

Sunday 26 March 2006: Lent 6.30pm Sermon Series: Building Community

The Orchestra as a Community

Psalm 98; 2 Chronicles 5. 11-14

I was a member of the BBC Symphony Orchestra Trumpet section for 18 years until my retirement last September. It was a wonderful job though as you will hear working in an orchestra has much in common with any other working community.

We are all aware of music as either the backdrop to our everyday lives or maybe a more integral part through church, concert going or performing.

I can remember one of the first times I ever sat down to listen to a symphony orchestra. My Father had just bought a radiogram, and he put on a recording of Sibelius 2nd Symphony. When it had finished he pointed out the silence just after the last note and remarked that the silence was held by 85 people sitting together in a recording studio. This was a revelation to me because in that silence I was suddenly aware of the individuals that had come together to make such a wonderful sound.

To become a member of a symphony orchestra you normally have to go through an audition process and if successful you are invited to take part in a trial period of employment. This is to assess whether you fit in musically and perhaps more importantly whether you are able to form a good working relationship with the others in your section. In the end the orchestra members decide, mainly on the recommendation of the section principal, if you are the right person for the post. Having got the job you soon come to realise that it is impossible to get on well with 85 individuals, but that you must have a good rapport with your closest colleagues and learn to develop a working relationship with the others.

In performance we are all aware that our own performance is to a certain extent entirely reliant on the performance of those around us. For example if I were to play a wrong note or play badly out of tune it not only makes me sound poor but also affects the overall sound of everybody else in the ensemble. That word, ensemble, used to describe a group of musicians, is perfect in that its translation from the French means simply together. In any organisation we must be aware of the effect that our actions have on other people in the same community.

In any community we also need to be aware of those things that can make our organisation work more effectively. It will come as no real surprise to you to learn that the same things apply to an orchestra as to any other working environment. The management needs to make the individual musicians feel that their contribution is valued and important. Good managements consult players on such matters as repertoire, rehearsal times, general workload and conductor's appointments.

This inclusive approach goes a long way to avoiding making the individual feeling detached and of little worth. Playing a musical instrument is not only very physical but also a very personal mental exercise and feelings of low self-esteem can affect your performance quite considerably. If there is a pervading feeling of insecurity within the orchestra then performance will undoubtedly suffer. The conductor plays a vital role in this respect. Their job is to interpret the music and get the best possible performance from the musicians arrayed in front of him or her. In my experience the best performances have resulted from a mutual

trust between players and conductors. I can remember one conductor asking a player to play one section of the piece on his own quite a few of times and the player in the end, rather exasperatedly saying “I’m doing my best,” to which the conductor replied, “I know, that’s what’s worrying me”. Not the best psychology I think you’ll agree.

In my experience the conductors who trust the musicians get the best performances. For instance two of the finest, Rudolf Kempe and Gunter Wand, rarely rehearsed on the day of the concert. Not only did this mean that the orchestra was fresh for the concert and their concentration better, but it gave them enormous confidence.

The performance is a very simple goal but if you only look at the next performance as the objective you can take decisions that could have a detrimental effect on the long term goals of maintaining and improving standards. A simple example of this may well be ones attitude to appointments. Do you always go for the older more experienced player or with the younger less experienced who, nevertheless, may well have more long term potential? These sorts of questions arise in every work place and have to be weighed very carefully.

Being a musician is a very blessed occupation but is not without its stresses and strains. The stress comes mainly from the continual examination of ones own standard of performance by, oneself, ones colleagues, the conductor, the radio producer and last but by no means least by the press. Ours is probably one of the few jobs where you read a criticism of your efforts in the daily press the next day. When things are not going so well, we all need the help and support of our colleagues. In my experience it happens to every one at one time or another. I have had to ask colleagues to help me play certain parts for me when experiencing some difficulties. They always helped because, not only are they good people but they recognised that they will have needed help in the past or might in the future; and that’s what you do when you work together.

With regard to the all issues I have been talking about, when things come together and all the conditions are right we are sometimes privileged to be part of a performance that somehow transcends the human condition. One such for me was a performance of Bruckner’s 8th Symphony at the Royal Albert Hall conducted by Gunter Wand. As the concert progressed it was obvious to all that something special was occurring. The performance grew and grew in stature. The audience was rapt and we, the orchestra, seemed somehow to be part of something sublime. It was like watching Durham Cathedral being built before your very eyes. It was certainly a performance in which each individual’s contribution made for a very special uplifting event. I am reminded here of the reading from Chronicles, “when with the clamour of praise, the house was filled with a cloud, as the glory of the Lord filled the house of God”.

Music has always had a very special way of bringing people together. They celebrated the destruction of the Berlin wall with concerts beamed all around the world. More recently Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said, a Palestinian intellectual, have set up the East-West Divan Orchestra bringing together young musicians from Israel, Palestine and Syria to encourage understanding and co-operation in that troubled part of the world.

Having been an orchestral musician has enriched my own sense of community and made me very aware of what can be achieved if we work together in harmony to reach our goals. Long may the community of musicians continue to bring peace, healing, thanks and praise for and on behalf of all of us who sit in that brief moments silence at the end of a great performance.