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Behind the Scenes: A Roundtable



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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

Behind the Scenes: A Roundtable

I am a musician, often present on the concert stage, but virtually unknown to the audience. My knowledge of repertoire, scores, and parts is extensive—often eclipsing that of nearly everyone in my organization. I am highly self-motivated, work under tight deadlines, and must be efficient. I love my work, and take my greatest satisfaction from a flawlessly played performance. Who am I? As readers of *Harmony* are about to learn, “I” am an orchestra librarian.

In its ongoing effort to illuminate the uniqueness and complexity of symphony orchestra organizations, the Symphony Orchestra Institute is pleased to highlight the role of the orchestra librarian. Even for participants who have worked for many years in symphony organizations, the librarian’s vital, central contribution to orchestral performance, and overall organizational effectiveness, is not well understood. The Institute recently became better informed about this pivotal organizational role, and invited five orchestra librarians—whom you will soon meet—to participate in a roundtable discussion of their day-to-day work and organizational roles. An edited transcript of the roundtable follows.

Institute: Please introduce yourselves and tell us a bit about your backgrounds.

Marcia Farabee: I am the orchestra librarian for the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, DC, a position I have held for 13 years. Prior to that, I was assistant librarian for three years. I hold a bachelor of music in violin performance and education from Capital University Conservatory of Music in Columbus, Ohio.

Margo Hodgson: I have been the principal librarian of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra for 12 years, and also served as assistant librarian for one year. My degree is an honours bachelor in music education from the University of Ottawa, with a double major in oboe and piano accompaniment.

Karen Schnackenberg: I have served in the libraries of several orchestras, and for nine years have been principal librarian for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. Previously I worked as principal librarian of the New Orleans Symphony, librarian of the Santa Fe Opera, and assistant librarian of the Oklahoma Symphony. I was also a section violinist in New Orleans, Santa Fe, and Oklahoma. I hold a bachelor of music education and a master of music in violin performance from the University of Oklahoma.

Larry Tarlow: For the past 14 years, I have been principal librarian with the New York Philharmonic. Before that, I was the librarian—with a variety of titles—with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra, and the Berkshire Music Center Orchestra. I started my formal study of music as a tubist in the pre-college division at The Juilliard School, earned a bachelor of music at the Curtis Institute of Music, and returned to Juilliard for postgraduate study.

Ron Whitaker: I feel as though I should introduce myself as grandpa, having been head librarian of the Cleveland Orchestra for 24 years! And I was even a librarian prior to that, as assistant librarian with the Minnesota Orchestra. Actually, I started at age 13, working in the orchestra library for the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. My father had worked there for a number of years and got me the job, initially on a part-time basis. The next summer, I worked there full time, and by the following summer realized that this was the profession I wished to pursue. I worked in the orchestra library at The New England Conservatory of Music while I earned my undergraduate degree, and also worked with Victor Alpert of the Boston Symphony during that time. I was probably one of the first people to actively plan and train to be an orchestra librarian from high school onward.

Institute: That’s fascinating, Ron. And it makes us wonder how the rest of you came to be orchestra librarians?

Tarlow: Thanks for asking, because I was about to say “not so fast, Ron.” I was led to this profession by a great love of score reading. One thing followed another, and I ended up as librarian for my high school instrumental ensembles. I kept going from there, including summers at Tanglewood. Actually, Ron’s taking the job with the Minnesota Orchestra created the vacancy at Tanglewood that I was so lucky to fill. His father was my boss at Tanglewood.

Farabee: Well, I don’t want to get into a “can you top that” mode, but I have been working with music preparation since junior high, although it never occurred to me at that time that it could be a career. In addition to being the orchestra librarian for my conservatory’s orchestras, I worked summers in a library reference section, and after graduation, implemented a music library system for a large county junior and senior high school where I was the orchestra director. As part of my freelance musician career, I became a freelance librarian, which led to a call from the librarian at the National Symphony Orchestra asking if I would be interested in a very part-time bowing position. I’m still there!

Hodgson: I cannot claim a lifelong plan to be an orchestra librarian. My predecessor at the Winnipeg Symphony was about to retire. He had observed me during my years as a freelance musician and recognized my strong organizational skills, neatness, conscientiousness, and an interest in attention to detail. Out of the blue, he asked me if I might be interested in learning to be an orchestra librarian as his assistant, and eventually taking the job over when he retired. I accepted.

Schnackenberg: I'm afraid I'm another one of those high school stories. I am an orchestral violinist, and that, plus my interest in the organizational challenges of the orchestra library and part preparation, started me on this path in high school. Working in my college orchestra library, combined with additional focuses in theory, history, and Baroque performance practice, led to becoming an assistant librarian while I was a section violinist in the Oklahoma Symphony. I continued to meld playing and librarianship as I moved on, and here I am.

Institute: Now that we know how you became librarians, we would ask you to explain to our readers the complexities of what you actually do.

Farabee: Let me paraphrase for you a few items from the National Symphony Orchestra's job description of librarian. The music library is the informational hub and music preparation center of the symphony. This involves music preparation for approximately 190 concerts and more than 500 pieces of music per season. In this setting, the librarian's duties include researching, locating, acquiring, preparing, and distributing all music for all services. Preparing the music includes proofreading all parts, editing, transposition work, string bowings, and possible manuscripting and repair. The description then goes on for eight additional points covering music storage and cataloging; communicating with everyone from conductors and artists to publishers and arrangers; developing budgets; researching copyrights; assisting with programming for pops and education programs; attending rehearsals, recording sessions, and concerts; touring with the orchestra; and responding to and researching music-related questions from Kennedy Center personnel and the public.

“The music library is the informational hub and music preparation center of the symphony.”

Schnackenberg: Marcia, I would summarize all of that by saying that my job is to get the right music in the right place at the right time! But I guess if we are really trying to educate the *Harmony* audience about the complexity of what we do, there are several thoughts I would add. So let me give you my long sentence and hope that the next time your nonmusician readers (and maybe even musician readers) see folders on music stands in the concert hall they remember my sentence. The orchestra librarian obtains program information from the artistic staff; rents or purchases materials from publishers in a timely manner to meet deadlines for music preparation and distribution; consults with the music director, guest conductors, and string principals about bowings, cuts, inserts, and any other markings that need to be placed in the parts; prepares each part for performance as required; places music in folders for distribution; distributes parts and provides music-related services to players; sets the music on the stage for each rehearsal and performance—changing them as the set changes; separates the parts following each performance; and returns music to the publisher or to library shelves.

Tarlow: I like to think of our tasks as divided into three groups: music preparation, stage librarian, and administrative librarian. Karen and Marcia have certainly covered the basics of those tasks, but let me add a little detail here. When they talk about editing, or cutting and inserting, they make it sound simple. But here's how it really works. You get a call or a note from the music director or guest conductor saying, "Let's only use three trumpets for this. Write the fourth trumpet part into another instrument." Or during a rehearsal, the conductor says, "I can't hear the second oboe. Add that part to the second clarinet." Sometimes the music we receive from publishers is in really bad shape—or maybe it's music from our own libraries that's in bad shape. Librarians do the repairs. We're masters of Scotch® tape and the photocopier! We fix bad page turns, too. When the program includes a piece of new music, librarians often make corrections during the rehearsal process. Mind you, these are not wrong notes entered by a copyist. They are rewrites requested by the composer as he hears the piece in rehearsal for the first time. We orchestra librarians do a myriad of small things, sometimes under great time pressure, that add up to a set of parts from which an orchestra can play a concert.

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Hodgson: Compared with you, Larry, I work for a very small orchestra. There's a big difference between New York and Winnipeg! But we need to accomplish the same things. I would like to add a bit about the time I spend with budgets, bills, and financial records. Budgets are prepared when the new season is planned, and most often I must give "guesstimates," because I don't have a complete program for nonclassical events such as pops and kids' concerts. Based on experience, you get to know how much these should cost, and then you must try to keep the costs within the budget once the programming is done. I also authorize invoices for payment, and maintain and revise forecasts throughout the season. Librarians also file all of the reports with the licensing agencies.

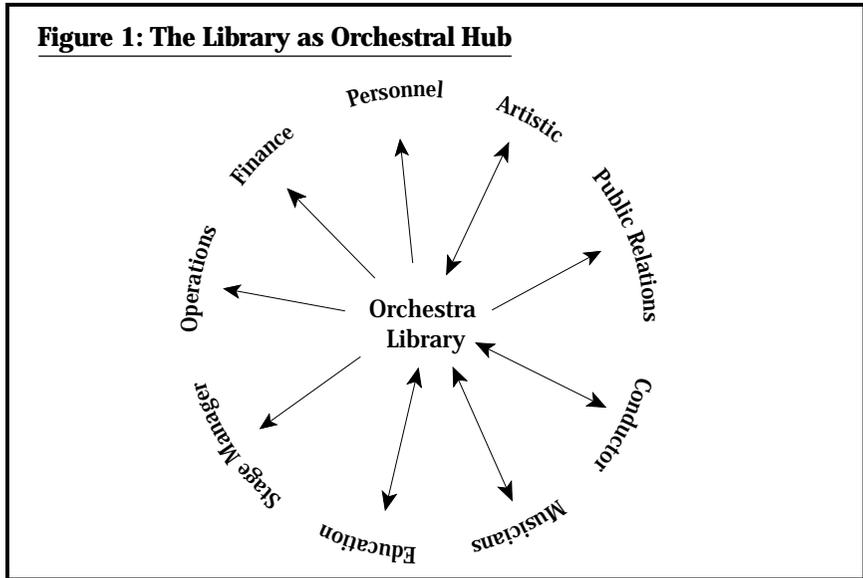
Tarlow: Margo, it's not all that different in New York. We file the licensing information, too. And if we use more Scotch® tape during a season, it's only because our season is longer. But none of us has really talked about the time we spend fielding miscellaneous public inquiries. I think we would all agree that it is not all that unusual to get a telephone call in which the person on the other end says, "If I sing you something, can you tell me where to find the sheet music?" To describe the library as the "hub" of the orchestra is very accurate.

Whitaker: Can I sum this up by saying that as librarians, we are musicians, accountants, computer experts, copier experts, archivists, and musicologists?

Schnackenberg: Absolutely!

Institute: We wonder if we can take all of this information you have shared with us and cast it in slightly more organizational terms? Can you describe for us the organizational roles—not necessarily particular people—in your organization with whom you have regular, ongoing contact that is important to the overall functioning of your organization?

Farabee: In the material I prepared prior to this conversation, I sent you a diagram of a hub and spokes which I think shows where the library fits.



We interact nearly every day with nearly every department. Notable exceptions might be development and marketing. Once we have the proposed program for the season, the library is responsible for obtaining and disseminating appropriate information to the various folks shown in the “wheel.” And occasionally, we are even asked to put on our creative hats and design a program, or decide how many clarinets we *really* need to perform a particular piece! Equally important, in my opinion, are the relationships we maintain with various folks outside our organizations: our library colleagues, publishers, music dealers, and even John Q. Public—who may well be a subscriber.

Whitaker: My answer would be that the foremost organizational relationships for the librarian are with the personnel manager, the stage manager, and the artistic administrator. None of these positions can function without information from the other three, and constant communication among them is essential. A good relationship with the orchestra membership is extremely important. There are times when we are all under stress—the scheduled conductor is ill, and the substitute just changed the entire program—and it is important that orchestra members respect and understand those times in the life of a librarian, just as we must understand when an orchestra member is under unusual stress.

Hodgson: I agree that we interact regularly with nearly every part of the organization. For example, the artistic director programs the concerts, informs me of the editions, cuts, program orders, and any other information I need to know to prepare the music. Likewise, I inform him of anything he might not already know, such as currently available editions, instrumentations, costs, and problems which might mean that the orchestra cannot perform the chosen piece—such as complete unavailability of the music. We must all keep one another informed and updated at all times, so that each member of the production team knows what is going on. None of us can do our jobs properly if there is a weak link in the chain.

Schnackenberg: Because we are talking about organizational behavior, you're probably going to ask us a question about our frustrations. But I'm going to beat you to the punch! I agree that, as librarians, we interact with nearly every office within the organization. And if I could send one message to all of them, it would be "timing is everything"! I want music out there for the orchestra to have access to a month in advance. Rental music only arrives a month in advance. Because we know the programs for the next season's classical series well in advance, we can order and prepare the parts in a timely fashion. But the frustration begins with secondary concerts, when we might only get the program a month in advance and be expected to put it together.

Tarlow: You might get less than that! And for the first half of a pops concert, you might get the program 10 days before the first rehearsal.

Schnackenberg: Or for the second half of a pops concert, you might not get the music until the bus arrives.

Tarlow: The music arrives under the bus, right there with the luggage!

Schnackenberg: The music arrives with the band, and you just have to be ready to react. But I generally try to work with that in mind.

Hodgson: Let me offer a real example to emphasize your point, Karen. Our orchestra recently played for the opening ceremonies of the Pan Am Games. Three weeks earlier, we prerecorded the thirty-one pieces of music in three three-hour sessions. When we started on the first morning, I only had 15 of the pieces. The rest arrived during the sessions. So picture this: The music would arrive at the back door, one or two pieces at a time. Working alone, I would race upstairs to the library, make complete sets of parts, and bind five sets for each before the next break. Then I would run down to the stage, distribute these, and the orchestra would basically sight-read and record the music. Then I would rush again to the back door, hoping more music had arrived, so I could repeat the process!

Whitaker: Margo, we can all tell such stories. And it happens with scheduled programming, not just special events. I've been the librarian in Cleveland for a long time, and I've often been asked, "How much leeway do you need?" My answer is, you can never tell me too soon. A year and a half out? That's not too

soon. Please tell me. There seems to be the idea that if you tell me what is being programmed, the librarians are going to blab it to the press. Nothing could be farther from our minds. We don't even know the press. The more advance time we have, the better we can do our jobs.

Tarlow: You can put big red stars around that one! Because it's a message we would like to get to our boards and our managements. Share the information as soon as you know it. Let us collate the information; let us decide what's important.

“Share the information as soon as you know it.”

Schnackenberg: We don't get hysterical for our health! If you can, provide us with program information three months out, even though you think six weeks is enough. We'll all be happier and produce a better product.

Institute: Receiving advance notice about programs and changes is obviously a sore spot for each of you, and perhaps this roundtable will help to educate those with whom you interact. But in our individual conversations, you have all expressed pleasure and satisfaction with what you do.

Schnackenberg: You're right. There is a special feeling about getting a challenging and complicated project done against all odds, and realizing at the first rehearsal that the orchestra did not have to stop even once to fix anything. Only the librarians know the amount of work that went into that particular set of parts, but because we know what was entailed, we can be proud of our accomplishment. Working on great music, then hearing it played, is what keeps me remembering why I do this. The detail can be overwhelming at times, but keeping all the balls in the air is satisfying to me.

Tarlow: Without a doubt, the most satisfying aspect of my work is hearing the New York Philharmonic play great concerts, and knowing that I played a part in that performance.

Farabee: I truly appreciate the interaction with my fellow musicians. I also enjoy utilizing the skills and knowledge I have acquired during a performance career when I can suggest and implement musical opportunities for the public.

Hodgson: I agree with you all. My greatest satisfaction occurs when rehearsals and concerts go off without a hitch, especially after a problematic piece of repertoire or set of parts has been prepared.

Whitaker: There is no pleasure greater than when I actually have the time to prepare a set of parts properly, according to what the conductor and players have indicated, and absolutely nothing goes wrong during rehearsals and concerts. The absence of comments is the ultimate compliment, because no

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one really knows when things have been done correctly, but everyone knows when something is wrong.

Institute: From what you've shared with us so far, would it be fair to say that a good orchestra librarian has to have a very broad and deep interest in all forms of classical ensemble music, and a dedication to lifelong learning about the repertoire?

Schnackenberg: To the second half of the question, the answer is absolutely. Because if you don't keep your mind open to learning, you are never going to survive in this job. The amount of knowledge one begins to amass over the years really helps.

Tarlow: I would disagree with the first half of the question. It's not a broad and deep interest, it's a broad and deep *knowledge* of the classical repertoire. It's easy to be interested. I'm interested in lots of things that I don't know much about. But to be a good orchestra librarian, one needs broad and deep knowledge.

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Whitaker: No question, the more you know, the better you can do your job. For example, an assistant conductor will come in and say, "I want to do a program by this composer, but I don't want to do the standard works. Is there something off the beaten track you can think of?" Larry's right. It's a broad and deep knowledge.

Schnackenberg: I would add that it depends to some extent on what your orchestra does. For example, if your orchestra does opera performances—and Dallas does—and the librarian knows something about preparing opera literature—and I do—the job is easier. Some orchestras do runs of *The Nutcracker*, or jazz programs. I guess we develop the knowledge we need to do our jobs.

Institute: There are two or three additional topics that we would ask you to address. First, let's explore for a few minutes the ways in which technology has changed or is changing your work.

Whitaker: Since, in this group of librarians, I have been at it longest, I'll lead off. As recently as 10 years ago, photocopiers made straight copies, period. Now we take reduction and enlargement for granted. And given the amount of music we are now required to process over the course of a year, copiers are an absolute necessity. Fax machines and such computer services as e-mail have streamlined communication among parties scattered worldwide. Receiving written confirmations from people in Europe or Asia can now be as fast as getting something from across town.

Tarlow: The use of a database to track the New York Philharmonic's 157-year history of concerts, artists, and repertoire is certainly an achievement. One no longer has to rely on a card file, and everyone with access to the database has the same information available.

Farabee: E-mail and faxes are wonderful for more than receiving confirmations. They make it very easy to communicate with my colleagues who have specialized knowledge of ballet, or opera, or gospel, or Latin music, or women composers, and so on. We are all able to be teachers and helpers to one another. The research capabilities offered by the Internet make locating pieces and editions much easier, especially with international works. The Internet also makes it easier for us to track some of our recalcitrant conductors!

Hodgson: While I agree that these technological advances have improved our work, there is a downside. I find that I spend much more of my day sitting at the computer, and this cuts into the time I have for hands-on preparation of the music. Since I don't have very many hours of assistance in Winnipeg, this can become problematic. I must have a clear goal of what I need to accomplish in any given day, and stay until it is done.

Whitaker: I agree with Margo. I spend three-quarters of my time in front of a computer. But there are certain things that we can do that we were not able to do years ago. My hand manuscript is not the greatest. Today, it doesn't have to be, because I can use the computer to generate inserts that before were handwritten. But that said, I certainly don't think we are close to seeing the end of hand work.

Tarlow: Ron, we're not yet using music engraving software in our library. But I know that will change in a year or two. And if you will let me repeat a favorite aphorism, I must say that one thing the computer has done is take a really bad copyist with bad handwriting and make him a really bad copyist with really good handwriting!

Whitaker: Oh, are you right! Bad computer-generated music is truly awful!

Schnackenberg: Music has been created and notated in a certain way for hundreds of years. Just now, we're making a gradual change to digital format. The issues remain constant in terms of the errors in materials, but what is exciting to me is that we—those of us who are orchestra librarians at this time—are in a unique position to help develop the technology to get the end products we want. I think that's pretty neat!

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Institute: Finally, let's turn our attention to the organization through which the Institute found you—MOLA. We suspect that the majority of our readers are not familiar with the Major Orchestra Librarians Association. Three of you are currently officers of the association, so educate us.

Tarlow: Well, I'm not one of the three who is currently an officer, but I certainly know the MOLA story. I was president for three years in the 1980s, and have attended every conference. The association was founded in 1983 because three

orchestra librarians recognized that each of us was working in a vacuum and reinventing the wheel on a weekly basis. I wasn't one of the three founders, so I can't take credit for the idea, but the thought was, why don't we use each other's wheels? And I want to make it clear that MOLA librarians are all orchestra librarians, but they are not all symphony orchestra librarians. They are also opera librarians and ballet librarians. What we all have in common is that we prepare orchestral music for live performance.

Farabee: I am one of the three, currently past president. Ron is vice president and Margo is secretary. MOLA had just begun when I started with the National Symphony Orchestra, and my predecessor was a charter member. From the outset, I learned on a weekly basis how important intercommunication among orchestras was.

Whitaker: There are now nearly 140 orchestras around the world that hold membership in MOLA, and as our seasons become longer and more complex, the interaction among the MOLA librarians is becoming crucial to our business. When you are up against it, you can get an answer to almost any question within half an hour because somebody somewhere has dealt with the same situation.

Tarlow: Here I go again with an example. The American Symphony Orchestra League, on behalf of MOLA, publishes a booklet that contains the repertoire that every member orchestra plays. Here's the scenario: The New York Philharmonic has an 8:00 p.m. concert. It's 7:45 p.m., I'm in the library, and the phone rings. When it's another librarian on the line, I know they're not calling to inquire about the weather in New York! "My second trumpet left the music at home. I know you're playing this rented piece next week. Can you fax me the part?" Of course I can. No more reinventing the wheel!

Hodgson: I've learned so much through MOLA! Particularly such things as which copiers, pens, papers, and pencils are best. In Winnipeg, we're the only orchestra of any size within several hundred miles. But I don't feel isolated. I have friends everywhere, and I know that my questions will be answered.

Schnackenberg: There's another issue here that I at least want to touch upon. And that's the fact that we are musicians first and foremost, doing musicians' work. Among the five of us who are participating in this roundtable, Ron and Larry are formally members of the orchestra, and Margo, Marcia, and I are formally members of the staff. And without wanting to spoil what has been a delightful conversation, or getting into contractual implications of the distinctions, I want to make the point that, in the broadest sense, the position of orchestra librarian is an artistic position. You can't just hire a good orchestra librarian off the street—we are not clerks! We are self-motivated; we are able to work on our own; we don't need someone over our shoulders. We are musicians.

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Tarlow: And musicians work under the collective bargaining agreement; nonmusicians do not. My personal feeling is that since we're all musicians, librarians should be part of the bargaining unit. So if our participating in this roundtable has helped to educate the *Harmony* audience about who we are and what we do, it has been time well spent. As long as an orchestra is still used in concert, or as live accompaniment to an opera or ballet, the work of the orchestra librarian will remain constant. There will always be errors to be corrected, inserts to be made, page turns to be fixed, music to be repaired or acquired, and information to be disseminated. This will not change, although the methods of doing these things certainly will, as they have been changing since the creation of the symphony orchestra.

Institute: Our thanks to each of you for joining the Institute in this special educational effort. The work of the librarian is one of the more complex roles in an orchestra organization. Your role requires a very high level of musical knowledge and administrative skill, coupled with deft interpersonal communications, particularly as you interact with orchestra members, conductors, and artistic administrators. You are among the primary “organizational boundary spanners” within your symphony institutions, as you help link the musical constituencies within your organizations. We hope this roundtable discussion will help all symphony orchestra organization participants to better appreciate your unique positions, the diverse skills required, and the potential you have—if you are properly integrated into the organization’s planning and information systems—to help create more effective orchestral workplaces and more flawless concert performances.

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