

Jon R. Campbell
Richard K. Davis
Michael Henson, CEO
Minnesota Orchestra
Orchestra Hall
1111 Nicollet Mall
Minneapolis, MN 55403

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Dear Minnesota Orchestra management,

Well, this is awkward.

On 10 September 2012. I wrote a blog entry titled "Is Minnesota Orchestra management lying to us?" (Google "Minnesota Orchestra lying" and you should be able to find it.) In it I called you dangerously oblivious incompetents "who are too arrogant to realize they know nothing about the organization's very reason for being." Despite the bravado, those were tough words for me to write. I'm a peacemaker who gets anxiety attacks when criticizing anyone about anything. So I'd like to give you a chance to convince me (and my thousands of readers) that I'm a raving partisan lunatic.

How? I've come up with a list of approximately a hundred questions that I'd like anyone on the board of directors to answer publicly, but especially Jon Campbell, Richard Davis, and Michael Henson. Ideally I'd bring my voice recorder and come visit y'all myself, but I'm guessing it will be difficult for us all to find mutually convenient times in which to ask and answer all these questions aloud. So I'm thinking it might be best if you answered them in writing. Take 10, 15 minutes out a day for a few days. Answer a few a day over the next couple of weeks. If certain questions are too sensitive given the current negotiations, say so and move on. I included a CD in this package with an RTF file of the document you're holding, so it will be as convenient as possible for you to answer. When you're done, save as a PDF and send it to me (try contacting me through Facebook, or if that doesn't work, ask the musicians to get it to me), and I'll publish it on my blog **unedited**. If you don't trust the CD I've made for you, type out what I've written on these pages. Once again, the musicians will know where to find me. Surely despite the no doubt extraordinary demands on your time, you could find a spare quarter hour every day for a week or two to explain yourselves and your plans more fully...since they will, after all, affect the future of one of the great orchestras of the world. Pretty important topic, that! Plus, I know you agree: transparency is key. You did, after all, make a very big show of releasing your proposed contract to the public.

These aren't meant to be judgmental gotcha questions. I've done my best to phrase them fairly and neutrally. I don't mean to vilify. My only purpose in asking them is to try to get inside your heads, since I've had such difficulty doing so over the last couple of weeks. Ultimately, all I want is to understand the future you're envisioning for the orchestra that means so much to me. I promise.

Clearly you have utmost confidence in the direction you want to take the Minnesota Orchestra. So what would you have to lose by explaining that direction more fully, and inspiring confidence in others? If you answer me, you could reach an audience of literally thousands ("Is Minnesota Orchestra management lying to us?" got thousands of hits in the last week, and those are just the views I can see; I know there are many more I can't). You could cultivate goodwill among your musicians, your patrons, your public...reassure those who are afraid you're in over your head...force me to eat my own

bitter words. Agreeing to give a hugely in-depth interview to a blogger (especially one who has been highly critical of you!) would be a daring move that would prove you're serious about bold leadership and a robust dialogue...and as a bonus, it would be a "forward-looking digital...initiative to reach broad audiences & raise visibility."

You have everything to gain in such an open and honest exchange of ideas, and absolutely nothing – nothing – to lose.

So let's have at it. Would you mind answering all – or heck, even some – of these questions for us? **And if you have time for nothing else, can you at least clarify some questions I had about your website? (These can be found under the heading "Website Stuff" on page 6.)**

And if not, why not?

I've given the Minnesota Orchestra a lot of free publicity over the last two years. I've spent hours upon hours writing about the Inside the Classics series – the Greenstein Microcommission – the Sibelius Midori show – your shows in Winona – your January 2012 Brahmspalooza. I don't get paid for doing this. I do it out of love and enthusiasm for this orchestra. These posts have been read by hundreds, if not thousands, of people all over the world, largely by a well-educated young tech-savvy demographic that I'm guessing you're rather desperate to reach. I've done you guys a favor. So would you mind doing me one? I guarantee you, you won't be able to read my past blog entries about the Minnesota Orchestra and say I don't share your stated goal of supporting "an artistically excellent, fiscally responsible, world-class orchestra that benefits our audiences, supporters, community and musicians for years to come." I'm here; you're here. Let's talk.

Here goes.

Personal Questions

How many Minnesota Orchestra concerts have you attended over the last year?

What were your favorite five, and why?

Do you feel your attendance (or lack thereof; I don't know) at concerts is relevant to your ability to oversee the orchestra?

Would you like to be more involved with your patrons? If so, how?

What did you think of Judd Greenstein's Acadia?

Who are three of your favorite musicians in the orchestra to watch, and why?

When and where did you study music?

How would you describe your relationship to music in general, and orchestral music in particular?

Who is your favorite composer, and what do you like most about his work?

What kinds of music do you listen to the most?

What do you bring to your job that uniquely qualifies you to safeguard and support the Minnesota Orchestra?

What do you feel you can learn from your musicians?

What do you feel they could learn from you?

What role do you envision a musicians' union as playing in today's world?

Do you believe classical music is dying?

If you do, why? What moves you to devote so much time and energy to trying to keep it alive?

If you don't, why? What do you believe is keeping it alive, vital, and relevant?

What are the biggest mistakes you've made during your tenure?

Why do you think you made those mistakes?

What steps have you taken to avoid those mistakes in the future?

What have been your biggest successes?

Why do you think you achieved those successes?

In your opinion, what mistakes have the musicians made in the last five to ten years?

Why, in your opinion, did they make those mistakes?

What, in your opinion, have been their biggest successes?

Why do you think they achieved those successes?

How have you felt about the press's coverage of the labor dispute thus far?

How are you able to keep up with the needs of all the organizations and companies you either work at or serve?

Artistic Vision

Would you classify the upcoming season in the convention center as more similar or dissimilar than what you have envisioned for future seasons in the new Orchestra Hall?

If you personally had total control over programming, and didn't have to answer to anybody, what percentage of shows would be pops and what would be classical? And why?

What does the phrase "heightened artistry" from your Strategic Business Plan Summary mean to you?

Do you believe that artistic quality can be heightened if a relatively large percentage of musicians are actively seeking employment elsewhere?

How big of a concern is turnover to you?

What steps are you planning on taking to minimize turnover after the new contract takes effect?

Do you feel confident you have an understanding of the way in which turnover may or may not affect artistic quality? Please elaborate.

Do you have a plan in place to meet the challenges of heightening artistic quality while also dealing with potential turnover and demoralization?

When are you planning to hold auditions for seats that are now empty?

Have you thought about what to do if many of your principals leave in a short period of time, since they are the ones most likely to find work elsewhere the fastest?

As a purely hypothetical question, if Vänskä told you that your proposals ran a high risk of severely impacting the artistic quality of your orchestra, would you consider altering them in any way?

Have you thought about what you want to see in your next music director?

Have you thought about how you want to attract the next music director?

Why specifically is touring important to you?

Why specifically is recording important to you?

What kinds of educational and outreach programs would you like to see the orchestra adopt?

How specifically would you like to use new technology in relation to the orchestra?

Money

How much money will the changes in working conditions in your proposed contract save the orchestra?

Do you have any idea why the musicians aren't satisfied with previous audits of the orchestra's endowment?

Why not have another one if it satisfies your musicians? Is it a matter of cost, or are you resisting for another reason?

Do you believe Minnesota can afford to support two world-class orchestras with internationally competitive benefits and salaries?

Do you feel the Minnesota Orchestra would have been able to meet more of the musicians' demands if the recession had not hit, and if so, how many more? Some more? A lot more?

Was it more or less difficult than you thought it would be to raise the capital for the Building for the Future campaign?

Do you feel you personally contributed in any way to the orchestra's current financial catastrophe, or do you feel it was inevitable and largely, if not completely, out of your control?

Do you believe the fiscal health of the orchestra will improve after the recession? If so, how and by how much? If not, why not?

If turnover is high and artistic standards decline, do you believe this will affect your ability to fundraise? Or do you believe the quality of a major orchestra is relatively irrelevant when it comes to fundraising?

Have you been in contact with anyone at SPCO management about their situation? Have they been in contact with you about yours?

How do you feel overseeing a non-profit organization is similar to overseeing a for-profit one?

How do you feel overseeing a non-profit organization is different to overseeing a for-profit one?

Treatment of Employees

How well do you feel the various staff members of the Minnesota Orchestra have communicated with one another in the run-up to this crisis?

Why did you insinuate in the press that it will be relatively easy to replace your musicians? (E.g.: "So couple what's happening in the marketplace with a large supply – not to dismiss the fact that we don't want to lose any of our wonderful musicians – but there may be some changes" and "there's a risk that they find their way to another place.") Talking that way obviously doesn't affect the budget at all, and I know that many people (including me) were puzzled and disappointed by this attitude. Would you care to elaborate why you said what you did? Why not take an attitude more along the lines of "We can't afford these wonderful people, and we're terrified and devastated we're going to lose them. They have done us proud. We're so sad to see them go"?

Do you feel it will be relatively easy to replace any musicians who may leave?

Do you feel your musicians are unwilling to compromise?

Do you feel your musicians are more interested in their own personal finances than in the long-term health of the orchestra, or do you feel they are clueless about what it will take to chart a sustainable course forward?

Do you believe your musicians regard salary as being more than, less than, or equally important as working conditions?

How many musicians do you think will leave within the next, say, three years if your proposed contract is adopted as-is?

What number of musicians would have to leave before you'd start feeling alarmed about turnover?

Who made the decision to shut down the Inside the Classics blog?

Do you know what the rationale was behind that?

Did anyone consult with Sam or Sarah beforehand?

Why weren't they given a chance to write a good-bye / hiatus post of their own?

Why did the author of the good-bye / hiatus post insinuate that Sam and Sarah were unable to both blog and plan for the upcoming season, when they've done both for years? Why not just leave the blog blank?

Did you ask the musicians' permission to post your proposed contract online before you did so? If so, what did they say?

If you didn't ask the musicians' permission, why not?

Is it true that what you're negotiating in private is different than what you're proposing in public, or are your musicians lying?

How did you feel that releasing the contract would help negotiations?

If negotiations persist past 1 October, would you be open to posting the expired contract alongside your proposed one, so it is easier for reporters and the general public to put your proposed changes into context?

Do you believe musicians should have a greater input in how the business side of the orchestra is run?

If so, what role do you envision for them?

One of my blog readers commented that he knows of someone who worked for the Minnesota Orchestra who was recently informed of her termination via email. Is this true, and if so, what do you know about that situation? Is this standard procedure?

Do you know who was in charge of making the decision to inform her in that way?

If you haven't already, would you be willing to apologize to her and whoever else may have been fired in that way?

Website Stuff

In your opinion, is the general tone of your website respectful and kind to your musicians?

What are you envisioning when you say "new concert formats and content"? Could you elaborate on that phrase?

Why did you insinuate that musicians are reluctant to participate in outreach efforts or play chamber music in community locations?

“Musicians in other major orchestras have agreed to concessions.” Why did you not mention here that the Minnesota musicians also agreed to concessions in 2009? I understand that you would like to (or need to) see further concessions, but it seems misleading to not mention what they’ve already given. It implies that audiences are unable to see the gravity of the situation unless only certain facts are set before them, and I personally feel a little condescended to because of that.

“What will happen if the Orchestra’s contract proposal fails to gain approval from the musicians?” Your answer doesn’t actually answer that question, instead addressing ticket prices. Could you please clarify?

Why aren’t Mr. Campbell’s words about “there may be some changes” in the Minnesota Orchestra management FAQ under “Will pay cuts cause the best talent to leave the orchestra”? Could you add his words there? If not, why not?

Do you truly believe the musicians share your desire for a “contemporary, world-class, flexible, artistically excellent community resource that can operate within its means regardless of external economic factors”?

In your strategic plan, you mention that “classical music event attendance decreased from 13% of all adults in 1982 to 9% in 2008,” according to the NEA’s “2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts.” Happily, that report is online, and I have it right here. I’m assuming you got your percentages from page 18...

Percent of adults attending classical music events

1982 – 13%

1992 – 12.5%

2002 – 11.6%

2008 – (during recession) 9.3%

But of course the United States population has grown over the years, so let’s move over a column and look at the numbers in millions...

Millions of adults attending classical music events

1982 – 21.3

1992 – 23.2

2002 – 23.8

2008 (during recession) – 20.9

I don’t think it’s unrealistic to posit that if the Great Recession hadn’t occurred, there would probably have been more people attending classical music events now than there were in 1982...according to the

report you cited. Am I wrong? If I am wrong, how? If I'm right, what was the rationale behind including the more alarming percentages as opposed to the more reassuring numbers? Why not include both to paint a more accurate, nuanced picture of the fiscally challenging future? Do you not trust your audience to interpret more nuanced numbers?

You cited the 2010 Giving USA report for 2008 and 2009's "national arts funding is declining" figure. Would you be averse to updating that to include 2010 and (if available) 2011's figures? (I know this strategic plan was published in November 2011, so those may not have been available upon publication, but surely an addendum could be easily added?) Unfortunately, I can't see the 2010 Giving USA report; one has to pay for more than a summary of it, and, as I'm sure you'd agree, summaries rarely paint the whole complicated picture...

Since you did not include both sets of numbers from the NEA report, and the Giving USA report is (to the best of my knowledge) unavailable for free to the public, would you understand if patrons would be hesitant to take the other numbers in your report at face value, especially since many of them come from reports that are not cited, much less available to the public or to reporters?

Miscellaneous

What's your favorite color?

Chocolate or vanilla?

Puppies or kittens?

Well, I think that wraps it up on my end. Looking forward to your response, or at the very least, response about why you don't want to respond!

Wishing everyone the best for a speedy satisfactory resolution, with as little acrimony as possible.

Best,

Emily E Hogstad
Minnesota Orchestra patron
Eau Claire, WI
songofthelark.wordpress.com

PS - Please don't be offended if I mail you multiple copies of this if you don't respond.