, for example, the graphs
for integrity as an ensemble and for job involvement). For the majority of the measures, however, there comes a “tipping point” at which the downward trend reverses and, as the proportion of women continues to increase, things begin to improve.

The findings in Figure 5 are disconcerting. The entry of women into professional symphony orchestras apparently spawns tensions and problems for orchestras and their members. We considered various
alternative explanations for our findings, and we checked what players said on the survey against our own on-site interviews and observations. No matter how we inspected them, the findings held. Clearly, the traditional dictum “the more the better,” as it applies to women entering traditionally male orchestras, is too simple.

What Are the Main Stages of the Gender Recomposition Process?

Our findings show that gender dynamics in orchestras are qualitatively different at three succeeding stages: (1) when an orchestra has but a token number of women (10% or fewer female members), (2) when it is in transition (around 10–40% female), and (3) when it has become relatively gender balanced (40–60% female).

Orchestras with token female representation.
In male-dominated orchestras, neither the ensemble nor its members are obtaining the benefits (such as personal learning and improved task performance) that compositional diversity can bring. Our qualitative data suggest that many women find that there are strong incentives for them to keep a low profile, to comply with existing orchestral norms, and generally to be as nonintrusive as possible. This stance is costly to orchestras because it protects majority members from exposure to unfamiliar perspectives and from the need to scrutinize and reconsider traditional behavioral norms. On the other hand, it increases the likelihood that orchestras will run smoothly and it minimizes the kinds of tensions that often develop when an orchestra moves into what we call the transitional stage.

Orchestras in transition.
Organizational life for both female and male members takes a qualitative turn for the worse when the proportion of women reaches the transitional stage (10–40%). For the first time, there are enough women to form a significant subgroup in the orchestra. Women now have set of colleagues with whom they can share and test their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Moreover, it is now feasible for them to become a political force in an orchestra—something that is possible for a group, but rarely for an individual, in an established organization. And, as women become both more numerous and more powerful, men can no longer ignore the threat that women pose to their occupational status and to their control of their orchestras. Together, these separate processes for women and for men result in tightened group boundaries for both genders, increased cross-group stereotyping
and conflict, less social support across genders, and heightened personal tension for everyone. These problems do not automatically correct themselves as the proportion of women grows; indeed, it was not until women achieved a representation of over 40% that robust signs of improvement—the tipping point evident in Figure 5—was first seen.

*Relatively balanced orchestras.*
In gender-balanced orchestras, all members have plenty of people like themselves with whom to compare themselves and from whom to seek support. Moreover, members of both gender groups are likely to feel fully legitimate in the organization—neither closely scrutinized nor especially threatened. Under such circumstances, relationships between men and women begin to stabilize. And with both constituent groups strong, it now becomes feasible to develop relationships between men and women characterized more by mutual support than by conflict.

It is the regional orchestras in the United States that are mainly responsible for the upturn that occurs for many of our measures when the proportion of women approaches 50%. There is a world of difference between one of these orchestras and, for example, a major West German symphony that has but two or three female players. The former orchestra has completed its transition from male exclusivity to gender balance; the latter has still to begin. Female members of U.S. regional orchestras appear to have achieved a level of legitimacy and acceptance that, so far, is uncommon either in major U.S. orchestras or in most orchestras in other countries. It just may be that these often struggling regional orchestras are providing an advance look at what, if current trends continue, could become commonplace in orchestras around the world.

**What Helps Make an Orchestra into a Great Musical Ensemble?**

In the course of our research, we naturally encountered a great deal of variation among orchestras—in the munificence of their resources, certainly, but also in the quality of their players as instrumentalists and in the degree to which they operated as real ensembles. We found particularly interesting those orchestras whose members were not considered to be among the greatest instrumentalists in the world but who
nonetheless played together superbly. Also of interest were orchestras that *did* have the very finest players but that did not quite come together as ensembles.

We wondered if our impressions about these orchestras would be confirmed by others who were more qualified to make such assessments. So, with a great deal of help from our advisors, we found eighteen individuals who were willing to rate forty-one major orchestras from the four countries on two dimensions: the overall level of player talent of each orchestra and the degree to which each orchestra operates as a superb musical ensemble. Our eighteen assessors were all people with extensive cross-national orchestral experience: conductors and solo instrumentalists who perform with orchestras around the world, orchestra managers and union officers, and knowledgeable critics and music writers. There was extremely high agreement among the assessors; the index of interjudge agreement exceeded .90 for both dimensions (maximum possible: 1.0).

**What Factors Predict An Orchestra’s Overall Standing?**

The answer is straightforward: its financial strength. Well-off orchestras are able to attract and retain the finest players, conductors, and guest performers. They have adequate facilities, music libraries, and staff support. And, according to our experts’ ratings, it shows in their playing. This finding holds both within and between nations, with few exceptions. It is the tangibles, the money and the resources, the things that provide stability, that make the most difference in an orchestra’s overall excellence.

An orchestra’s financial strength, in turn, depends heavily on how it is governed and managed. In our research, we enumerated all the major decisions that have to be made in a symphony orchestra, from hiring players and staff to deciding about musical interpretations, and noted who had the authority to make each of those decisions in each orchestra we studied. The more say the board of directors and the managing director have in orchestral decision making, the greater the orchestra’s financial strength. The more say players have about orchestra decisions—whether directly (for example, through votes by the orchestra as a whole) or indirectly through the negotiated contract—the weaker it is financially. And, finally, orchestras in which the authority of the music director extends to organizational and operational decisions tend to be weaker financially than those in which the music director’s contributions focus mainly on artistic matters.
What Distinguishes Over- from Underperforming Orchestras?

As is illustrated in Table 2, overperforming orchestras are those that play much better as ensembles than would be expected given their level of player talent. Underperforming orchestras are those that play less well as ensembles than would be expected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of ensemble playing</th>
<th>Relatively high</th>
<th>Relatively low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overperforming</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orchestras</td>
<td>orchestras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Underperforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>orchestras</td>
<td>orchestras</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The joint effects of player talent and ensemble playing on orchestra performance.

Music director behavior, which did not distinguish excellent from poor orchestras overall, is the main factor that differentiates overperforming from underperforming orchestras. Music directors of overperforming orchestras spend more time with them, provide clearer musical direction, and engage in more hands-on coaching of players than do music directors of underperforming orchestras. Overperforming orchestras also tend to be composed of younger players who are highly engaged with their musical work and to be less well off financially than are underperforming orchestras.

There is a tension here. A strong board of directors can ensure that an orchestra has the financial wherewithal that makes good playing possible—but board influence that extends into musical and operational arenas does more harm than good. A strong music director can be critical to an orchestra in setting its artistic direction and in its development as a musical ensemble—but orchestras that are dominated by their music directors tend to get into trouble financially. It is the job of the managing director to balance these sometimes competing sources of influence, making sure that both the board and the music director do those things that they are uniquely positioned and equipped to do and that they refrain from extending their reach into arenas that are more appropriately dealt with by others.

Although we have a policy of not identifying specific orchestras, we can summarize our findings about over- and underperforming orchestras as follows. The prototypical overperforming orchestra is located in a medium-sized city, is not well off financially, and is mak-
ing do with a barely adequate concert hall. Its music director lives in
the orchestra's home city and spends considerable time working with
his relatively young, underpaid, but musically engaged players—both
as individuals and in sections.

The prototypical underperforming orchestra, on the other hand,
has long been recognized as one of the world's great orchestras.
Located in a major city, the orchestra's rehearsal and performance
facilities are superb. Although each year's budget presents a challenge
to management, players are among the best paid in the country. The
orchestra's famous conductor lives elsewhere, does many guest appear-
ances with other orchestras each year, and is with the orchestra only
for scheduled rehearsals and performances. Although players in this
orchestra are among the finest instrumentalists in the world, they do
not feel stretched by their musical work, and many report that playing
has become "just a job."

The very best orchestras, of course, are those located in the
upper right corner of the matrix in Table 2. These fortunate ensem-les tend to be those that have, simultaneously, fully adequate finan-
cial and material resources, superb instrumentalists, and a music
director who challenges orchestra players musically and is available to
work with them in meeting those challenges.

**What Has Happened to Orchestras in East Germany?**

When we began data collection for our research in 1989, the political
events that eventually led to reunification of the two German nations
were already underway. Among East German musicians and orchestra
managers, there was a considerable and understandable concern about
what the future would hold for them. We shared that concern, and
our earliest papers reflected upon the East German situation.6

We remained in touch with East German orchestras, managers,
and players as the events of reunification unfolded. Eventually, we
were able to prepare a report that assesses what happened to orchestras
and players when the socialist regime took power after World War II
and then again in 1990 when that regime fell. A brief summary of our
findings is provided below.7

**What Was the Impact of the Socialist Regime on East German Orchestras?**

In the first half of this century, before the socialist regime came to
power, German orchestras shared a common cultural tradition and
operated in a common political and economic environment. After
World War II, however, the context of East and West German
orchestras diverged radically, with those in the West becoming increasingly market oriented and those in the East coming increasingly under the control of central government agencies.

One tenet of the socialist regime's cultural policy was to bring the German musical tradition to all the people of the land, to blanket the country with orchestras. That policy was not mere propaganda. Twenty-nine new orchestras were created in a country that already had a higher density of orchestras than most nations; orchestras took their music to the places where people lived and worked rather than require that they travel to metropolitan concert halls; and citizens were actively encouraged, through exhortation but also through financial incentives, to take advantage of orchestral offerings. The effect was both to homogenize and to elevate the cultural level of the populace.

In implementing its cultural policy, the central government took control of virtually all decisions of consequence for orchestras and players, including finances, facilities, and the training and placement of musicians. Although no orchestra risked being closed, smaller orchestras became increasingly interdependent as they struggled to achieve their assigned objectives with insufficient resources and staff. Also, because managerial tasks were handled centrally, there was a sharp reduction at the local level both in orchestra autonomy and in managerial expertise.

Without question, these were major changes. Yet they did not destroy the commitment of East German orchestras to the centuries-old German musical tradition. Even at the very end of the socialist regime, our data show that orchestras in the two German nations were more similar to one another than either was to orchestras in the two English-speaking nations. Indeed, as the need and opportunity for East German orchestras to manage their own affairs declined under socialism, the historical and cultural traditions of these orchestras became, if anything, even more salient.

The power of those traditions is illustrated by what happened to the repertoire played by East German orchestras under state socialism. Official policy of the state concert and theater agency was that orchestras would emphasize in their programs music by contemporary composers from socialist countries. Although most people we interviewed assured us that this policy had been implemented, the data say otherwise. We selected one concert program from each orchestra in our sample (excluding special or festival programs and concerts led by guest conductors) and recorded the birth dates of the composers whose works were played. Only 8% of the works performed by East German
orchestras were by composers born in the twentieth century, compared to 20% for West Germany, 24% for the United Kingdom, and 32% for the United States. Far from being on the cutting edge of contemporary music, then, East German orchestras appear to have deepened their commitment to the classical repertoire that was central to their musical heritage.

What Was the Impact of Reunification on East German Orchestras?

When the socialist regime fell, the previously secure base of resources for the support of symphonic music in East Germany vanished almost overnight. Although transitional funding supplied by the Bonn government did keep all East German orchestras alive for the time being, no one knew what would happen to them when that funding ended.

The collapse of the central government resulted in an immediate increase in the orchestras’ autonomy. For the first time in over forty years, each orchestra now had the latitude to make its own decisions about personnel, operations, and finances. Success was by no means assured, however, because both a proactive orientation and management skill were required—qualities that had atrophied for many orchestras during their four decades under socialism.

Our findings show that major orchestras were far better positioned than regional orchestras to take advantage of the situation in 1991. Both the staffing of major orchestras and their recent histories contributed to their ability to respond competently to the threats and the opportunities that accompanied German reunification. Their structure more closely matched the international standard, and their managers generally were better qualified and more knowledgeable than those of regional orchestras. Moreover, the top orchestras in East Germany had toured internationally, which gave them the opportunity to observe, interact with, and learn from the experiences of leaders and players in other countries. When the time came to take action, therefore, these orchestras were more disposed to act—and had greater capability to do so competently. Regional orchestras continued to exist, but they risked losing their special prestige as the orchestras of the people, along with many of the material resources that they needed to accomplish their musical work.

Leadership also moderated the impact of reunification on orchestras. When leadership was present and constructive during the 1990–91 transition period—whether provided by existing leaders, brought by a new music director or technical director, or (as often occurred) taken on by players themselves—the well-being of orchestras and
players generally improved. When leadership was absent or misguided, on the other hand, the orchestra’s situation tended to deteriorate.

As the economic context of orchestras in the former East Germany becomes increasingly market oriented, the gap between major and regional orchestras may widen even further, and self-fueling performance spirals may develop. Only major orchestras, for example, appear to have material resources and network contacts sufficient to engage leaders (managing directors as well as music directors) of the quality needed to see them through what continues to be a turbulent period of transition. The result may be a kind of social triage that separates organizations that have adequate adaptive capacity from those that do not. There is a risk that the eventual outcome could be a polarization of orchestras in East Germany—one in which the already rich become richer, and the now poor face increasing threats to their very survival.

Notes


