



UNA VOCE

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What's going on here?

On December 13, 2001 the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra was locked out by its management. They were preceded in that strategy by the Calgary Philharmonic in October. At the same time, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra re-opened their agreement and The Toronto Symphony was threatened with bankruptcy for the second time in 10 years.

A few years ago I commented in the *International Musician* that Canadian orchestras have a spotty history of work-stoppages and by that I meant that neither management nor musicians seemed to have the stomach for them. Up to that time, the only strikes were in Ottawa at the National Arts Centre in 1989 and Montreal in 1998. There had been crises, of course, like the Vancouver Symphony shutdown in 1988 and threats of bankruptcy in Toronto in 1992, and Symphony Nova Scotia in 1995. No one was getting rich through the '90s but at least there were no devastating concessions. We still don't have the appetite for labour unrest, but it is quickly becoming the reality in Canada.

The more things change...

OCSM Newsletter – January 1990.

"When (NAC) Music Producer Jack Mills told the National Arts Centre Orchestra November 30 that the board had ratified the new collective agreement, the announcement formally ended an acrimonious seven-week strike that made news headlines across Canada. The musicians had ratified the agreement a week

earlier, after weeks of talk-no-talk, management backing away from what had been perceived by the musicians as an earlier agreement, until the community – and the newspapers – had had enough of the sometimes vicious arguments..."

In October 2001, Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra Board Chair Byron Neiles characterized the CPO contract as "too rich" for the environment so he, along with Calgary Philharmonic Society President Jack Mills locked out their 64 musicians. This in a boomtown where according to recent studies, "Calgary has been doing very well, growing 6.5% in GDP in 2000" and the majority of Calgarians "support an increase in municipal funding for the arts."

In a nutshell, the management proposed cuts totalling 16% including 4 fewer weeks, 5% less weekly base and pension at 6% rather than the current 8%. After a four-week lockout the season was reduced from 41 weeks to 38 weeks and paid vacation weeks reduced from 4 to 3. The weekly rate for musicians is frozen in the first year and there is a five per cent increase in the second.

In Vancouver, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra jiggled the final year of their contract. By all accounts they were able to work out a mutually agreeable deal that maintains the 19% increase over the four-year term of the agreement, but the musicians are donating four weeks of salary this year only. Salaries for all staff are frozen at 2000-01 levels. There was no finger pointing and to be fair, there were many external influences that led to the re-opener.

In Toronto, the serial that began in 1999 (or perhaps 1992) resumed in September, and finally played itself out with a ratification vote on Dec. 17. Following the strike in 1999 the TSO, with the help of the Symphony Orchestra Institute, set up a joint committee to address the state of relations in the orchestra (reported in *UNA VOCE* v. 8 n. 3). It never

went anywhere after Executive Director Ed Smith took over the reins. Before the first media blackout in the current crisis, Smith (former ED of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra) threw in the towel with the words:

"The cancer has spread too far into the body. It's not just a matter of treating one limb or one organ. These are strong words, I know. But that's the best analogy I can think of. The cancer within the TSO is everywhere."

It was in that atmosphere that the TSO teetered on the brink of bankruptcy. The result is stunning. As a point of reference, the TSO agreement at the end of the 1991-92 season averaged \$1,140 per week for a 50-week season (\$57,000 per annum). The cleaver came down later that year with a 16% cut. Ten years later it looks like this:

Weeks: cut from 46 to 43 this season; down to 40 in the next 2 seasons.

Salary: for the 24 weeks beginning with ratification is \$1091; in 2002-03 it is \$1406 per week for an annual salary of \$56,240. The negotiated fee for a third year (extension) is \$1475 per week. On top of that are numerous changes to working conditions.

At the last minute there was a misunderstanding about the last 3 weeks of this season – they were completely gone, not a 15% (or even 20%) cut – they simply disappeared. Despite the severity, a clear majority voted in favour of the measures to avert bankruptcy.

All of this was done through a media blackout, even though it was not officially a negotiation. Since the musicians of the TSO ratified the agreement on Dec. 17, there has yet to be anything in the news and we're not expecting any until early January. We know that there's a deal (this was written on Dec. 27), but the public still doesn't.

In Winnipeg, the WSO management's final offer included laying off two of 67 musicians (including the chair of their negotiations team) and the option to reduce the current season from 38 weeks to as few as 34. In addition, weekly wages would be frozen this year. They've offered 3% increases in each of the next two years, but the number of weeks could be reduced to 35 next year and 36 the year after. The WSO's last contract, a six-year arrangement that included three years of wage freezes, expired Aug. 31.

(update - The WSO reached agreement on a new contract on Jan. 15.)

Can Canadian orchestras survive as top-flight ensembles after suffering these measures? Most think they will survive, but no one seems to think they will flourish for years to come. For the TSO, 1992 was not devastating, but this one? There are currently 93 players under contract. Two principal players have already found employment elsewhere and there are approximately 30 musicians who will reach retirement in the next 8 years.

There are many questions being asked across Canada. Did the TSO Board agree to a contract that they had no intention of honouring? Is there some sort of collusion among orchestra managements in Canada? Why impose unpalatable terms to force a strike or lockout? Is that simply an easy cost-cutting measure to save a few weeks in musicians' salaries?

And where is Orchestras Canada in all of this? OCSM removed itself as ex-officio Board member of Orchestras Canada (OC) at the 2000 OCSM Conference in Calgary. We had a unique situation in Canada where the AFM and OCSM both attended OC meetings. The AFM is still there, but OCSM has no intention of going back until there is a clear indication from Orchestras Canada that they will address these questions. The feeling of co-operation is quickly dissipating. If there has been a nation-wide breakdown among the major players in symphonic music in the past decade, this is it, and it must be rectified.

Steve Mosher, OCSM 2nd VP

In the September 29, 2001 issue of the Globe & Mail, arts columnist Robert Everett-Green made a few trenchant observations on the state of Canadian orchestras under the title "Orchestras in the Pit". OCSM President Rob McCosh offers his comments.

ORCHESTRAS IN THE PIT ONLY PART OF THE PIT

There is a Canada-wide malaise and Robert Everett-Green only gets it partly right for several reasons. First of all, there was no input from the American Federation of Musicians, the union that represents musicians from Halifax to Victoria and major centres in between? Second, Mr. Everett-Green needed to flesh out the reasons behind both the successes and failures in Canadian orchestras. Third, his conclusion that orchestras will only have a bright future if they

have the “will and flexibility” to change their institutions, is but a part of the solution.

The Canada-wide malaise can be explained in large extent by: lack of leadership at every level; lack of public outcry about the cuts to public funding and arts-based education and; the one Mr. Everett-Green gets right, lack of financial support at every level, which is related to lack of leadership. Let’s start with the lack of leadership.

We lack leadership on many orchestral boards because they have adopted the zero-deficit business model. That may be an appropriate for-profit business strategy but is less appropriate in a not-for-profit cultural institution which should be striving for artistic growth and excellence. There is a lack of leadership by Corporate Canada, which is represented on every orchestral board, because they, by and large, have taken control of the financial agenda. Zero-deficits have been deified not only by business but also the general public, government, granting bodies and the managements of cultural institutions. That control often has a negative impact on the artistic agenda, to the point where Arts Stabilization programs (cooperative funding ventures between corporations and municipal or provincial governments to help fund cultural organizations) have put a gun to the heads of boards and managements in the form of zero-deficits or risk being booted out of the program.

The training for arts managers in Canada is still in the dark ages compared to the U.S. but the conundrum is that the good ones who do come to the fore are quickly snapped up by much better salaries in the private sector. Endowments are nowhere near the size they need to be to stabilize the institutions. The restrictive guidelines, such as access only to the interest generated by the endowment for operating revenue, is at best a band-aid. While there are positive examples of philanthropy in Canada there simply is not the same history or level of philanthropy as in the U.S. which has something to do with our risk-averse national character but even more likely to do with a lack of leadership regarding federal tax laws which do not encourage giving to the arts. And why, despite repeated pleas from the cultural sector, have these tax laws not changed? Because there has been no public outcry and no independent initiative taken by our elected leaders. After all, politicians have one overriding agenda – to get re-elected. If the citizens of this

country want to have orchestras, culture needs to be put on the politicians' radar screen.

Other governments have shown leadership. The city of San Francisco has recognized the incredible financial spin-offs the hospitality and tourism industry receive from cultural activity within their city. As such, the city levies a hospitality tax on the industry, which the industry recognized as only fair considering their symbiotic relationship with the city’s cultural institutions. Our Federal Government, in its hypocritical wisdom, takes in millions of dollars from the sale of tobacco products, dollars which are then used however it chooses. Then they make it impossible for these companies to continue their strong financial sponsorship of cultural events and institutions. The institutions would not have had such a problem with the end of this association had the federal government shown leadership or a plan to replace this sponsorship. The Australian government took the same problem and created a healthy solution by taxing tobacco products and then using this “sin tax” to help fund its sport and cultural programs. The world knows how healthy their sport program is.

Mr. Everett-Green cites Symphony Nova Scotia’s near-death experience in 1995. What he fails to mention is that it was the musicians who showed leadership by refusing to accept the board's wish to declare bankruptcy. They were also the leaders in convincing the board and management to go public with their financial problems, whereas the appointed “leaders” wanted to keep their situation quiet, in the mistaken belief that it would damage ticket and donor revenue. The people of Nova Scotia responded by donating \$250,000, which got the orchestra to the end of the season. Furthermore, it was the musicians who finally convinced the “leaders” that they needed to be more relevant to their community by structuring a Pops series that hired local musicians to play the music of their region, which at least initially, was phenomenally successful from at least a community and revenue point of view. In the past few years, a major donation has been given to tour the province to bring the orchestra to schools outside of the metro area.

This brings me to the second issue: cuts to arts-based education. Every time the federal government uses cuts to federal transfer payments to the provinces to reduce their deficit, the provinces cut in kind to their education funding. And what always

goes first? The arts, because they are viewed as a frill. This, even though more studies than I care to dust off have shown a direct positive correlation between the performance of students in core areas such as math and their involvement in musical activities. How does this affect our orchestras? We are losing our future audience. Further to that, our donors and board members often come out of our audience. Even at the most basic level there is a loss of understanding in the general public and we are creating a nation of specialists instead of well-rounded citizens – those able to apply the creative, outside-the-box thinking associated with arts education. Now the Canada Council, through a return to higher levels in federal funding, has passed on this funding to orchestras with the codicil that orchestras become more involved in education and outreach. While all orchestral musicians recognize the importance of education it must be stressed that orchestra education programs cannot be viewed as a replacement for music education in our schools. Orchestras could do better in these areas but there needs to be a focused discussion among all the stakeholders and communities as to how these programs can best fit the needs of their “clients” and communities.

Mr. Everett-Green identifies “the assumption of broader responsibility by musicians, and more open management” as “another important trend.” This trend has been around for at least a decade when concessionary agreements were the norm across the country. By and large this was the bone tossed by boards and managements as a way to ease the financial pain the musicians were experiencing by supposedly sharing the power. It is unfortunate that it took crises such as near bankruptcy, strike or lockout to get the boards and managements to consider musician input and representation. However, oftentimes the increased representation that the musicians had at the board and management committee level was one of blatant tokenism. Some actually believe that, if musicians were truly intelligent, we would have gone into a career that actually paid a living wage. Without a shared trust, open communication and respect, this “trend” has only meant increased frustration for the participating musicians, with some fortunate exceptions.

If there is one bright light in this malaise it has been the continued striving for performance excellence by the musicians. Canadian orchestras are

not headed for extinction but the landscape will look very different unless 1) creative solutions are found for stable, ongoing funding; 2) our corporate and elected leaders go the more challenging road of raising revenue as opposed to the easier path of cuts, 3) charitable giving is increased to a 100% tax deduction for not-for-profit cultural organizations, 4) we return to stable arts programs in our public schools, 5) there is better training and programs in arts administration and. 6) there is real communication, trust and respect among the stakeholders within our individual orchestral constituencies. Above all, the public has to show politicians and boards they want a high standard of excellence from its cultural institutions. The people of Nova Scotia said yes; it’s time for the rest of the country to respond in kind.

Rob McCosh, OCSM President

OCSM/OMOSC 2001 - 2002

DELEGATES

Calgary Philharmonic – Mark Johnson
COC Orchestra – Colleen Cook
Edmonton Symphony – Andrew Bacon
Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony – Doug Lavell
NAC Orchestra – Michael Namer
National Ballet Orchestra – Shelley Brown
Hamilton Philharmonic – Ken MacDonald
Orchestra London – Karen Kjeldson
Orch. s. de Montréal – Vivian Lee
Orch. s. de Québec – Simon Jacobs
Orch. Métropolitain – Cathy Martin
Regina Symphony – Gary Borton
Saskatoon Symphony – Don Schmidt
Symphony Nova Scotia – Shimon Walt
Thunder Bay Symphony – Jeff Gibson
Toronto Symphony – Susan Lipchak
Vancouver Symphony – Brian Larson
Victoria Symphony – Bob Fraser
Windsor Symphony – James Ormston
Winnipeg Symphony – Arlene Dahl

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