

Harmony

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Contract Renewal Process: Through Musicians' Lenses

A Roundtable

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Contract Renewal Process: Through Musicians' Lenses

Staff and board members of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (SPCO) chose to share in *Harmony* their constituencies' experiences during the contract renewal process through single-author essays. The five musicians who served as members of the Contract Renewal Group (CRG) chose to share their experiences through an Institute roundtable. What follows is an edited transcript of that roundtable.

Institute: Please introduce yourselves and describe your involvement with the SPCO.

Kyu-Young Kim: I am the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's associate concertmaster and am on sabbatical leave this year. I have been a member of the orchestra since 2001.

Tom Kornacker: I have been with the orchestra since 1977. I was principal second violin for 23 years and am now co-principal second violin. I am also the current chair of the orchestra committee.

Sarah Lewis: I am a cellist and have been with the orchestra for five years.

Charles Ullery: I am the SPCO's principal bassoon and have been a member of the orchestra for 28 years.

Herb Winslow: I joined the orchestra in 1981 and am the orchestra's principal horn. I have been involved in negotiations since 1987.

Institute: The contract renewal process that the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra used to reach its most recent collective bargaining agreement included representatives from each constituency who worked collaboratively from beginning to end. From your perspectives as members of the orchestra, describe for our readers what you consider to be the important elements of working in this way.

Ullery: I've been in this orchestra for nearly 30 years, and probably the most important element of the process for me was the fact that there were no trades made in this negotiation. We looked at each and every issue in light of what was good for the organization and reached consensus on each issue. But let me back up a bit. Because many of us who were involved in this process had

been involved in negotiations in the past, initially we wanted to be in caucuses to ask ourselves what we should say, to decide whether we should be frank. By the time we reached the end of the process, we were in the position that anyone could say anything. In fact, what might be viewed as strange alliances developed on some issues. On any given issue, we might have an orchestra member and a board member debating heatedly with another musician and a staff member in our quest to get at the truth. The process encouraged devil's advocacy and pushing back, and we all participated. It really did become a process in which one did not think of oneself as only a musician. Each of us had the opportunity to give the orchestra a very positive direction.

Winslow: Our ability to interact with the board directly was new to me in this process. In past negotiations, anything the musicians wanted to say to the board, or that the board wanted to say to the musicians, was filtered through a member of the staff. As a result, there were always open questions as to whether what one was hearing was really the other side's true feelings about an issue. In my opinion, the fact that the process we used in this contract renewal encouraged speaking directly with board members to let them hear the musicians' issues and concerns, and then having board members address us directly to share their perspectives, opened up the thought processes for all of us. In this instance, in this orchestra, we had a convergence of people in positions of leadership that offered opportunities for very open and honest conversations.

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Institute: Herb, what I think I'm hearing from you is a ringing endorsement of what was a very long process.

Winslow: That's correct. This time around, I don't think it could have been done in a shorter time because we really wrestled with issues that we had never addressed before. Having gone through the process, we will have less wrestling with issues in the future and more determining where we want to go and what steps we need to take to get there.

Kornacker: Let me add that there was an incredible educational component to the whole process. We had the opportunity to learn directly about board members' views of us. And we had the opportunity to educate board members directly about what the life of a musician truly is. We learned where each of us was coming from and how we had gotten into the room; we learned how to work on a thorny issue together; we created a document together that went out from the room. We must not underestimate the importance of this education because it will be of great benefit to the organization in the future.

Winslow: Lest anyone misunderstand, during this process, one could have private conversations with anybody on the committee. But we had agreed to “rules of engagement” such that no one could cut a deal outside of the room and bring it back as a *fait accompli*. There were times when we thought we had agreement, or near agreement, on an issue, and then one person would ask a question which would take us back to wrestle the entire issue all over again. We also agreed to rules about the ways in which we would use e-mail, and we used e-mail a lot. When anyone sent out an e-mail, it went to the entire CRG. And when one replied to an e-mail, one also replied to the entire committee. Everyone had the same information at the same time. That was an important piece to avoid anyone feeling that there was “back room” negotiating taking place.

Institute: Let’s turn our attention to the agreement itself. From your perspectives, what is new, or unique, or significant about this collective bargaining agreement? And how will your lives as musicians be different as a result of this new agreement and the new paths the SPCO has chosen?

Kornacker: What is new is that the orchestra has taken upon itself enormous responsibility for the future of the organization. We have done this in conjunction with a very strong and significant working relationship with both the board of directors and the managers. In the orchestra world, this is not ordinary by any means. It is a new responsibility for the orchestra members which is questioned by some, but very enthusiastically embraced by others.

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Lewis: This may sound a bit odd, but out of those of us who served on the CRG, I have the second least experience in the orchestra, and I had, frankly, neglected to get to know the old collective bargaining agreement very well. So I thought a lot of what we have just agreed to was going on already. I thought people were on committees and involved in the process. I’ve had quite an education.

Ullery: Sarah, it is interesting to hear your perspective on this because it is true that we have had committees forever, and we have gotten more creative about committees. We’ve had an artistic advisory committee; we’ve had conductor search committees; we’ve had tenure committees; we’ve had audition committees. We have also had musicians sitting on board standing committees as orchestra representatives. The orchestra committee chair has been able to attend board meetings. But all of that activity was advisory.

Now we have two committees, the Artistic Vision Committee and the Artistic Personnel Committee, in which the musicians have real responsibilities. They sit where the buck stops. Musicians will make decisions about every program we play, every soloist, every conductor. Musicians will think about touring

not in terms of their own careers, but in terms of the orchestra's career. Musicians will think about recording in the same light. That's what makes this a revolutionary document.

Winslow: In terms of how our lives as musicians will change with this new agreement, we already have musicians who are saying, "My every spare moment is involved in a committee meeting." And for some, that is probably true. But they are learning much more about how the organization functions. They are having much more impact on what the future can be. I see this as spreading out musicians' talent. We not only are responsible for great performances, but we are also responsible for understanding the business side of the organization, for balancing business with artistic. In the final analysis, musicians are going to have a much greater say in what their jobs look like.

Kornacker: Let me approach the changes in our lives in a slightly different way. There is no question that in the past, the artistic values of the organization have been filtered by those who held total artistic responsibility. We have now empowered people who sit in the orchestra to make decisions. Decisions will be made by people who are not career-driven, not ego-driven.

Rather, decisions will be driven by the musical intent and the artistic quality of the organization. Let's be clear. This is not an easy responsibility. But we will sit on the stage knowing that we have ownership of what we are doing. We will choose the music we are playing. We will choose the people with whom we will work. We are confident that this sense of ownership will translate into greater quality throughout both the performances and the organization.

Kim: What we've done here in the last year has really shaken things up a lot. Even before we began the contract renewal process, we were doing some artistic things that were very challenging. We were doing Baroque music and new music with challenging conductors. The musicians were feeling that preparation and performance were more demanding than they had been. But the decisions about that repertoire and those conductors had been made by someone else, not by the musicians. So it was easy to point a finger, to blame someone else for something you didn't like. With our new agreement, musicians have the responsibility to decide what we will play and with whom we will play. That takes away the opportunity to blame someone else for something you don't like, or if you do blame someone else, it's not just the managers, but your fellow musicians on the committees we have created. That is very different from being able to point a finger at management. In essence, we have asked the musicians to put a lot of trust in themselves and their colleagues to make some very important decisions.

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Kornacker: There is another piece in the agreement that probably deserves mention. We have added what are called informational services. We think it important that information be given to the whole orchestra so no one can say that he or she didn't know or didn't understand. But beyond that, we hope that more real interaction between orchestra members and managers will encourage orchestra members to challenge and question what they hear. That's what we mean by wanting to become a more collaborative organization. It is going to take time, but in my mind, this is what is revolutionary about our new agreement.

Institute: In your new collective bargaining agreement, feedback is an important element. Describe the scope of the changes and the roles musicians will play in this area.

Winslow: Let me start with a few thoughts about individual feedback. I think there are some orchestras that handle this better than others. Their culture is such that one musician can make a comment to another about his or her playing and it is not taken personally. Ours has not been that kind of culture and, as a result, individuals get very little feedback about their performances except from their friends, and that's generally positive. What we are trying to do is to create a situation that helps musicians grow as individual musicians, but that also makes it less of a surprise if there ever comes a time when intervention is needed. What we want it to be is a humane way for individuals to find out about both small and major issues early, in a way that doesn't place them at risk for their jobs.

Another important element of what we did with feedback involves the whole orchestra in a way that's a bit like Monday morning quarterbacking. It's a plan to look back on a week we have just done, with the whole orchestra participating, to talk about the positives, and the negatives, and what might have been done differently.

Kim: I agree with Herb that the idea is to try to create a culture in which feedback is part of the daily rehearsal process, part of the daily institutional way of thinking. The intent is for everyone to help one another in constructive ways. That is a hard place to get to in an orchestra. Initially it feels very unnatural and uncomfortable, and it requires caution in how one says something. But what we need to remember is that it is all geared to raise the level of excellence in this entire organization, which is something everyone wants.

Winslow: Because the ratification vote was close, there is a hazard that morale will suffer. But I agree with Kyu that status quo is not good enough. We cannot get to a different place if we don't take some risks. I think as

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individual musicians we recognize that. What we are trying to do is get to a different place for the entire orchestra, for the entire organization.

Institute: Your mention of the closeness of the ratification vote prompts me to ask you to discuss why you all decided to go ahead with the artistic changes and the expanded roles for musicians even though you knew that unexpected financial strains would require a reduction in the musicians' total compensation.

Kornacker: During the process, we worked on a visionary and idealistic view of what this orchestra would be in the year 2010. The discussions that we had with the full orchestra during the process revealed a lot of interest in these ideas on the part of the players. There did not seem to be a great division among our colleagues about instituting these ideas for 2010. As a matter of fact, some of our colleagues wondered why we could not institute all of the ideas now.

When the need for serious financial cutbacks became apparent, some of our colleagues became very concerned that somehow our vision of 2010 was leading to the financial cutbacks of 2003. Those of us who served as part of the CRG sincerely believed that we had looked at these issues as two separate things. We had looked at every item under a microscope for many months. Although we knew the vote might be complicated by the financials, and that the financial result was not one that any of us would have wished for, we still believed it was very important to institute the well-received artistic ideas as soon as possible.

Winslow: Some of our colleagues were concerned that the financial hit that we took was because of our use of this process, and that we would not have been so affected had we used a traditional negotiating process. What I want to say about that is that if we review the settlements that have occurred all around the country this year, they range from pay freezes to cuts of 20 percent. And those settlements were reached whether attorneys were present or not. The financial realities of this time are what they are.

But I believe we came out of these negotiations stronger because we did not have a great big issue that led us toward a strike, or even the hint of a threat of a strike. The support of the board members and the community at large to raise the money that will be needed to do what we hope to do with this orchestra will come only if those people believe their money is being spent wisely.

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Kim: Your readers need to understand that between the strategic-planning process and the contract renewal process, members from every constituency of this orchestra had spent nearly three years examining this institution and charting its artistic future. If we ignored that part of it in light of tight financial times, nothing would change.

Winslow: To me, the fact that we decided to continue with the process in which we had invested so much shows the courage of this orchestra and its belief that there is something better out there. Despite the financial reductions we all took, we decided that we were willing to walk down this new path we had created.

Institute: If another orchestra were to contemplate undertaking a comprehensive, process-driven self evaluation, what thoughts would you offer them?

Ullery: I've thought about this a lot. It is important for others to understand that before we began this contract renewal process, we had spent two years engaged in serious long-range planning. That planning was authentically cross-constituency and gave every member of the organization the opportunity to share his or her thinking about the direction the SPCO should be going. As part of that process, we had day-long, organization-wide retreats that included all the musicians, the entire staff, the entire board, and even audience members and funders. I would encourage other orchestras to spend the money to do this type of inclusive, serious planning. When we began the contract renewal process, we went back to the long-range plan and reviewed each piece of it asking ourselves "what does this really mean here and now?" But I would say to others who might be looking at a new way of approaching a contract renewal that to do what we did required starting from having undertaken that long-range planning process.

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Winslow: I would absolutely second what Chuck has just said. I would not recommend that an orchestra use a contract renewal as the first place to try to begin working collaboratively. What I would recommend to orchestras that might undertake a similar process is to realize the importance of not letting those who are actively engaged get too far ahead of their constituents. Even though we had full orchestra meetings to try to share what was going on in the Contract Renewal Group, in retrospect, we did not do enough. You need to allow enough time for all members of the constituency to have full input.

Kornacker: We also did extensive cross-constituency reporting which I would recommend. As orchestra committee chair, I was included on the teams that

reported to the board and to the executive committee, as well as to the staff. Board and staff members were included on the teams that reported to the musicians. And I agree completely with Herb that communicate, communicate, communicate is advice to be taken seriously.

Kim: This may sound very obvious, and of course we had no idea when we began our process, but I would recommend that an orchestra not try the type of process we used to do a contract renewal in financially troubled times.

Ullery: I'm not sure I agree with you on that, Kyu. Because we were renewing our contract in a tough financial climate, we were forced to focus on real artistic issues, without thinking about extra compensation to smooth the way. None of us was in the position of being able to offer additional compensation to soften the resistance against going along with a new idea or way of doing things. We were always forced to answer the question "Is this good for the organization artistically and financially, or not?" And that was very positive. So I guess what I would recommend is that an orchestra, and the whole organization behind it, try as well as it can to understand its financial and artistic circumstances before it undertakes this way of doing a contract renewal.

Institute: You have all, indeed, participated in a revolutionary process and we thank you for sharing your thoughts. We wish you well and will follow your progress as you proceed together down your newly chosen path.