

*Harmony*TM

FORUM OF THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA INSTITUTE

NUMBER 2 • APRIL 1996

Why They're Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestra Workplace

by

Seymour and Robert Levine



To subscribe to *Harmony* or provide support to the Institute, contact:

Symphony Orchestra Institute

1618 Orrington Avenue, Suite 318

Evanston, IL 60201

Tel: 847.475.5001 Fax: 847.475.2460

e-mail: information@soi.org

www.soi.org

EDITOR'S DIGEST

Why They're Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestral Workplace

We suspect that most observers of symphony orchestras were disturbed as they read (in the interview which immediately precedes this article) the findings of Richard Hackman's research. Just why is it that symphony orchestra musicians are so unhappy with their jobs?

Robert Levine, principal violist with the Milwaukee Symphony, and his father, Seymour, a professor emeritus from Stanford, collaborated on the following essay to provide readers of *Harmony* with their insights as to why symphony audiences often see dour looks on the faces of the ensemble performers.

It is the Levines' thesis that musicians experience high levels of stress, due primarily to their lack of control over their working environments. The article opens with explanations of the particular stressors which orchestra musicians encounter, ranging from plain, old-fashioned stage fright to the levels of perfection which ensemble musicians expect of themselves.

The Levines then expound their views of orchestras as fundamentally patriarchal organizations and explain the role which the "myth" of the conductor as omniscient father and musicians as children plays in orchestra members' unhappiness. Their description of a typical orchestra rehearsal is written with great wit and understanding; it is also terribly sad.

Is There a Solution?

Not content to share only the myth, the authors explore coping strategies of individual musicians and tactics which musicians employ to take control of their working lives. For example, were you aware that a surprisingly large number of orchestra musicians are general aviation pilots?

Orchestra musicians may well read this essay and nod sagely while murmuring "bravo." Non-musician participants in symphony orchestra organizations would be well advised to evaluate the Levines' thesis and the ways in which symphony orchestra organizations might address the issues raised.

Why They're Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestral Workplace

Orchestra musicians' discontent with their jobs is currently enjoying its proverbial "15 minutes of fame." Much of this comes from coverage of the New York Philharmonic's recent labor negotiations in *Forbes* magazine (1995) and *The New York Times* (1995), both of which discussed (with less than total sympathy) the unhappiness of the orchestra's musicians with their jobs, as well as with the negotiations.

Most observers of the orchestra industry have great difficulty in coming to grips with what industry insiders have known for a long time: orchestra musicians tend not to be very happy when they are at work. A recent study by Jutta Allmendinger, Richard Hackman, and Erin V. Lehman (1994) demonstrated that this observation is not based simply on anecdote. The study shows that, while orchestra musicians' internal motivation is higher than any of the other groups studied, their level of general job satisfaction is quite low—below that of federal prison guards, in fact, and far below that of members of professional string quartets.

Working in an orchestra provides a reasonable level of income and economic security, up to 10 weeks of paid vacation a year, and work that is (at least in theory) so enjoyable that amateur musicians will do it in their spare time for free. Why then are orchestra musicians so dissatisfied?

It is our thesis that this dissatisfaction is due to the levels of stress they experience and that much of that stress is due to their lack of control over their working environments.

Musicians face many unusual stressors. The one most frequently recognized and discussed is performance anxiety. Virtually everyone has experienced some form of stage fright; even audiences understand the issue. Orchestra musicians will experience performance anxiety many times, even before they are hired by professional orchestras. It is a natural and accepted consequence of performing on an instrument, and because of that, orchestra musicians cope with it better than they do with any other stress involved in their jobs. Performance anxiety also tends to diminish with repetition and experience so that, while still present, it can be largely hidden from the listener and even colleagues. In addition, well-known options exist for dealing with performance anxiety, including drugs of

the beta-blocker type, which control the physiological manifestations of anxiety by blocking certain hormone receptors at the cellular level.

Simply playing their instruments is another stressor for many musicians. Although instruments differ in the ways they alter performers' bodies for the

“In few other professions are the practitioners forced to confront their own professional failings so regularly...”

worse, playing any instrument is a fundamentally unnatural act. A recent ICSSOM survey of musicians' health showed that the vast majority of orchestra musicians experienced medical problems which they rated as “severe” in terms of their effects on performance (1987). Few other professions combine the physical demands of playing an instrument with the level of training, preparation, and mental activity—not to mention talent—required to succeed as a musician. The closest analogy may be professional sports, yet most athletes do not expect to continue performing professionally until age 65, the typical retirement age in professional orchestras.

Such interruptions in a musician's career create another stressor, the fear of disability. Musicians, after all, have spent most of their lives in training to practice their craft and often do not possess the more generalized training that would enable them to reach an equivalent income or standing in another profession. Equally disturbing is the possibility of losing the one skill that has structured their lives and given them much of their identity.

A more subtle stress musicians face is difficult even to label, much less to quantify. Instrumentalists generally view whatever they produce on their instruments as flawed in comparison with the ideal they have set for themselves. This comes, at least in part, from a system of instrumental education that views anything less than absolute technical perfection as completely unacceptable. Yet it is also the mindset that an instrumentalist, at any level of proficiency, must maintain in order to improve. But most instrumentalists, however good, are never going to reach perfection in their playing or even reach the level regularly achieved by the soloists who stand in front of professional orchestras.

In few other professions are the practitioners forced to confront their own professional failings so regularly, and this constant awareness of their personal limitations can lead to chronic internal conflict between diminished self-esteem and musicians' natural desires to think well of themselves. The resulting emotional dissonance is bound to be stressful, perhaps even more so because it goes unacknowledged and unrecognized. Research by M. Seligman (1975) on the development of “learned helplessness” has shown that unsolvable tasks can induce helplessness in social coping situations. “Helplessness” refers to psychological situations in which the individual cannot determine any relationship between available responses and probable outcomes (Levine and Ursin, 1991).

All instrumentalists, including members of string quartets, experience these stressors. Why then are quartet players so much happier with their jobs than are orchestra musicians? The answer lies in the assumptions at the root of the two types of musical enterprises and the effects of those assumptions on the musicians.

All institutions and organizational structures have at their core a fundamental hypothesis or normative myth. The normative myth underlying democracy, for example, is that a large body of people can make better decisions about their collective affairs than can one ruler. The hypothesis underlying capitalism is that private greed leads to public good. The myth at the core of the string quartet is that the four musicians are equals.

The Impact of Normative Myths

Myth-making is a primal attempt to grasp painfully complex realities by symbolizing and simplifying them. Yet, in simplifying the real world, myths distort and even lie. After all, democracies often make very poor choices, while the greed of businesses in a capitalistic system can lead to great suffering. Anyone who has worked in a small group certainly will recognize that the “quartet myth” is false; no group of four individuals is composed of “equals” in any meaningful sense. (The classic insider’s definition of a string quartet is: “a good violinist, a bad violinist, an ex-violinist, and someone who hates violinists.”)

“...the disparity between myth and reality in professional orchestras is extreme and serves as the most powerful source of musician stress and counterproductive institutional dynamics.”

But such myths continue to exist because they are built on a truth of some kind, even if the myths themselves are not true. Democracy may not consistently produce good decisions, but it often produces comity and stability in the community. Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” has produced a very high standard of living in capitalist economies. And string quartets in which one member treats the other three as lesser beings will soon have either one new member or three.

These normative myths also have a powerful impact on the way we experience the institutions with which we live and color our perceptions of the ways those institutions function. Discrepancy between myth and reality also creates powerful cognitive and emotional dissonance. Perhaps worst of all, we often try to adapt ourselves to the myth, rather than adapting the reality to ourselves. The story of the mythical Greek innkeeper, who stretched his guests or lopped off their limbs to fit his one bed, perfectly illustrates the unhealthy effects of that adaptive response.

Orchestras, like other institutions, labor under the heavy weight of such a

myth. But the disparity between myth and reality in professional orchestras is extreme and serves as the most powerful source of musician stress and counterproductive institutional dynamics.

Orchestras are fundamentally patriarchal. Underlying the behavior of conductors and musicians in the orchestra is the myth of the conductor as omniscient father (“maestro,” “maitre”) and the musicians as children (“players”) who know nothing and require uninterrupted teaching and supervision. As Robert Sapolsky (1994) wrote of the Fellini movie, *The Orchestra Rehearsal*, “When Fellini needed a metaphor for the anarchic overthrow of the patriarchy, he came up with the notion of an orchestra rebelling against its conductor.” (Some might suggest that the patriarchal myth also accounts for the overwhelming dominance of the podium by male practitioners, not to mention the very existence of the baton.)

To demonstrate this myth, let us deconstruct a typical moment in an orchestra rehearsal. The conductor is waving his arms around in a manner that would get him arrested were he to do it on the street, and the musicians are not only *not* laughing, they are doing their level best to decipher those motions, coordinate their actions to realize the music on their stands, and incidentally give the conductor the gratifying sensation of total control.

What happens when a member of the orchestra asks the conductor a question is even more revealing. (Virtually every communication from a musician to a conductor in a rehearsal is phrased as a question, even when it is really a statement of fact or belief.) One of the authors once heard the principal clarinetist of a major American orchestra ask the conductor whether he wanted the notes with dots over them “short, or like the brass were playing them?” This rather complex statement masquerading as a question conveyed both the musician’s lack of respect for the brass players in question and scorn for the conductor’s failure to notice the problem. But to fit the myth of the omniscient conductor, the comment had to be phrased as a question, for how could a musician possibly inform an omniscient being? The myth dictates that a musician can only tap into that well of knowledge, not add to it.

Questions from musicians to conductors must be respectfully phrased and, ideally, prefaced with the honorific “Maestro.” (This title may be dropped if the conductor is sufficiently young or doesn’t speak with an accent.) Such questions must not explicitly challenge the conductor’s interpretation of the music or conducting and rehearsal technique in any way.

This arrangement makes matters awkward for the orchestral musician who desires to improve the quality of the orchestral product. The musician must not challenge the conductor’s tempi or interpretation; he or she cannot even suggest that there might be a pitch or ensemble problem, much less how the conductor might fix it. Questions are therefore limited to issues of whether the parts agree with the score or how the conductor would like a certain passage bowed. Even the latter has risks, however, as it implies that the conductor didn’t see how it

was bowed the first time; certainly no self-respecting omniscient being could have missed something as elementary as whether a passage started up-bow or down-bow.

In fact, the myth makes virtually all communication from musician to conductor impossible. (In one major American orchestra, musicians are discouraged from addressing the music director until he addresses them first. Matters are arranged so that the music director never encounters musicians except on the podium or in private meetings which he calls.) This is not to say such communications don't happen, of course, but the farther they venture from simple inquiry, the more uncomfortable they are likely to make orchestra members and the more angry the conductor. Challenging the conductor's omniscience is, quite literally, taboo.

Of course, like most myths, the myth of the omniscient conductor teaching the ignorant, childlike "players" is false. Musicians in a professional orchestra of any significance know quite a bit about music and about what they're doing. So do many conductors, of course; but generally, individual conductors do not know more than the orchestra in front of them knows collectively. In fact, about

"In order to prevent things from degenerating into chaos, musicians and conductors pretend that the conductor stands on the podium by divine right."

certain issues, such as the mechanics of string playing, conductors usually know quite a bit less. Most orchestra musicians would agree that many conductors deal ineptly with technical issues such as pitch and ensemble, and that many conductors do not even recognize such problems when they occur, much less address them. Most orchestra musicians, after all, have extensive chamber music experience, in which pitch and ensemble are prominent on the work agenda.

Yet, as do other normative myths, the myth of the omniscient conductor has an underlying reality. An ensemble of 100 musicians can neither rehearse nor perform as a chamber group. *Someone* has to run things, and that someone has to have the attention of the musicians. In order to prevent things from degenerating into chaos, musicians and conductors pretend that the conductor stands on the podium by divine right. Internalized behavioral norms and taboos protect that authority from any challenge.

The omniscience myth does "work" to some extent, as do most such myths, which accounts for their durability. Orchestras deliver musical services to their communities with a high degree of efficiency. Any competent professional orchestra can prepare and perform several new programs a week, a task impossible to most professional chamber ensembles. However, in adapting themselves to this myth, musicians pay a very high price in the form of chronic stress, job dissatisfaction, and infantilization.

Players Lack Control

If the myth dictates that conductors are “masters” and musicians are “players,” then the conductor must have complete control. The natural consequence of omniscience is omnipotence, after all. If the conductor has complete control over the work environment, then the musicians can have none.

This is actually the fundamental structure of the orchestral workplace. During rehearsals or concerts, musicians experience a total lack of control over their environment. They do not control when the music starts, when the music ends, or how the music goes. They don’t even have the authority to leave the stage to attend to personal needs. They are, in essence, rats in a maze, at the whim of the god with the baton.

Extensive research has demonstrated that lack of control is a major cause of stress. Baron and Rodin (1978) defined “control” as “the ability to regulate or influence intended outcomes by selective responding,” while “perceived control” refers to expectations of the power to participate in making decisions in order to obtain desirable consequences. Stress caused by lack of control is not a subjective phenomenon; it can be quantified within a number of physiological parameters. Hormonal activity is perhaps the most commonly studied. A wealth of data, both in animals and in humans, shows that lack of control or loss of control causes significant changes in hormonal activity. Frankenhauser (1983) demonstrated that when individuals performed a task at their “preferred work pace,” and when the subjects were given an opportunity to modify the rate and maintain an optimal pace throughout a one-hour session, pituitary-adrenal activity decreased from baseline. Control over the work rate, he concluded, reduced the stress.

Another classic study (Glass and Singer, 1972) exposed two groups to noxious noise levels (recordings of jet aircraft noise). The first group was told they could inform the experimenters when the noise became uncomfortable. The second group was given a switch which they were told would control the noise. Though the switch *wasn’t connected to anything* and had no effect on the noise level, the second group was able to tolerate roughly twice as much noise. In similar work with rhesus monkeys, monkeys that had control over noxious noise showed cortisol levels (a primary physiological response to stress) similar to monkeys that were not exposed to noise. Levels in both groups were lower than those in monkeys with no control over the noise. When animals with control over noise had that control taken away, their cortisol levels rose to match those of the group without control.

In a study of air traffic controllers, Rose and colleagues (1982) reached similar conclusions. Stress associated with this profession is legendary, yet Rose demonstrated that controllers’ stress hormone levels do not change while at work. Researchers attributed this to the experience levels of the air traffic controllers studied (5+ years), and to the ability they had developed to exercise control over their workplaces. Although air traffic controllers directly control

neither the pace of their work, nor air traffic volume, they do exercise considerable autonomy in performing their jobs. The way air traffic controllers work with pilots and other controllers is not dissimilar, in fact, to working relationships in a chamber group. In both cases, individuals have responsibility and control.

Research among nursing home residents (Rodin, 1980) demonstrates the negative effects of a lack of control, as well as the benefits that accrue when control is returned. In one study, residents of a nursing home were given more

“Much of what is inexplicable to observers of professional orchestras can be explained by stress caused by chronic lack of control and musicians’ attempts to deal with it.”

responsibility for everyday decision-making—choosing their own menus, selecting and caring for house plants, and the like. Residents with more control over even the trivia of their daily lives became more active socially, described themselves as happier, and were rated by their physicians as healthier. Perhaps most startling, death rates among these residents were one-half those of residents who had no such control over their environments.

Much of what is inexplicable to observers of professional orchestras can be explained by stress caused by chronic lack of control and musicians’ attempts to deal with it. Musicians’ first line of defense is the classic tactic of avoidance. It is no accident that every professional orchestra of any consequence is unionized and that the resulting collective bargaining agreements under which orchestras labor spell out in

exquisite detail the limits of a conductor’s authority over the musicians. Such agreements attempt to limit the amount of time musicians are exposed to a situation over which they have no control, as well as expressions of musicians’ need to control at least *something* about the workplace.

How does chronic stress caused by lack of control affect orchestra musicians? Research has demonstrated a link between lack of control and the phenomenon of learned helplessness. In one study (Seligman, 1975), exposure to uncontrollable loud noise significantly reduced the ability to handle a learning task in which a correct response would control the noise. A follow-up study demonstrated reduction in more general cognitive skills.

Closely related to the development of learned helplessness is depression. According to Sapolsky (1994):

A major depression . . . can be the outcome of particularly severe lessons in uncontrollability for those of us who are already vulnerable. . . . According to one school, it is a state brought on by pathologic overexposure to psychological stress, particularly loss of control and of outlets for frustration . . . Subject to enough uncontrollable stress, we learn to be helpless—we lack the motivation to try to live because we assume the worst; we lack the cognitive clarity to perceive when

things are actually going fine, and we feel an aching lack of pleasure in everything.

“Musicians who, when not at work, are perfectly responsible adults, can regress to the level of five-year olds at work...”

There is another, more subtle effect of this chronic lack of control on orchestra musicians: infantilization. Forced to play the roles of children, musicians can behave childishly. Musicians who, when not at work, are perfectly responsible adults, can regress to the level of five-year olds at work, especially when the conductor is even less like the mythic omniscient father figure than is the norm for conductors. Moreover, these musicians tend to view their world, much as a child might, as a mysterious and threatening place. The paranoia that some orchestra musicians exhibit towards managers and conductors, and even towards those of their colleagues who serve on workplace

committees, is a consequence of this world view. Yet the subjects of this generalized paranoia are not some anonymous “they” off at corporate headquarters; they are people who, on a daily basis, stand in front of these musicians, answer their questions, and find the money to pay them.

The Unanswered Question

Having examined the damaging effects of forcing musicians to live in a myth, the natural question is whether it is possible to adapt the reality to the workers, rather than the workers to the myth. Perhaps the answer can be found by examining the existing strategies which musicians use to cope with the effects of their perceived reality.

It is no coincidence, we believe, that musicians gravitate towards hobbies which provide a high degree of control. For example, it appears that far more musicians hold pilot licenses than one would expect in a randomly selected group with similar incomes and educational levels. In some orchestras, five to 10 percent of the members are pilots. Gardening, writing, and home improvement are also pursued with surprising intensity by many orchestra musicians. By contrast, team sports are not as popular with musicians—with the possible exception of serving on membership representation committees, an activity which participants also pursue with a great deal of intensity.

These strategies can successfully reduce the effects of workplace stress in musicians’ lives. However, they are less successful in reducing the levels of stress experienced at work. A very sharp bifurcation can develop, therefore, between work and the rest of life.

Another coping strategy is to negotiate and enforce strict limits on the control conductors wield over the work environment. The paradigmatic example in the typical orchestra labor agreement is the one that most baffles outside observers: the rigid limits on rehearsal time. In virtually every orchestra labor agreement,

there is an absolute limit on the amount of time before a required break, regardless of the point in the music the conductor has reached. How many conductors, managers, and board members have reacted to such clauses with disbelief that the orchestra (or “the contract,” or “the union”) would force the conductor to stop the rehearsal in mid-phrase? And yet to musicians, the necessity of such limits is painfully obvious. The root issue is one of pure and simple control. Conductors resent having control taken away from them after 150 minutes of complete autonomy. Musicians, having experienced 150 minutes of total lack of control, want their lives back. And outsiders, never having encountered what the musicians experience daily, wonder why the musicians seem to hate their jobs so much.

By imposing limits on the length of rehearsals (and, in some orchestras, on the kinds of rehearsal techniques conductors can use), musicians also engineer predictability, which research has shown to ameliorate the effects of whatever stressors are at work. During the German bombing of London in 1940, for

*“And outsiders . . .
wonder why
the musicians
seem to hate their
jobs so much.”*

example, residents of London developed fewer ulcers than did those who lived in the suburbs, even though London was being bombed nightly, while bombs fell in the suburbs much less frequently (Steward and Wisner, 1942). The lack of predictability experienced by suburbanites proved more stressful than did the nightly bombing of the city residents.

Unfortunately, these coping strategies fail to address the cause of the stress itself. Is it possible to actually do away with the myth and with musicians’ lack of

control over their workplaces, while maintaining the ability of professional orchestras to produce musical services efficiently?

Very few orchestras have tried. The best-known example in the United States is Orpheus, the conductorless chamber orchestra; but Orpheus does not try to produce the number or variety of concerts that American symphony orchestras do. Nor does it need to, as it is not a full-time orchestra requiring full-time upkeep. The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the nearest analog to Orpheus in the world of full-time professional American orchestras, is run quite traditionally by comparison.

Could musicians exert more control over the workplace? It seems at least plausible that the notions of small teams, and of workers being able to stop production to fix a quality problem, could be imported into orchestras. It is also easy to imagine the difficulties involved in doing so. Adding one’s colleagues to the list of taskmasters may not seem very attractive to many musicians, even with reciprocal privileges. Nor will the idea of giving up power appeal to conductors, who have done very well under the current system, both economically and psychologically.

Nonetheless, any attempt to make orchestras happier and less stressful places

to work must focus on the issue of control. Until ways are found to return some control over events in the orchestral workplace to the musicians, they will continue to feel like rats in someone else's maze.

Robert Levine is principal violist of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. He previously served as violist of the Orford String Quartet. His father, Seymour Levine, Ph.D., is a professor emeritus at Stanford University and is currently a research professor and director of the program in neurosciences at the University of Delaware. Dr. Levine has published extensively on the psychological and biological aspects of stress.

References

- Allmendinger, Jutta, J. Richard Hackman, and Erin V. Lehman. 1994. *Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras: An Interim Report of Research Findings*. Report No. 7. Cross-national Study of Symphony Orchestras. Cambridge: Harvard University.
- Baron, R. and J. Rodin. 1978. "Perceived Control and Crowding Stress." In *Advances in Environmental Psychology*, edited by A. Baum, J.E. Singer, and S. Valins. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Fishbein, Martin and Susan E. Middlestadt. 1987. Medical Problems Among ICSOM Musicians: Overview of a National Survey. *Senza Sordino* 25 (6).
- Frankenhaeuser, M. 1983. *Health and the Social Environment*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Glass, D. and J. Singer. 1972. *Urban Stress: Experiments in Noise and Social Stressors*. New York: Academic Press.
- Holland, Bernard. 1995. A Pathetic Living at the Symphony? *The New York Times*, November 5.
- Levine, Joshua. 1995. Sour Notes. *Forbes*, November 20, 46-47.
- Levine, S. and H. Ursin. 1991. "What is Stress?" In *Stress. Neurobiology and Neuroendocrinology*, edited by M.R. Brown, G.F. Koob, and C. Rivier. New York: Marcel Dekker, Inc.
- Rodin, J. 1980. "Managing the Stress of Aging: The Role of Control and Coping." In *Coping and Health*, edited by S. Levine and H. Ursin. New York: Plenum Press. 203-223.
- Rose, R.M., C.D. Jenkins, B.E. Hurst, L. Livingston, and R. P. Hall. 1982a. Endocrine Activity in Air Controllers at Work. I. Characterization of Cortisol and Growth Hormone Levels During the Day. *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 7: 101-111.

- Rose, R.M., C.D. Jenkins, M. Hurst, J.A. Herd, and R. P. Hall. 1982b. Endocrine Activity in Air Traffic Controllers at Work. II. Biological, Psychological, and Work Correlates. *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 7: 113-124.
- Rose, R.M., C.D. Jenkins, B.E. Hurst, J. Kreger, J. Barret, and R.P. Hall. 1982c. Endocrine Activity in Air Traffic Controllers at Work. III. Relationship to Physical and Psychiatric Morbidity. *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 7: 125-134.
- Sapolsky, Robert M. 1994. *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. New York: W.H. Freeman & Co.
- Sapolsky, Robert M. 1996. Private communication with the author.
- Seligman, M.E.P. 1975. *Learned Helplessness: On Depression, Development and Death*. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Steward, D. and D. Winser. 1942. Incidence of Perforated Peptic Ulcer: Effect of Heavy Air Raids. *The Lancet*, February 28.