

Performance reviews for the orchestral musician

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Abstract

Musicians are appointed to positions in professional symphony orchestras – both rank and file and section principals – following a blind audition process. They perform set repertoire works and orchestral excerpts behind a screen. In many higher education programs, musicians focus on learning the orchestral excerpts and instrumental repertoire that they can expect in a blind audition. They practice performing. They seek as much experience as possible for this scenario by performing in competitions and applying for orchestral vacancies – using each audition as a learning opportunity. Once appointed, musicians are expected to maintain the level of musicianship to retain the overall level of orchestral playing. However, musicians in professional orchestras in Australia are generally not involved in regular structured performance reviews. This study explores the introduction of leadership training for section principals in Australian orchestras and the qualitative evaluation of musicians' skills. These two aspects are linked with performance reviews for section principals and rank and file orchestral members in the same way that workers in other industries are required to present for an annual performance review (including the managerial positions in Australian orchestras). An orchestra is an example of an institution with its own culture and levels of leadership, pursuing its operations in the industry marketplace. Musicians employed in orchestras are continually learning and developing their craft. Involvement in performance reviews within the orchestral setting challenges a musician to consider their identity within the orchestra and as an individual musician, together with career aspirations and apprehensions. Each musician needs to articulate their creative knowledge and skills (in both words and music) and refocus their experiential learning and knowledge transfer, appropriate to their current role or a potential career change in or outside music.

Key words: communication, employability, leadership, orchestra, performance review, workplace learning.

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Introduction and background

This study explores the introduction of leadership training for section principals in Australian orchestras and the qualitative evaluation of musicians' skills. These two aspects are linked with performance reviews for section principals and rank and file orchestral members in the same way that workers in other industries are required

to present for an annual performance review (including the managerial positions in Australian orchestras). The study is set in the context of workplace learning and the demonstration of employability skills. It continues our interest in workplace learning, particularly educating the professional musician in industry settings rather than the academy. This study examines two programs being used to introduce performance

reviews in Australian orchestras – the *Joy Selby Smith Orchestral Leadership Chair* with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) and the Queensland Symphony Orchestra's (QSO) program titled 'Qualitative evaluation of musician skills by Chief Conductor and section leaders' (QSO, 2012, p. 9). An associated influence is the development of the *Artistic Reflection Kit* (Australia Council, 2010) subtitled, 'A guide to assist organisations to reflect on artistic vibrancy and measure their artistic achievements'. In turn, these two activities have been coupled with performance reviews, adding relevance and reform to the employment of orchestral-based musicians.

Literature review

An exploration of performance reviews and leadership skills within the orchestral setting involves considering a number of themes in the literature. A leading theme is that of introducing a new challenge to a musician's identity as an orchestral musician/player juxtaposed with their initial audition leading to appointment as a section leader or a rank and file position. A member of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) management team expressed concern about musicians in orchestras considering artistic standards as a taboo subject. The team member offered the opinion that this should not be the case, as performance reviews have been part of the work environment for about 20 years (personal communication, 30 April 2013). This suggests that orchestral musicians consider that artistic standards are not appropriate for objective discussion. Research undertaken by various authors including Bennett (2012), Beeching (2012), Huhtanen (2008), Perkins (2012), Smilde (2012), Triantafyllaki (2013) and Weller (2012) focus on the meaning of identity and the shifts that occur in student musicians, when commencing a higher education degree program and the pathway they travel until graduation and their first real appointment. In the instance of this

study, the section principals involved in the MSO leadership chair program are early, middle and late career musicians, and as the team member noted, "some are ready to retire. It's a challenge to their roles, [and] involves change" (personal communication, 30 April 2013). Thus, the late career musician who is a section principal, and very secure in their role as both a player and leader needs to revisit the question of identity as they participate in leadership activities and the link to performance reviews. Challenges relate to being a musician (with the associated maintenance and development) and before that, the education they received for their actual and perceived role.

An important resource associated with this study is the Australia Council's (2010) *Artistic Reflection Kit*, which is represented by two linked circles describing an artistic reflection cycle. Five elements of Artistic Vibrancy are depicted in one circle – Quality and excellence of craft, Audience engagement and stimulation, Development of artists, Curation and development of artform, and Relevance to the community. Tools for Artistic Vibrancy categorised under basic effort, good effort and recommended effort are listed under the five element headings in the other circle (Australia Council, 2010). The *Artistic Reflection Kit* is an example of acknowledged professional standards that could be used in association with a performance review process.

Professional standards have a direct link with performance reviews and the avenue through which they are demonstrated. The simplest definition of a performance review (or appraisal) is an activity that takes place between a manager and an employee on an annual basis to discuss how the employee has worked/performed during the year. A requirement for a performance review may be for an employee to meet predetermined and defined job-related professional standards, developed by their employer – possibly in conjunction with the employees – or by an outside agency. Alternatively the employee may develop

their own objectives, guided by criteria provided by the employer or taken from an external source. Performance reviews take many formats including narratives, ranking comparisons, checklists, rating scales and objective measures (Types of Appraisals, 2013).

The literature associated with continuing professional development is extensive and overpopulated with jargon. A small selection of writers in this field include Avenell (2007), DeFour et al. (2006), Elmore (2002), Ingarson et al. (2005), Stoll and Louis (2007), Verscio et al. (2008) and Zammit et al. (2007). New terms, labels, processes and procedures are created for reconstituted ideas and practices. Harris and Jones (2012) comment that the three basic features of effective professional learning (or professional development) are enquiry, reflection and collaboration facilitated by connecting together like-minded professionals. Professional learning communities are considered to be a successful approach to connecting groups of workplace professionals with a goal of continually improving outcomes. Professional learning communities are often established to assist employees to complete a performance review and professional learning teams are only one approach within a learning community to achieve this goal. The programs run by the MSO and QSO adopt a learning team approach to achieve their respective goals. The teams begin with questions, are driven by the participants, guided by a leader, and linked with action research cycles.

The development of skill sets for section leaders and rank and file players is another theme associated with this study. In Australia, eight employability skills are listed as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning, and technology skills (Matters & Curtis, 2008, p. 5). To promote the development of leadership skills, the Australia Council has established in 2011 the *Emerging Leaders Development Program* with the aim

of supporting “future arts leaders through specialised training, mentoring and coaching” (para. 2). Applications from successful candidates are assessed against criteria and they attend a residential workshop followed by a period of mentoring and coaching. They participate in a program designed to cover a broad range of topics to stimulate discussion with other emerging arts leaders, enhancing their knowledge and skills to face the challenges of their future careers (Australia Council, 2012). Although orchestral section leaders and conductors have previously not been selected in this type of program, the leadership skills needed to pursue artistic excellence in their niche work environment would benefit from such a program especially with the introduction of performance reviews for orchestral musicians. Rosen (2013) comments,

Do orchestra auditions serve to identify talent that extends beyond the execution of a series of excerpts played behind a screen? And what about the job of an orchestral musician? A frequent comment from their ranks is that they spend their professional lives being told what to do by a conductor. (p. 2)

In a further link to develop and harness leadership, Holden (2007) identifies that as part of their role, the job of a leader “is to lead creative people who are constantly questioning what they do, and they must somehow provide the conditions in which those creative people can flourish” (para. 18). Although the orchestral section is a small fragment that makes up the whole artistic company, the musicians are individuals working in a team to achieve a common goal. Working in tandem, an orchestral conductor and section leaders need to be able to manage those people and harness their creativity, whilst pursuing artistic standards. Bennett (2008) draws attention to the unmet opportunities for conservatories to provide continuing professional development for musicians. Leadership programs for orchestral section principals (and aspiring principals) would be a valuable addition.

Context of study

This study is set in the context of workplace learning and the demonstration of employability skills. Members of the workforce in other industries are required to present for an annual performance review, including managerial positions in Australian orchestras. The researchers invited the six Symphony Australia orchestras to participate in the study and sought responses from the management representative tasked with musicians' professional development. The two orchestras involved with this study were working with the same consultant. The selected programs adopted a learning team approach to achieve their respective goals. They begin with questions, are driven by the participants, guided by a leader and linked with action research cycles.

Method of study

The contacts for this study were through the respective management teams of the MSO and QSO following a review of the 2012 annual reports of the six orchestras affiliated with Symphony Services International (SSI) that reported on any performance review activity. Similar activities are taking place in all Australian orchestras at different points of progress. The *Joy Selby Smith Orchestral Leadership Chair* is supported by a benefactor and widely promoted in MSO materials. An MSO management team member remarks, "there is similarity with [annual] performance reviews of other workers in all fields, executives, it's more than just being able to play music to the appropriate standard" (personal communication, 30 April 2013). The first stage has involved percussion, string, woodwind and brass section principals taking part in a structured training program facilitated by an independent consultant contracted by the MSO. The *Joy Selby Smith Orchestral Leadership Chair* is described as, "Within a range of in-depth workshops, activities and individual coaching, this program is designed to enhance the leadership skills of

Section Principals – skills which are vital to successfully lead a talented, dynamic and diverse group of individuals. Through the Leadership Program, the MSO aims to be the best possible orchestra for its audiences.

An orchestra's Section Principals are crucial on-stage leaders – they not only need to deliver an amazing performance themselves; they inspire and provide artistic direction, motivating every member of their section to deliver their best. (MSO in Concert, 2012, p. 41)

We proposed a survey of the players involved with a focus on three questions relating to leadership of an instrument section and in the orchestra, self education and lifelong learning, and aspects of the program that were most beneficial, those that could be improved and advice for future participants. After discussion at management level the MSO informed us that our request was rejected. "It is a little premature for research. Musicians are sensitive to it, especially late career who have been with the orchestra for 30 plus years and principals for the same length of time" (personal communication, 11 June 2013).

The Queensland Symphony Orchestras' program 'Qualitative evaluation of musician skills by Chief Conductor and section leaders' has the aim "to achieve and maintain high artistic standards" (QSO, 2012, p. 9). It is described in the QSO Annual Report for 2012:

In maintaining focus on professional development for musicians, Section Principals led by Concertmaster Warwick Adeney and Principal Trombone Jason Redman, developed and trialed a Section Development plan which aims to achieve the goals of increased artistic vibrancy set by our tripartite agreement, and actively engage every musician in artistic dialogue. This includes section discussions, recognising strengths and weaknesses, setting goals and increasing opportunities for professional development. This is a process that will itself be refined year by year. (QSO, 2012, p. 12)

Communication was established with a human resources team member for the QSO with a request for further information and a draft copy of the 'Section Performance Development Plan' was provided.

The current process has been initiated by the Concertmaster and another Section Principal. The process is that each Section meets as a group twice per year and collectively completes the form. They evaluate themselves as a Section, but there is no individual performance evaluation so far. Hopefully we can get to this point in the future, but there is some resistance to the idea among the musicians. I'm afraid that our tentative and cautious steps into performance management for musicians aren't quite earth shattering, although they have been a big step for us. (personal communication, 7 August 2013)

Exploring the issues

The issues arising from this study align with immediate concerns – those relating to the MSO and QSO programs – and longer term, where broader implications can be identified. A major concern relevant to the success of the pilot MSO program is the length of time that section principals have been in their roles. Many are close to retirement and were appointed up to three decades ago. Variables including age, attitude, experience prior to joining the orchestra and being appointed to a section principal role may be unsettling to the success of the *Joy Selby Smith Orchestral Leadership Chair*, until the demographic of the orchestra changes. Embedding the new challenge of addressing artistic standards in conjunction with a performance review that is focussed on the non-musical roles of the section principal – specifically leadership, communication and mentoring – will be accompanied with an expectation that musicians accept and demonstrate suitable attributes to carry out their expanded role.

Members of the orchestra, as opposed to management, have developed the QSO Section Performance Development Plan. The major issue dominating the implementation process has focussed on the identity of section principals. The musicians in these positions have requested support from management on two matters. Some have their instrumental teacher in their section, and now view them in a different light, however their teacher does not. Others have asked the question, "how do I run this meeting" (personal communication, 23 September 2013). In both instances the challenge here is that section principals are not trained as supervisors and they require guidance to encourage their fellow musicians to express their opinions, and strategies to deal with responses from a previous mentor. Section principals "need to provide guidance/ mentoring to their section, be caring, supportive with regard to performance standards" (personal communication, 23 September 2013).

From a broader perspective, the introduction of annual performance reviews for all orchestral musicians and a defined leadership role for section principals, suggest addressing topics that relate to the audition and selection process for a section principal role, workplace learning, purpose of performance reviews, employability skills and career change, and preparation in higher education for a career as a musician.

Selection process

The audition and selection process for section principals based only on musical attributes is well established. However, with the introduction of a defined leadership role for the musician holding these positions, the first choice may not be suitable to fulfill the expanded role. Applicants might be required to submit a written statement addressing criteria and personal attributes developed by the orchestra musicians and management relating to the leadership role. Characteristics that might be considered are communication skills, life and career experience

(including in non-music careers), the ability to implement new ideas and deal with rejection, encouraging lifelong learning through a professional learning team structure where both age and orchestral experience may be diverse. Short-listed musicians might be interviewed and a judgement made about their suitability to carry out the broader role. The probation period associated with an appointment to a section principal position would include music and leadership skills. The focus on leadership is exemplified with the open-ended question and comment posed by an MSO team member, "How does the section leader handle leadership issues? They are selected as musicians through a blind audition – on musical skill/performance – judged as musicians – might be unsuitable as a leader when selected 20 years ago" (personal communication, 30 April 2013). The importance of knowing and demonstrating leadership skills are emphasised by Dale Barltrop, interviewed on his appointment as the MSO's Co-concertmaster position. He comments,

Ideally the concertmaster is a musician the orchestra can look to, but it's just as important to have the people skills to lead an orchestra of 100 people, and to communicate well. . . . But more important is what happens during rehearsals and concerts, where the concertmaster is a conduit between the conductor and the rest of the orchestra, helping the conductor achieve musical goals. . . . They provide leadership but work as part of a team and must be diplomats, sensitive to the needs of other people and what is unfolding. (Music in Concert, June 2014, p. 27)

Workplace learning

Developing performance plans for all musicians and implementing expanded leadership roles for section principals, leading to probable annual performance reviews represents a culture change for Australian orchestras. Incorporating the *Artistic Reflection Kit* (2010) and giving serious

consideration to embedding artistic standards in their total work environment is another priority. Musicians are being challenged to discuss and notate within their section, performance standards and objectives, and development activities to meet those agreed standards. They are expected to review their progress towards achieving their section objectives, acknowledge obstacles that may have an impact and document problem-solving solutions to enable objectives to be met. Forecasted new or modified objectives are encouraged for the next performance plan. Orchestral management also faces a changed environment. They must be prepared to support all musicians with strategies and advice when required and learn about the challenge to issues of identity encountered by the players. Implementation of the QSO Section Performance Development Plan highlights the preparation and support that is required by orchestral management. A human resources team member for the QSO comments,

There is back up provided by management. Section principals are only expected to provide technical input regarding musical and other performance matters of a section member, [they are] never expected to tackle performance issues to the final point. Section principals take feedback – from the section discussion – to a certain point and hand it on to us. Corporate entities and management structures sit neatly in orchestras and sections – if a problem is out of hand – seek advice. [We] never expect principals to solve a problem that is too much for them – they still need to sit next to a person in a section. If they choose to climb the ladder then they can learn management strategies. (personal communication, 23 September 2013)

Participating in professional development activities – as a section and individuals – sharing learned knowledge and skills from these new experiences introduces the concept of a learning team, supporting the growth of each other and preparing individual musicians to focus on a performance review.

Purpose of performance reviews

There is a general acknowledgement that performance reviews for professional orchestras musicians serve the purpose of providing continuing professional development. They bolster a sense of community. In answering the question 'What is an orchestra?', Monica Curro, Assistant Principal Second Violin in the MSO replies, "A metaphor for community". She elaborates, "A group of passionate, dedicated individuals coming together to create something great, and only possible with a collective will and brilliant teamwork!" (Music in Concert, June 2014). In a 2013 radio interview conducted by Marshall McGuire, titled 'Power, Communication & Leadership: Benevolent Dictatorship or Single-minded Arrogance opportunity', the teamwork of orchestral sections combined with artistic leadership of section leaders was emphasised. Monica Curro comments further,

"We don't necessarily look at the conductor. We may not look when we're playing, its peripheral middle management . . . listen to each other . . . looking at each other . . . rely on section leaders for leadership in performance".

The conductor, Graham Abbott, another participant in this interview continues,

We on the podium are so dependant on section leaders, particularly in the strings to do the stuff we can't do, to hear things we can't hear, and there is very much a chain of command that Monica has been talking about, that we on the podium are completely dependant upon for to make the performance happen. (McGuire, 2013)

Mitchell (2014) posed the question, in a response to the initial presentation of this paper asks, "if following a vocation as a professional musician, such as an orchestral musician, why are they and their institutions so reluctant to interrogate their own practices?" She strengthens her observation with the comment that, "the elements of the *Artistic Reflection Kit* do represent desirable and appropriate professional standards that could

be used as criteria for professional reviews".

Encouraging orchestral musicians to discuss artistic questions illustrates the positive strength of performance reviews.

However, performance reviews can be used for dismissal of musicians from an orchestra, as in any other workplace. Mary Valentine, Manager of the Melbourne Recital Centre, participating in the radio interview presented by McGuire (2013), expands on the appropriate use of performance reviews through meeting and monitoring of artistic standards supported by the orchestral community. She comments,

[The] Chief conductor does the weeding of the garden and replanting of the garden. . . . [It's the] Role of the music director/chief conductor to encourage movement of players onwards when the time is right. . . . [It's a] Difficult thing for an orchestra, that they expect you to [do] but does not necessarily want be part of the process.

Employability skills

Mitchell (2014) questions why following a vocation such as an orchestral musician, "do such musicians undervalue their generic skills". Whether they are entering or leaving an orchestral career the issues previously explored in this paper are significant. For the musician who chooses to leave employment from an orchestra, to pursue another career as a musician or in unrelated field, transferable employment skills are vital. Their career change may be an individual choice created by a change of interest or may be imposed through examples such as failing to meet orchestral playing standards, injury or a financially unviable orchestra that has closed. A musician who works in the many music careers that rely heavily on self-management needs to draw on all employment skills as well as develop the ability to self assess their own performance and continue their learning. A musician who chooses a fulltime school teaching position following a performing career may need to

adapt to a disciplined approach to professional development because, for example, their orchestral percussion position does not equip them to teach and demonstrate drum kit. The opposite employment direction is also possible where a musician has been employed in an unrelated career, for example nursing, and wins an orchestral position. These musicians bring with them experience and expectations of different employability skill sets, performance reviews, workplace learning and a variety of workplace cultures.

Higher education preparation

The movement towards annual performance reviews for orchestral musicians and broader leadership expectations of section principals will require preparation for this aspect of life as a musician to be added to the higher education curriculum. Although these ideas are currently specific to the orchestral workplace they are most relevant to any career as musician. Many pre-professional musicians aspire to a chair in an orchestra and they may be appointed to a section principal role in their early 20s, on graduation from a conservatoire. As these workplace expectations become common, students will need practice tasks to complete, in preparation for an interview for an appointment to a section principal position and during the probation period. All students will need to be familiar with types of performance development plans, performance reviews and the expectation that skill sets focussing on communication, leadership, learning teams and lifelong learning will become the norm.

Closing Comments

This study has discussed a culture change that is gradually being introduced into Australian orchestras. It has explored two programs involving the introduction of leadership training for section principals in Australian orchestras

and the qualitative evaluation of musicians' skills. Although the notion of performance reviews is in its infancy it is apparent that roles of musicians and orchestral management is being challenged. Management is mindful of the sensitivity and resistance from orchestra members, especially those who have been employed in the same orchestra for most of their working life. Musicians and management are entering a new era and need to embrace a shift in their roles and refocus questions of identity in the organised setting of an orchestra.

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