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Players Representing and Leading Players: A Roundtable Discussion



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Editor's Digest

Players Representing and Leading Players: A Roundtable Discussion

In several issues of *Harmony*, we have used the roundtable format to tell the story of some aspect of symphony orchestra organization life. Reader response has been positive; we seem to learn from real-life stories. In this issue, we explore the roles that orchestra members play in representing and leading their fellow musicians. Our conversation was with players who currently serve, or have served, as members and chairs of their orchestra committees.

What Orchestra Members Expect

The conversation began with a discussion of the expectations that orchestra members have of their orchestra committees, and ways in which orchestras select committee members. Some interesting observations came forth about the evolution of musician involvement over the past 30 years, as did some startling information about the extensive time commitments that orchestra committee members and chairs make.

The Importance of Communication

A major portion of the conversation revolved around the many aspects of communication. Our roundtable participants shared ideas about communicating with the orchestra as a whole, as well as communicating with other constituencies within the orchestra organization. They then turned their attention to the concept of individual leadership, and discussed the ways in which they have changed after assuming leadership positions.

As readers are aware, the Institute champions greater musician involvement within symphony orchestra organizations. We think you will agree that our six roundtable participants are, indeed, involved.

Players Representing and Leading Players: A Roundtable Discussion

Over the past four years, the Institute has explored many aspects of organizational effectiveness within symphony orchestra organizations, always with an eye to improving the effectiveness of all symphony organizations. One method we have used is to bring together symphony organization participants for roundtable discussions on topics of mutual interest. We have conversed with members of individual orchestral families that have achieved breakthrough moments, and we have explored the leadership that women provide to symphony organizations. In this issue—again using the roundtable format—we explore the work of players representing and leading other players.

We invited six musicians with experience as members and chairs of their orchestra committees to participate. Each completed a written questionnaire to provide background information and initial thoughts about our chosen topic. Following receipt and circulation of the questionnaires, Institute founder and chairman Paul Judy, board member Fred Zenone, and *Harmony* editor Marilyn Scholl held conference calls with the participants. The report that follows presents an edited transcript of our conversations.

Institute: Let's begin with introductions.

William Foster: I am assistant principal violist of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington. I have served on the orchestra committee off and on since 1970, with several terms as chair, including the last four years. I have also served on artistic advisory committees, music director and executive director search committees, and on long-range planning committees of the board.

Paul Ganson: I am the assistant principal bassoonist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and have been for 30 years. I have chaired the negotiating committee at least a half-dozen times, and have served on many other committees, including artistic advisory, marketing, and board-musician long-range planning.

Sara Harmelink: I am a violist with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. I have been a member of the orchestra committee for the last seven years, and have served as chair for four of the last five years. I was previously also a member and chair of the artistic advisory committee. I am also a musician member of the board, and have served on many board committees during the past six

years, including the executive, finance, long-range planning, and endowment committees.

Michael Namer: I am second bassoon with the National Arts Centre Orchestra in Ottawa, Canada, and have served as chair of the orchestra committee for the past 11 years.

Norbert Nielubowski: This may sound a little redundant, but I also play bassoon. I am a member of the Minnesota Orchestra, and have twice served on the orchestra committee, from 1989 to 1991, and again since 1995. I am currently chairing the orchestra committee.

Ron Schneider: I play third horn with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, and have chaired the audition committee and the players' committee. I currently serve as chair of the players' committee.

Institute: Let's begin our conversation with a discussion of orchestra committees themselves. We would ask each of you to comment on just what it is that your fellow orchestra members expect of this elected group of colleagues?

Namer: Most players expect members of the orchestra committee to make themselves available to deal with personal perspectives regarding issues in the workplace. This may involve both issues directly related to specific working conditions, or personal problems concerning an individual musician's relationship with the organization. Most players expect members of the orchestra committee to be advocates for their personal points of view.

Foster: Our musicians generally want to elect people who are willing to represent the orchestra as a whole and who will see to it that decision makers within the organization hear and understand the musicians' views. They want representatives who can have an impact on decisions, either by appropriate understanding and application of the contract or by effective advocacy. And I think what Michael said about availability is very important. It's something I worry about because I sometimes sense that orchestra members are reluctant to approach me because they think they are bothering me. And I certainly don't feel abused!

Schneider: That's interesting, Bill. I think my family would have the exact opposite complaint based on the number of phone calls I receive.

Ganson: Availability is an aspect of serving on a committee with a group as large as an orchestra. At any moment, there are people who need someone available because they do have a pressing problem. When you are the chair of

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a committee, or a member of a committee, or a union steward, you are one of the first people to whom other musicians turn. One's private life can, indeed, become lost.

Harmelink: In Milwaukee, we are looking for musicians who are willing to put forth the time and effort necessary. We want people who are capable of handling the stress of the position and who are able to resolve conflict effectively. We also want people who are responsive to the needs of the musicians as a whole and not just interested in pushing their own personal agendas.

Schneider: In Pittsburgh, the tradition had been to elect "anybody available" for non-negotiating years and to save our experienced people for contract years, but that no longer seems to be true. One reason for this change is a modification in our bylaws which increased an orchestra committee member's term from one year to two. What you hope for is a committee that is a reflection of the orchestra and represents a range of viewpoints.

Institute: So now that we have some idea of what your musicians expect of their orchestra committee members, let's turn our attention to how you interest people to serve on orchestra committees. Are you overrun with volunteers, or do you need to do some serious recruiting?

Schneider: Now that we have two-year, staggered terms, it is not as hard to find people to run as it was when we elected all seven members every year. We do identify people we think would do a good job and encourage them to run. I think it is important to encourage participation.

Foster: There have been many years when there has been no election because there have been only as many nominees as vacancies. As often as not, those nominees have been selected through other orchestra committee members urging a musician to accept nomination.

Harmelink: We have to do a lot of recruitment, too, behind the scenes. We announce when there are openings, and if we see that people are not signing up, we might twist a few arms. And what is most interesting to me is that somehow just being approached by a committee member instigates a lot of soul searching, and the people who then decide to run have more confidence about what they are doing.

Namer: I think this is a problem in most orchestras. It is often difficult to fill the roster with nominations. After nominations and elections, we have often had to fill the fifth position through appointment by the orchestra committee, subject to ratification by the orchestra. But I suppose I must remember that we are a small orchestra, with 46 players, and that a 5-member committee is a fairly large percentage.

Nielubowski: It is interesting for me to go back into history and think about how 30 years ago, musicians were clamoring to get any sort of representation. Now, as conditions have improved, it is very easy to take things for granted. I

think current committee members need to help people realize that it is very important to have a committee and to serve on a committee. This is not something that came easily.

Ganson: Norbert, I would call what you just described the “first generation” of musician involvement. Representation of musicians by their committees has been, and still is, a means of accomplishing orchestra recognition, as distinct from union recognition. I think this first generation of involvement has really been reactive representation rather than something we would have chosen to do. We would choose to avoid it. We would choose to play great concerts with our only problems being those of creating the concerts themselves. And that’s why it is difficult to get people interested and involved.

Institute: Stop right there, Paul. Are you suggesting that we are moving toward a second generation of musician involvement that will have a different philosophy?

Ganson: I think a second generation might include more active involvement in exercising choice. The precursors for a second generation of musician involvement are conductor evaluation and selection, service on committees of the board, and, in some instances, service on the board of directors and the executive committee. We should actively pursue these developments in musician involvement because there are active, creative things we can do. The first step is to inform as fully as possible those who might become more involved so that they can make informed decisions.

Harmelink: Paul, let me see if I have straight what you are saying. You said that in the first generation, musicians did not want to be involved, and that the second generation is about having choice, if that implies that musicians will be heard by our boards and management and that serious consideration will be given to our input. In the first generation, are you assuming that musicians did not want to be involved, or rather that they were trying to avoid any kind of agreement with management and the board? What did you mean by avoiding commitment?

Ganson: I meant having to deal with issues they would rather avoid. The idea that the orchestra committee was perceived as the grievance committee.

Foster: I think what Paul is talking about when he says second generation revolves around an awareness that you don’t have any contractual power to effect what you are trying to effect. But if you have good arguments well expressed, and a good sense of timing, you can be effective in those areas.

Schneider: It’s also possible that what is causing change is not just us, but circumstances, as orchestras are having trouble meeting their goals. The

“The organization needs musicians in order to be successful, and I think musicians are beginning to see that we need successful organizations in order for us to be successful.”

organization needs musicians in order to be successful, and I think musicians are beginning to see that we need successful organizations in order for us to be successful. The problem of apathy is one we face everywhere in our society—from government to the PTA. Also, people usually don't feel a pressing need to be involved when everything seems OK. That's the problem we are facing.

Harmelink: I don't know if I entirely agree with that. Because Milwaukee Orchestra members actually hold seats on the board of directors, and on board committees, we attend meetings where we get to know the board members and members of management individually and see how they work together. My observation is that our input is welcome, and although we have to do some recruiting, we are really not apathetic.

Schneider: We, too, have a great deal of contact with our board members. By exchanging e-mail addresses, we have opened up channels of communication among musicians, board members, and management that didn't exist 10 years ago. Maybe our authority isn't very different, but our communication certainly is.

Nielubowski: In Minnesota, we've just completed a contract for which we used an interest-based bargaining process, and one real difference was having access to the board. I must admit there was some resistance to this idea, probably because some people feel they have been burned in the past. It is difficult to bring an orchestra to this new way of thinking.

Institute: This is a very interesting conversation, and we would observe that the six of you are anything but complacent. You are all volunteers, and you apparently spend a good deal of time working on orchestra committee business. Just how much time are we talking about? And if you are the committee chair, does that increase the time commitment?

Foster: I would figure for a committee member it is probably an hour to an hour and a half per week, which would work out to 50 to 75 hours a year. For the committee chair, I would estimate that it is three to four times as much.

Harmelink: That's very hard to estimate because it depends on the year and the issues. I would say that in a non-negotiating year, committee members put in around 75 hours per year, with the committee chair logging 25 to 30 percent above that. In negotiating years, it is five times that amount! And, of course, these estimates do not include our meetings with board committees.

Ganson: I think we spend more time than that. I would guess that it is two to three hours a week for committee members, and five to ten hours a week for the chair.

Schneider: I agree that the time involved is hard to estimate. A ball park figure would be five hours a week for the thirty weeks a year we are not touring or on vacation. That would be about 150 hours. We have more meetings now because of the Hoshin process our orchestra has been using.

Namer: I've never tried to estimate the time before. I would think it would be about 100 hours a year for committee members, with a multiple of three for the chair. And, of course, those figures are multiplied in a negotiation year. Our orchestra committee is also the negotiation committee.

Nielubowski: For us, I think it would be about an hour a week, with the committee chair averaging four to five times that much.

Ganson: I have a question for those of you who have musicians serving on your boards of directors or board committees. Are meetings of those groups scheduled during services of the orchestra?

Harmelink: I can tell you our experience. Up until this year, we had no problem with board meetings being scheduled in conflict with orchestra services. It started to become a conflict this year, and we just mentioned that fact to our executive director. They're going to be more watchful in their scheduling so we can always attend.

Namer: Sara, you have given me the opportunity to add something that is on my mind. I think it is vitally important that musicians support the establishment of efficient structures within their organizations that facilitate meaningful communication between musicians and management, and between musicians and the board. Many organizations have opted to have musician representatives on management and board committees. If these are decision-making bodies, musician participation can be constructive so long as musicians have real power on the committees and are prepared to accept the burden of responsibility that goes with decision making.

Institute: Let's turn our attention to how you view your committees' work in the overall governing of your orchestras. And we would include in that asking you to tell us how the committee communicates with the orchestra as a whole.

Foster: I feel really strongly that the word governing does not apply. I think representing and leading are what we are talking about.

Schneider: I agree with Bill. We are talking about representing and leading. But the word governing just doesn't fit in what we do. We have limited authority, and it seems to work just fine that way.

Namer: To me the word governing has a connotation of ruling or dictating, and I would certainly reject that idea. Our role is definitely to represent the views of others and to be advocates for the rights and needs of others. At the same time, we provide a certain amount of needed organization, too.

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Nielubowski: I'm really glad you asked about communicating with the orchestra, because I've been thinking a lot about that lately. I'm trying to find better mechanisms for communicating information to the orchestra because we have a lot of members who don't want to have too many meetings. I've about decided that when an organization is having problems, that tends to galvanize the orchestra and bring it together. When things are fairly calm, it is very easy for apathy to creep in.

Harmelink: In Milwaukee, we have an internal newsletter, and publication of each issue seems to stir things up a bit.

Schneider: How often do you publish?

Harmelink: Twice a year, around January and July.

Schneider: Is that an orchestra committee function?

Harmelink: We oversee it, but the editor is not on the orchestra committee. Because our musicians have a lot of involvement on the board of the organization, and on separate board committees, we include in the newsletter reports from the musicians serving on these committees. We also include general reports to let the musicians know what is going on and to encourage them to talk with us personally. Let me add that as a committee member, I expect to communicate well within the committee and to lead the orchestra musicians to a clear understanding of the issues we face. We accomplish this by a lot of listening. I have a great interest in communication and tearing down walls that have been built by distrust, and I do not believe in conspiracy theories. On the other hand, when there is conflict, the issues must be stated clearly and openly. We should not avoid conflict, but should work through it in open discussion.

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Schneider: We just settled a five-year contract in Pittsburgh, and one of the things we are concerned about is how do we keep the orchestra from becoming complacent for the next five years? One communications technique we've used—and I have to give Bill Foster credit for suggesting the idea—is to have focus groups. We broke the orchestra down into groups of 15 to 20 to discuss various issues. In the smaller group, you can actually ask an individual who has not said anything, “How do you feel about this?” People expressed themselves, and in the end, all sides felt they understood the others better.

Namer: In the National Arts Centre Orchestra, we have distinctions as to types of meetings. We have business meetings when a vote is required, and advance notice is given of the subject matter. For these meetings, we get good attendance. Then there are information meetings, and for these, attendance is not as good.

We have also used focus groups over the lunch break, and that has proven very useful. And we do try to keep informal track of those who have been unable to attend meetings. We approach these people casually and say that we realize that they were unable to come to the meeting, but thought they might be interested in knowing what had transpired. They seem to appreciate that.

Harmelink: One other thing we do happens during negotiation years. Every negotiation year, each member of our committee interviews perhaps 18 individual musicians. We then write up the interviews, and each member of the committee reads all of the write-ups before the negotiations begin. We feel as though we really have heard from everyone because not everyone will speak out at a meeting.

Institute: You all seemed to agree that the word “represent” was better than the word “govern.” How much authority does the orchestra committee have to represent the orchestra?

Foster: My view is that the orchestra committee has no authority to make substantive decisions that have not been approved by the orchestra. However, the committee ideally represents the musicians’ views well enough that they can come to agreements with management, with the intention of going to the orchestra with a strong recommendation and confidence that the recommendation will be ratified. Every time the committee brings such an issue, it is like a “vote of confidence” in the representation and judgment of the committee. In a healthy organization, one in which musicians and management trust each other and are not afraid of looking at issues creatively and flexibly, this can occur quite frequently.

Schneider: In my view, it is important for the committee to keep the orchestra informed, although this is very time consuming. Our bylaws also give the orchestra the right to appoint subcommittees. One of my responsibilities is to fill slots on board committees, or to respond to requests from staff departments that want orchestra representation for particular projects.

Nielubowski: We tend to err on the side of asking for orchestra approval rather than making assumptions. This often gives us an opportunity to get additional points of view, and also to be sure we are on track with our assessments.

Harmelink: We have elections for our representatives on board committees. And we make sure that everyone is aware that there are openings. We also advise management on the musicians’ position on certain issues. If we are unsure where the musicians stand, we call an orchestra meeting. Quite often, after members have the opportunity to express their ideas, the orchestra passes a motion giving the committee the authority to negotiate using our best judgment.

Ganson: I agree that it important to involve the orchestra early when a new idea is being discussed. You need to inform them early because you want them to be more involved, to be part of implementing a new idea.

Harmelink: Paul, that relates to good communication. Communicating with your orchestra on a regular basis enables you to lead through consensus building

rather than saying, “We know the right way, so just listen to us and follow us.” That’s not going to work. We need to take information back to the orchestra and find out what they really think. We need to find the common ground.

Institute: We’ve talked a good deal about orchestra committee leadership. Now we want to spend some time considering individual leadership, and would ask you to describe for our readers what you see as the role of the orchestra committee chair.

Namer: The orchestra committee chair serves as a liaison between representatives of management and members of the orchestra committee, and also serves as a liaison between the orchestra committee and the Local for business that relates to contract administration. The chair presides over meetings of both the orchestra committee and the orchestra, and has the responsibility to provide as much information as possible, and to facilitate discussion and decision making. When presenting recommendations of the orchestra committee to the orchestra, it is the chair’s responsibility to ensure that there is ample opportunity for discussion and open debate of the issues.

“... the chair can set an agenda for areas that the orchestra would like to improve, and can try to involve other members of the orchestra committee and the orchestra in the process.”

Foster: The orchestra committee chair is responsible for seeing to it that the musicians’ agenda is addressed. This requires a level of consciousness of the orchestra’s affairs that constantly organizes, sets priorities, and acts on issues that are raised.

Nielubowski: I would add that the orchestra committee chair can have a large impact on the quality of communication with management. I think the chair can set an agenda for areas that the orchestra would like to improve, and can try to involve other members of the orchestra committee and the orchestra in the process.

Harmelink: I agree that the orchestra committee chair plays a large role as a communicator, and to that I would add as a facilitator.

Institute: Are there attributes or special qualifications that you believe a person elected to this role should have?

Foster: First of all, the orchestra committee chair must be willing to devote an enormous amount of time to the position, as we discussed earlier in this conversation. The chair should have good judgment, should be a good listener, and should be articulate. He or she should be able to understand, and even argue, different points of view, and be able to effectively represent a point of view different from his or her own. I would add to the list a good sense of timing. By that I mean that the chair needs to know how to deal with individual issues. Sometimes it is too early, and an issue needs to be held on the agenda for a more appropriate time. Sometimes it is too late for meaningful input. The chair

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should also have a good idea of what the appropriate forum is for addressing an issue. Does the whole committee need to meet with management? Would a smaller group be more effective? Is one-on-one discussion needed? And finally, an orchestra committee chair should be able to handle confrontation. Even in the most harmonious musician-management relationships, there will be times when there are strong differences. The chair has to be viewed by both management and colleagues as having a constitution that can hold up under difficult circumstances.

Namer: Bill, I'm not sure I can add to that! But I might express it that the chair needs to be capable not only of organized thought but organized emotion as well. As you implied, individual and group interactions can be volatile. Rational and intuitive thought, balanced with measured and intuitive emotional response, are necessary to meet many challenges of the workplace. The greatest tests for any committee chair are to always deal with issues

on their merits, to avoid personal agendas, to control one's ego in the attempt to get to the essence of a problem, and to find solutions that will bind people together, rather than divide.

Schneider: Well said! But there is one concept that I would add, and that is consensus building. Good orchestra committee chairs are able to share their “vision” or ideas in a way that gets others to participate. A great idea isn't worth much if no one will go along with it.

Institute: In the questionnaires you filled out to prepare for this conversation, you each indicated that your orchestra committees elect their own chairs. That led us to wonder how your committees maintain continuity? Do your bylaws provide for some type of succession to the position of committee chair?

Namer: As I mentioned earlier, I have chaired the National Arts Centre committee for a long time, and succession is something I have thought a lot about. When it was time for our last elections, I spoke with an individual who I felt would be a very good committee member, and someone who could potentially take over as chair. I encouraged this person to come on the committee, and have been passing on my experience and knowledge. I was candid that I would not be continuing on the committee, and that we needed a good person to succeed.

Nielubowski: I would agree that grooming people is very important. That didn't happen when I went on the committee. I found myself going to people who had served on the committee in the past to learn the history and past practices.

Schneider: Our two-year terms were designed to provide continuity to the committee. Five members of our current seven-person committee have led the group at some point, so there seems to be an unspoken rotation of the leadership position.

Namer: There is no question that continuity and consistency can benefit an organization, particularly if the person enjoys a broadly based confidence. When one deals with the same people over a period of years, there can be mutual respect and confidence, even when you are going at it hammer and tongs.

Nielubowski: I'm glad you said that, Michael, because I've been thinking about the fact that people in management must get frustrated sometimes. They start developing a sense of rapport with the committee and the chair, and the next year it's new people and starting all over again.

Harmelink: Conversely, if the committee has been stable, it has the same problem with turnover in management, especially if it is the executive director or general manager position.

Ganson: I would just add that the more informed, involved, and interested the orchestra, the less critical is the issue of succession. At the end of the day, the most meaningful continuity resides in the orchestra as a whole.

Institute: What we have been talking about in this conversation is leadership, and you have all acknowledged that you are leaders within your own orchestras. Does being a leader influence your behavior around the orchestra or with individual colleagues?

Schneider: I have a great deal of respect for the "office" of the chair and would prefer to answer the question in that context. There is no doubt that I am invited to participate in certain activities because I chair the committee, and I try to represent the best interests of the orchestra. And I know serving as chair has increased my diplomatic skills. There is probably always a percentage of orchestra members who want to discredit any leader, particularly a leader perceived as successful. Dealing with rumor and innuendo seems to be a part of the job. I try to keep a low public profile, as I do not see myself—nor do I want to be seen—as what in Yiddish we would call a "macher"—a big shot.

Ganson: I agree that the first thing to avoid is pride or a feeling of having been anointed. One must be careful not to jump in to "lead" a situation when the opportunity exists simply because one's colleagues are uninformed, confused, or discouraged, and are willing to let someone—anyone—attempt to show them a way out. The best leaders are those who can follow the lead of a well-informed orchestra.

Schneider: When I first went on the committee, I did not want a public role at all. I did not want to speak to the orchestra because I wasn't comfortable with that idea. I was quite content working behind the scenes. Two years later, our committee chair—who had done a terrific job—retired from that role and said,

“You do it.” And I really didn’t want to. I remember the first time I had to call the orchestra together. I hesitated because I just didn’t know how I was going to do it. I think back about that now and find it rather funny. I guess one either grows into the role or leaves.

Harmelink: I felt the same way, because I, too, would rather be behind the scenes. Things changed when I felt a void or a lack of direction. I was churning inside, knowing that someone needed to take action to keep things focused and moving. It was then that I began to step in and contribute.

Namer: As I have served as chair of the committee, I have learned that a leadership role is a position of trust—trust that has been given to me by the members of the orchestra. If I lose that trust, I will also lose any authority I may have.

Nielubowski: Michael, I agree with that completely. And I would add that sometimes the orchestra committee is very close to a situation of which the average orchestra member has no knowledge. In these situations, I think my leadership involves speaking with orchestra members who have questions and giving them background information to help them better understand what we are doing and how we relate to the organization as a whole.

Institute: Well put, Norbert. As we are approaching the end of our time together, are there any other topics you would ask your colleagues to address?

Schneider: Yes. I would ask my colleagues, “Are you having fun?”

Nielubowski: I guess I would answer the question yes and no. It is certainly fun when you feel as though you are making a difference. I enjoy sitting down with members of our orchestra, or our committee, or our management and saying, “All right. We have a problem. How do we fix it? What do we do to make this better? How can we get beyond this and really try something different?” For me, the downside is the frustration of finding yourself back in the same old ways of doing business.

Foster: Well said. And even a recognition of old patterns can be turned into an interesting challenge—an opportunity to analyze what made it impossible to be creative and constructive. Chairing the orchestra committee is always challenging, demanding, stimulating, and engaging. If that’s your idea of “fun,” then I recommend it.

Namer: I have found serving as the committee chair very stimulating and enjoyable. I’ve learned a lot intellectually, and a lot about myself in the process.

Schneider: I’m glad to hear that because I, too, have enjoyed being chair, and I know I am not doing it out of a sense of responsibility. I think it has to be fun or it is time to move on.

Harmelink: Being involved and more knowledgeable about every aspect of our organization has given me far greater job satisfaction. I don’t sit on stage wondering why we are rehearsing in a specific hall, or why the schedule has been changed. I am more willing to ask for behind-the-scenes information if it

has not already been provided. And another interesting byproduct of my committee involvement has been the opportunity to improve some neglected skills in writing and speaking which has contributed to a greater level of self-confidence in all areas of my life. I love getting to know the people on the committee who have diverse interests and points of view. Putting our collective ideas together to find solutions that are acceptable to our musicians, management, and board is perhaps the most rewarding benefit of committee participation.

Institute: This has been a fascinating conversation, and we thank you all for your time. We know our readers will gain a better understanding of orchestra committees and their chairs, and the ways in which musicians serve as important cogs within their orchestra organizations.