



UNA VOCE

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Early in February the Calgary Philharmonic performs their first concerts since suspension of operations last October. An initial proposal to cut the number of musicians from 66 to 53 was a major stumbling block in the re-structuring process. The Orchestre symphonique de Québec has been there, and Eline Brock Sanheim cautions against such measures.

The Québec Symphony Orchestra in 1989

was an orchestra on its way up in the musical world of Canada. We had a wonderful conductor, Simon Streatfeild, whose musicality and humanity made the orchestra a wonderful place to work. The musicians were dedicated, talented people who worked together to make the best possible artistic product for our public, which was large and loyal. There is a long history of sincere appreciation for music here in Québec City where Canada's first orchestra was established in 1902. In 1989, the bigger and louder the concert, the better. Opera, choral/symphonic repertoire, and large-scale symphonies of the late Romantic and early 20th Century were guaranteed sell-out concerts for us. Brahms, Mahler, Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Mussorgsky and Hindemith were played regularly, and the public loved it.

A wonderful opportunity came to us in the spring of 1990; we would replace the French National Orchestra (they had cancelled their appearance at the last minute) for a season concert at Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto. Within days, we arrived in Toronto to play Shostakovich 5th Symphony. The public and the critics were astounded. The reviews spoke of the "unknown" orchestra from Québec, as a "jewel among Canadian orchestras," and predicted how we would make our mark in the coming years. With the subsequent recording and tour offers, it seemed that Canada would soon talk about *two* wonderful orchestras in the Province of Québec.

Two months later, with no warning to the negotiating committee (we were in contract talks at the time), the members of the orchestra learned through the newspapers that our promising orchestra would be gutted. Our 70-member symphony would be reduced to 53 full-time and 17 part-time players. What had been, until 1988, a 35 week guaranteed season (and in previous years, the orchestra had worked as

much as 38 weeks) was reduced to 30 weeks. In order to slash the \$1 million deficit, 53 musicians would lose 5 weeks of work, and 17 musicians would lose 20 weeks of work, an astounding 57% cut in salary.

A very painful year followed, with bitter consequences. The board of directors refused to listen to any criticism of their plan, and in spite of the musicians dire warnings, they insisted on going ahead. Simon Streatfeild, after months of private discussions and pleading with the board not to cripple the orchestra, finally came out publicly in favour of the musicians and against the cuts, and for his loyalty to the orchestra he was threatened, intimidated, and ultimately, fired. The board employed the same method it had used to fire James DePriest several years earlier: they held a news conference to announce the new season, didn't invite Maestro Streatfeild, and left his name off the official program. The consequences were disastrous for our orchestra.

Although we had successfully argued the point that the 17 positions were used for nearly all of the 30 weeks proposed in the new seasons, we were only successful in getting their weeks up to 22, rather than 15. This (at least) allowed these musicians to qualify for unemployment insurance. But many of these musicians decided to leave Québec, as 22 weeks of a pitiful salary could not sustain them. We lost many wonderful players during the following years – to orchestras in Calgary, Toronto, Montreal, Germany, U.S. – with some leaving the business entirely.

Musicians who auditioned to replace those forced to leave never stayed long. And in one year, the members of Les Violons du Roy, most of whom had positions with the orchestra left. That, plus some other resignations, left us missing 7 violinists out of the 22 full-complement in the two sections.

Eventually, because the pay was so poor, and our reputation so bad, few would attend our auditions. The Music Director at the time, Pascal Verrot, reacted by making up incredibly difficult audition lists in order to discourage unqualified candidates from applying. With a marathon to prepare – for a salary of \$20,000 per year, poor working conditions, an inexperienced conductor, and absolutely no respect – nobody came to audition. Unfortunately we became known on the audition circuit as pretentious snobs who never hired anyone anyway, so why bother putting in the effort to prepare an audition? It ultimately took us 10 years to replace all of the violinists, with the last position being filled only in 2001.

The morale and the concerts were terrible. What could one expect? It became an embarrassment to admit that you played for the OSQ. But the most insulting aspect of this whole saga was that we had been right, all along. Without enough musicians to play any larger repertoire, we constantly relied on subs. As there were no specialists left in Québec City, we had to import them from Montreal or Ottawa. With the cost of the per diems, travelling fees, and doubling instruments, many subs from out of town netted about \$1,000 per week. Regular players with several years of seniority made just over \$600 per week, but take off the taxes, and we ended up with about \$350 a week. The worst of it was, the corporation didn't save a penny.

After 7 years with Pascal Verrot, it became clear that we needed to change the conductor. We had lost so much public that we had a deficit year after year. We were known as an orchestra in constant conflict, and a "bad risk." Nobody wants to back a financial loser, so Canada Council, the governments, and sponsors left in droves. Nobody wanted to touch us with a 10-foot pole.

The decision was made to search for a new conductor. Kees Bakels was brought in to insure some artistic integrity and continuity for the time it would take to establish a new music director. He helped to put some discipline back into the orchestra, technically and musically. After acting as the largest chamber orchestra in the world for 7 years (the result of a very inexperienced conductor up front), we had to re-learn the art of following a conductor. This is not an easy thing to do. With so many new players, it was a different ensemble that needed to establish itself and its sound.

THE TURNAROUND

We were so lucky to find Yoav Talmi, an Israeli conductor who had previously been Music Director in San Diego, and who is also Music Director in Hamburg, Germany. This is what began our amazing turn-around. Here is his list of priorities to bring an orchestra to the international calibre it deserves.

PRIORITY #1: INSPIRE THE MUSICIANS TO PLAY WELL.

This is not hard to do when you have a good conductor who respects you. Musically, he is exceptional. Technically, he is exceptional. He expects perfection, and can achieve excellent results by treating his musicians as colleagues. Every musician, who has not become too jaded by "the business" wants to play their best and produce the best product that they can. Use this energy.

PRIORITY #2: MEET WITH POLITICIANS AT EVERY LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT.

Talmi came to Québec and immediately asked for meetings with not just the Minister of Cultural Affairs, but also with the Premier of the Province, then Lucien Bouchard; the Mayor of the City of Québec, Jean-Paul l'Allier (who, lucky for us, is a fantastic supporter of the Orchestra); the Canada Council, etc. When M. Bouchard was invited to

concerts and did not show up (likewise for the Min. of Cul. Affairs), M. Talmi talked about it to the newspaper. Why did they not come? This is the capital of Québec; do they not have pride in the Capital Orchestra?

When he was being stonewalled about a meeting with Bouchard, he told the board and the newspapers that "...it is not *if* I will meet with the Premier, but *when*." The meeting happened within a very short time. The goal, of course, is to argue the importance of cultural institutions with the persons who have actual power to do something about your situation.

PRIORITY #3: TO GIVE BACK SOME PRIDE AND DIGNITY TO THE MUSICIANS, START BY PAYING THEM A DECENT SALARY.

We hadn't had a pay-raise in 10 years. The 5 week cut and the 2.5% annual cost of living increase meant that we were now earning about 35% less than we had in 1989, and that amount was not enough to live on (in 1989) if you were the sole bread-winner in the family.

Most of the part-time positions had disappeared due to attrition. Those musicians who were still here had gradually been brought back up to 30 weeks, except for the Tuba and Harp. (This was accomplished by solidarity – the musicians in our orchestra refused to take a pay increase until all musicians were back at full-time. We felt it was our moral obligation.) Our abysmal salary situation needed to change.

The direct result of Talmi insisting on meeting with politicians and raising the level of awareness about the orchestra netted a \$2.5 million, one-time grant from the Québec Gov., to be distributed over two years. This eliminated our deficit, and helped us to recoup a salary catch-up of 28.5%. This was a tough negotiation. Although the money had been asked for, and given, in order to address the musicians' salaries, the board was reluctant to give us a raise. They considered a one-time "bonus" which would leave our salary the same. Talmi and the musicians committee fought bitterly hard to make them understand that the level of the orchestra could not increase with such a poor salary to offer potential newcomers. It took 9 months to make them understand. We were very happy that the Tuba and Harp, after 10 years as part-time musicians, finally were back in the fold as full-time members.

PRIORITY #4: INCREASE THE NUMBER OF FULL-TIME MUSICIANS.

This enables us to play bigger repertoire with a certain guarantee of quality. We were at 58 full-time musicians. Too many for a chamber orchestra, not enough for a symphony. The goal was to add 12 new positions, to bring us up to 70 again. So far, we have added 8, and are at 66 full-time, NO PART-TIME. We still have 4 to go, but the money situation makes that unlikely for the moment.

PRIORITY #5: TOURING AND RECORDING ARE ESSENTIAL.

This point was also a difficult sell, but with the phenomenal success of our "Concert Français" recording with James Ehnes, the board is now on-board, so to speak. An

orchestra must be visible to attract a public and those all-important funding dollars. Example: Les Violons du Roy. They have toured extensively all over the world, and done many, many recordings. Result? They are very, very popular, well known worldwide, and very successful. You can't go a day without hearing about them, reading about them or hearing some news from them in the media. They are *everywhere*. The marketing of the group is fantastic, but one must have something concrete to market, n'est ce pas?

Our third recording has just come out, "100 Ans de Danses", and "Concert Français" won the ADISQ award, disc of the month in Europe from two French magazines, and received a Grammy nomination. We have one recording project for this season, and two tentatively scheduled for next season.

Our first real tour will be a Western Canada Tour to celebrate our 100th Anniversary. From 31 March to 14 April 2003, we will play Vancouver, Banff, Regina, Winnipeg, Ottawa and Toronto. Please, any and all, come out to see us. We'd love to see you. James Ehnes will accompany us, playing the Saint-Saens Violin Concerto.

PRIORITY #6: BUILD AN OFFICE MANAGEMENT TEAM WHICH IS DYNAMIC AND COMMITTED.

Our new General Director was announced in November. His name is Michel Letourneau and so far things seem to be going well in terms of attitude and direction. He replaced the interim-turned-permanent previous director, who was not very successful in running the orchestra. He didn't share the vision of the Music Director, and had no confidence in the orchestra itself. The office staff has turned over so many times in the last five years that there are, once again, new people in the office whom I have not yet met.

This turnover is a bad sign, especially as many people left for reasons of burnout. This points to problems with the administration. Obviously, if the staff is fine but the General Manager burns out, the structure puts too much work on his/her plate, and he/she has not learned how to delegate. In our case it was the opposite. The GM was quite comfortable, but the office staff was run ragged. Working 7 days a week, sometimes from 8 am 'til midnight, was not uncommon among some staffers. The marketing team also has to be committed, must like classical music, go to concerts, and be open to suggestions from everyone – like musicians. We might know something.

PRIORITY #7: BECOME INVOLVED WITH THE LOCAL MUSIC SCHOOLS AND DEVELOP A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP.

We just finished a week of Mahler 2 "The Titan." There were 330 people on the stage. How is that possible? Do you know how much that costs?

Bring in the Conservatory and the Faculty of Music Students. Our union Local allows one concert per year for which the students are not paid in cash, but for whom the payback in terms of experience is much more important. The students (and the orchestra.) get to do repertoire which is too expensive to play in Canada in these tight financial times. The

students learn from the pros (who are also their teachers), and we can do the show as Mahler wanted. One of the two concerts was to benefit Laval University for their 150th Anniversary, so they got the door for that night, the other was our "official" Concert of the Century. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

As for the musicians, what can we do?

1) PAY ATTENTION! Apathy is our greatest enemy!

2) JOIN THE CORPORATION. You'd be amazed how this small act can really worry a board into being less cavalier. It is powerful to just be in the room.

3) MAKE FRIENDS WITH BOARD MEMBERS. I don't mean you have to have them over to your house for supper (although that's a good idea, too). Have some musicians from the executive set up a breakfast or lunch meeting with 3 or 4 members of the board and exchange ideas. Find out what they are thinking, and let them know the perspective from our end of the organization.

In our orchestra, the problem arose when control was taken over by a small group of individuals who gave few details and hid information from others, then held votes on topics which others weren't well-enough informed about. This could be a recurring problem if we are not careful. Be watchful for board members who try to stack the board with buddies who will vote their way.

Expand your circle of influence. Once you have 2 or 3 key persons with whom you have established a good and trusting relationship, invite some others whom you think might be receptive. (Information and communication is your best weapon to counter a secretive and totalitarian-type board.) The more you get to know the board, and they you, the better off you'll be.

Also, actively recruit new board members. Do you have a neighbour who subscribes to the orchestra, and who might be interested in joining the board? Even better if the person is a professional, such as a lawyer, or a corporate type. Try to get musicians or artistic professionals onto the board, even though it's a harder sell. This balance is important to the functioning of a non-profit cultural organization.

4) MAKE YOURSELF A POSITIVE PLAYER IN YOUR COMMUNITY, AND DON'T BE SHY ABOUT PUBLICIZING IT. Last year we did a blood-drive with Héma-Québec, with lots of media coverage. This was a very important musician-driven activity that allowed us to give something back to the community and to help cast a more positive light on the musicians of our community. We have other projects coming up which are in the planning stages. Musicians are so often accused of being leeches on society's purse, taking tax-money and giving nothing in return. Let's prove that this is not true. The NAC in Ottawa does the coat-drive for kids. You could try an event such as a blood-donor clinic, sending chamber groups to play (on a volunteer basis) at hospitals or Seniors Centres, a food-drive for your local

food-bank, or even adopting a Foster-Child in need from overseas. It doesn't matter what you choose, as long as two things are clear to the public:

a) The musicians' association is the co-ordinator for the event, NOT the Orchestra management.

b) Everyone involved is a volunteer, and the event is a gift to your community.

The rewards of helping others are obvious but, if you want to be purely selfish, your image in the public eye will be greatly enhanced. The one-on-one with the public is great for people to identify with you as a person and not a tuxedo-wearing geek. It can also net you some wonderful contacts.

5) TRY TO DEVELOP A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR LOCAL UNION OFFICE, AND SEE WHAT THEY CAN OFFER YOU. We're exceptionally lucky in Québec City that we have a dynamic and committed team at our local Guild office. They provide a wealth of services, including innovative and creative solutions to some problems we encounter. The phrase "there is more than one way to skin a cat," comes to mind ... look outside the box. I know that not all cities or Locals are as lucky, but see what can be done.

To sum up:

- You need a committed, dynamic, "I don't take 'no' for an answer" music director with vision, who still manages to (mostly) respect the musicians.
- You need a board to accept that vision and take the risk.
- You need a management team who does the same, and works hard (without killing the staff).
- You need musicians who are willing to make a few well-chosen sacrifices in order to advance the orchestra. Think of it as an investment.
- You need to help turn around public and political opinion about artists and their importance and relevance in society.
- Keep contact with politicians of all stripes. An election could completely change your financial situation, for better or worse.

That being said, a change in government in Québec in the next year could put us right back in the position Calgary, and some

other Canadian orchestras, face right now. Unfortunately, we have no more guarantees than any orchestra in Canada.

We learned the hard way that temporary cuts always last longer than promised. Penalizing the musicians for what is not working in the organization sets up a climate of hostility which is easily seen by the public and the funding bodies, and is toxic for the organization as a whole.

Let's hope that we, and other orchestras across North America, can learn from our mistakes. And let's start to wake up the public about the true cost of a cultureless society.

Eline Brock Sanheim

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OCSM/OMOSC DELEGATES 2002-2003

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Edmonton Symphony – Donald Plumb
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Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony – Sophie Drouin
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WHY JOIN THE OCSM-LIST E-MAIL FORUM ?

As members of an orchestra that is new to OCSM/OMOSC, it has become clear to us that one of the main advantages of the organization is that it facilitates communication among orchestras. In order to fulfill this objective, it is apparent that the ocsm-list e-mail forum is one of the best tools that our organization has at its disposal. Here are some of the opportunities that are available to those on the list:

- being informed about what is taking place in other orchestras
- listening in on, and participating in, discussions related to life in an orchestra
- receiving and sharing information on a variety of topics
- soliciting help or receiving help from colleagues in a timely manner

To give the list a try, talk to your delegate, or subscribe at our website <www.ocsm-omosc.ca>. You will have the following options:

- receive individual messages
- receive a daily digest of messages
- receive no e-mails, but have access to the messages at the Yahoo site <www.groups.yahoo.com/group/ocsm-list>

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