

Radical Restructure at the Fictitious Symphony

A fictional 'think piece' prepared for the Heinz Endowments

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Mission or Means

The Fictitious Symphony Orchestra was founded in the late 1950s in a burst of civic pride for its region, and with a broad understanding among its forming board and artistic visionaries that orchestral and classical ensemble music of exceptional quality had an important place in the social and civic life of the city.

In the decades following its launch, the symphony consistently added concerts to its season each year, attracted increasingly higher levels of orchestral musicians, and built up an endowment of reasonable size given its annual budget. At the same time, the organization responded to a need in its community by opening a school for young musicians. Starting with just a few orchestra members serving as teachers, the school grew to serve several hundred school-age children each year, as well as a smaller group of adult learners.

In the 1980s, with the selection of a new artistic director, the orchestra extended its traditional mission with a specific focus on contemporary works and commissions, integrating the works of living composers within its more familiar repertory. The orchestra made special efforts to commission and encourage regional composers of small ensemble and full-scale orchestral works, and had built a national reputation for these initiatives.

By the late 1990s, the evolution of the Fictitious Symphony had brought it to three primary roles in its community:

- To bring the highest-quality live symphonic and ensemble performance experiences to citizens of their region;
- To champion the works of living composers – especially regional composers – through commissions, performances, and educational programming; and,
- To foster a personal connection to music among young people through high-quality education in instrumental performance.

But while the organization's mission had evolved, its means for achieving that mission had remained much the same: a full-time, professional resident symphony, a music school, and a central administrative staff and board within a single nonprofit corporation, with a support trust holding the organization's endowment.

By early 2002, that model was showing extensive signs of stress: falling concert admissions and declining results from its annual fundraising efforts had created a cash crunch. And because this

dropping revenue pushed the administration to review its largest single expense – its payments to contract musicians – negotiations between the musicians and management were becoming entrenched and tense. While the organizations' school continued to be a strong draw, even becoming a moderate profit center, the financial struggles of the larger organization were beginning to affect the focus and quality of the school's operations, with any attention or improvements to facilities or staff training deferred to better times in the distant future. Also in the face of tight budgets, the board had reduced funding and emphasis on the larger commissions and the local composer program, suggesting a short-term focus on the traditional performance fare until audience numbers rose again.

While much of the trouble seemed tied to regional demographic shifts away from the orchestra's traditional base, as well as tighter economic times for its current and prospective patrons, the organization was primarily a victim of its ever-growing fixed costs, built up over decades of new programs, longer seasons, and a growing full-time or full-contract personnel. Growing fixed costs in the face of dropping revenue had contributed to a cautious and inflexible culture among administration and board, and a faltering focus on original mission.

In the midst of these external changes and internal tensions, a small group of board members began to wonder if the current structure, itself, had become a significant barrier to achieving their mission. The larger, single nonprofit entity made more sense when the community had fewer and less sophisticated nonprofit organizations – within the arts and in other fields – vying for the same dollars. And the inflexibility of the current organization to responsive action seemed more than a matter of stubbornness, perhaps even a matter of structure. Could a radical rethinking of the organization's approach to its work actually reframe and refresh the mission it claimed within its community?

Through intensive study, conversation, research, and community open forums, the board and the collaborative assessment team of administration and musicians came to a difficult conclusion: a full-time, contracted, regional symphony was no longer sustainable as a means to their end. Further, they came to wonder if the extended and exhaustive efforts to keep this particular business model afloat were crowding out other opportunities for innovation and audience engagement in the live performance experience.

In a flurry of press reports and angry letters from symphony aficionados and contracted musicians, the orchestra reframed its efforts into three unique organizations collaborating as a collective called the Fictitious Music Society, which included:

- A performing arts presenter (a radical retooling of the original orchestra, retaining its endowment and much of its staff), focusing on bringing the world's best symphonies and chamber ensembles to the region for performances and extended residencies;
- An arts support cooperative (drawing its initial funding as a project of the orchestra's support trust), providing fiscal sponsorship and other operational services to small performing ensembles or projects, with a special emphasis on commissions and performances of contemporary works (modeled on the San Francisco Foundation Community Initiatives Fund, Fractured Atlas in New York, or other similar efforts around the country); and,
- A music school, formed as a for-profit subsidiary of the presenting organization, to provide instruction primarily in orchestral instruments, but also in theory, composition, and concert production. The school also was to launch a greater effort to attract adult learners and community ensembles.

The Fictitious Symphony board and staff hoped that disaggregating the various goals and functions of the original symphony into three separate endeavors would allow each to be more flexible and responsive to its specific mission. The presenter would focus on bringing the highest quality symphonic experiences to the citizens of their region – now through primarily touring performances by world-class ensembles. The cooperative service organization would foster and support innovative efforts in the performing arts, consistent with the symphony's original goals, but extended to a full spectrum of local and national voices. The school would carry on much as it did before, but now more directed toward its service mission of musical instruction, with the bulk of its profits supporting the larger nonprofit presenter (with some withheld for on-going facility and staff improvement).

By 2004, the various legal, donor, and financial issues (which were considerable) were resolved, and the three organizations in the new collaborative were ready to launch their new approach to the extended mission of what was once the Fictitious Symphony. In the first year, as expected, many of the principal musicians of the original symphony left for other cities with full-time orchestras. But many other musicians remained – some teaching full time at the school, others forming their own smaller ensembles with the support of the arts support cooperative.

The fiscal sponsorship service proved particularly powerful for fostering emerging ensembles and short-term efforts, such as commissions and professional recording projects. One collection of musicians started a new music festival under the umbrella of the support cooperative. Another larger group was planning a musician-managed chamber orchestra. Because of the sponsorship and production services, neither initiative would require a full nonprofit corporate status or extensive infrastructure during its early years.

The first season of the symphony presenter was also a success, with significant increases in ticket sales and donor interest over the final seasons of the resident orchestra, but also fewer performances. The board couldn't yet know the longer-term impact of their fairly radical restructuring on future audiences, long-term sustainability of any of the new organizations, or the overall availability and quality of live ensemble performances throughout the region.

Leadership and community members involved in this transition hoped to unlock some of the energy and resources that had been consumed by the faltering symphony structure, and release them back into the local cultural ecology. Only time would tell if their gamble had fostered or flummoxed their original mission.

ANOTHER NOTE: This case is entirely fictitious. Any similarities to any symphony, living or dead, is completely accidental, and the result of dumb luck.

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