

# Are New Leaders Hiding in Plain Sight?

Four musicians who were recently named chief executives of the orchestras where they played talk about what it takes to make the switch from the artistic to the administrative side.

by Jesse Rosen

A number of musicians have become orchestra managers, notably Arthur Judson, Bob Jones, and Deborah Borda, among others. But, in the last two years, several musicians have become CEOs of the orchestras they played in. Maybe these recent appointments of musicians as the chief executives of their orchestras are just a coincidence. But I wanted to know what it is like to make that transition and what it might mean for the orchestra community. After the rich and thoughtful discussion with four of these new CEOs that follows below, I am even more convinced that extraordinary leadership talent resides among the musicians in American orchestras. This is a talent pool hiding in plain sight. It's time we take notice.

**JESSE ROSEN:** What has surprised you about the role of CEO? Was there something that you had no idea was part of the job, or was different from what you had thought the job was before you were in a CEO position?

**JAMES ROE:** The biggest surprise has been the complexities of personnel management with the staff. As a member of an orchestra, roles are defined by where you sit onstage. Understanding the interrelated motivations within a staff is a new process for me. No one becomes a classical musician to get rich, but there's a great deal of

personal satisfaction that comes out of a great performance. With the administrative staff, I am learning how that kind of satisfaction is built around our work.

**JONATHAN PARRISH:** For me, there is frustration with spending time on issues that don't really advance the organization, but are essential to being able to advance it, like cash flow. Just the amount of time and energy I spend making sure that we always have enough money to make our payrolls. We were successful, but there were some very close calls, and it felt like an empty victory because everybody expects you to make your payrolls, and I wanted to work on the things that would show people the new course that we're taking. I wanted to get new things established or at least give indications of new things to

**We're so committed to the value of what an orchestra is and presents. We love it so much, we love the music so much, that we're going to find a way to make it work. — Jonathan Parrish**

come—that's important for us since we're essentially starting over. While we have a great artistic legacy, we also have a troubled legacy on the management side that we have to prove is not going to happen again.

**MARK NIEHAUS:** I was surprised at the amount of time I spend dealing with health insurance and pension issues, and the quagmire of benefits packages and the difference between cash liability and pensions, when it comes to the budgeting



Jesse Rosen, President and CEO, League of American Orchestras

process—trying to figure out what you have to pay for, what you don't have to pay for, what your real liability is going forward, what your projected liability is going forward, and trying to come up with cost certainty around benefits. For me, that was probably the steepest learning curve, and I didn't expect it to be so convoluted.

**MICHAEL SMITH:** I had spent some time prior to taking this position bridging the gap between the two worlds, serving as operations manager and principal trumpet, so I was not completely blindsided. A few things did strike me, though. With the amount of time spent managing the finances and countless other

tasks that all seem to be top priority, I had to keep reminding myself and my staff that we are all here for the music! It's easy to be distracted and pulled in a million different directions. When I took this position, I had a vision of what type of leader I wanted to be, but quickly realized that everyone involved, including staff and musicians, needs something different from me, and I have to adapt to them in order to get the best results.

**ROSEN:** Given that you're each confronting new roles and responsibilities, what have been some of your strategies for learning while on the job?

**PARRISH:** I have great resources in terms of my board and committee chairs—one with incredible managerial experience and the other with great fundraising and external experience, so I have both things to draw on. They've been extremely invested in the success of my time here, and I can rely on them. I've called other administrators from time to time, and the League has been great for this. Learning to build a support network has been a big focus of mine these first thirteen months.

**NIEHAUS:** I had the same experience as Jonathan. My board chair took a risk when rallying his board and the community to appoint me as executive director. He's a very high-functioning corporate CEO type, and he knew that I was going to need support, and he tasked different members of our board and the community to have my back in different areas. There's nothing like coming in as a CEO and having your board own your success, meaning, "We know this person is only going to be successful if we support them fully." It can happen that executive directors will come in, and the board would just sort of wipe their hands and say, "Okay, fix it. Well, you got it. Bye-bye." You could bring in the most seasoned CEO and they won't be successful if the board isn't fully engaged and ready to do the hard work. With the exception of the New Jersey Symphony, all of our organizations were in crisis and fighting for their lives. There had been a fair amount of turnover in the chief executive position in Milwaukee and, since necessity is the mother of invention, our organizations took some unconventional choices. That included hiring me.

**SMITH:** There was a tremendous learning curve to taking on this role. Only nine months in, I believe I still have a lot of ground to cover, but it has been a thrill. I too am very grateful for my strong board leaders, who are committed to supporting me and equally dedicated to the success of the orchestra. In addition, I rely heavily

on my staff, and have an amazing team helping to drive our success. Colleagues from other orchestras have also reached out and offered support and advice, which has been a tremendous help.

**ROE:** Mitigating that weighty sense of the day-to-day work is something that I have had to get used to. I often think about the mortgages and college tuitions of the musicians and the administrative staff. To carry that around is very different than wondering if I really landed a particular passage or if my intonation is shifting.

**NIEHAUS:** People think of being in an orchestra as such a collaborative experience, and it is. But for much of the time, especially as a principal trumpet player, I'm in my own zone trying to nail my part and make sure that I don't mess up. It's like being a starting pitcher in baseball: if you have a great night, you throw lots of strikes, you go home, and you feel good about yourself, and sometimes, the pitcher feels good even if the team lost, right? As a chief executive, every success for the organization is a broad-based participatory experience. I joke that the only unilateral decision I've made as executive director is the music on hold in our phone system. I said, "It's going to be the last movement of Mahler Seven." It's odd that I would find being executive director as collaborative if not more collaborative than being a member of the orchestra. That's what I didn't expect.

**ROE:** Moving the ball down the field so that we all can celebrate the goal is really the job. Part of the fascination is that each of the major stakeholders of the organization—board, staff, musicians, and audience—has a different perspective. Finding alignment across these groups requires an empathetic imagination, to describe a new world for the organization and then point everyone in that direction...there's a deep sense of fulfillment in that, and it is much deeper than anything I've experienced.

**ROSEN:** Jonathan, how did you navigate the need to learn new roles, and where does the satisfaction in the work come from now?



Tim Evans

**Mark Niehaus** was appointed president and executive director of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra beginning

in the 2012-13 season. He had played principal trumpet of the MSO since 1998, and had also served as chairman of the orchestra's Players' Council and as a member of the MSO Board of Directors



Hawaii Symphony Orchestra

**Jonathan Parrish** was named executive director of the Hawaii Symphony Orchestra in November 2013. Since 1998 he was

assistant principal/utility horn with the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra, which closed in 2010, and also served as the musicians' representative to that orchestra's Board of Directors.



Fred Stucker

**James Roe** was named president and chief executive officer of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra in June 2013. From

2011 to 2013, he served as the NJSO's acting principal oboe.



Alyona Semenov

**Michael Smith** became executive director of the Charleston Symphony Orchestra in December 2013,

having served as the orchestra's operations manager from 2010 to 2012. He had been acting principal trumpet of the CSO from 2009 to 2013 and second trumpet from 2006 to 2013.



At the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra: Mark Niehaus (at right) with MSO Co-Principal Trumpet Dennis Najoom.

**PARRISH:** I tried to utilize all the resources that I have at my disposal. I was recruited by Steve Monder, and he has had the semi-official role of senior advisor for the orchestra, so I've tried to take full advantage of that. I've made use of the board, especially our board chair, who runs his own business, so I call him for advice. When I was running Chamber Music Hawaii, I didn't play every concert, and I still got a lot of satisfaction out of a successful program and an enthusiastic audience. And now, being able to hear the orchestra sound great and the audience enjoy it is very satisfying for me. Building a good team in the office, with people supporting each other and pitching in—I get a lot of satisfaction out of that as well.

**ROSEN:** How has having been a musician in the orchestra helped or hindered your work?

**SMITH:** Playing trumpet in an orchestra, or any instrument, really, can be a stressful job. Musicians put a lot of pressure on themselves to perform at an extremely high level all the time. Every note you play, you are laying part of yourself out there for the audience—as well as your colleagues—to hear. It's very personal. There is no in-between. It's hit or miss. To be a successful musician, you have to be able to fail in public

and quickly pick up the pieces mentally. You have to be able, with brutal honesty, to assess why you failed—or why you performed well. The pressures of this job are different, but still come from the same underlying desire to be successful at a very high level. I'm tasked with advancing the organization, but I'm motivated by the people who drive it, my friends and colleagues who make the music. I think it's

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easy to connect the dots and see how my career in music has helped prepare me for this job in so many ways, but I believe the ability to put failures behind me quickly and keep on trucking towards success is really critical, especially as I am learning many new things.

**NIEHAUS:** Negotiations are extremely difficult. You know what's best for the organization, and you also know that the largest part of the organization is the orchestra and the musicians. In order for the organization to function well, the musicians have to be functioning well, which means they have to be supportive of a contract that's fair. To be sitting on the other side of the negotiation table,

especially during a crisis, was very, very difficult for me.

The part of being a musician that helps in this job is that I take criticism better than most. My self-worth wasn't connected to whether or not I played the high A-sharp or not. If I missed, I came back and did my best. As the CEO, I am open to suggestions from my staff. I told them, "You have to push back, I expect you to have opinions and to challenge me." And the same with the board. Because it's not about me, it's about the orchestra and it's about us working well together.

**ROE:** I've had to ask for feedback that's quite direct. Any of us who survived the intense criticism of a conservatory education will understand. So, this ability to take harsh and pointed criticism is a strength.

**PARRISH:** I often am surprised to find that people are expecting me to pronounce what's going to happen, when I'm actually looking for input. I try to give people permission to say what they think. And if it's a good idea, I will adjust my course.

**ROE:** As a fundraiser, having great fluency in the music has been incredibly helpful. Mark encouraged me to be totally fluent with the numbers when talking to

donors—and you have to be. But what's interesting is that donors want to know what it felt like to be in the middle of the orchestra. The ability to talk about the meaning of a symphony, or what it's like to have a life in music, and to understand that this potential donor is not only supporting the art and the audience, but working artists—this ability to speak about art and your life in the art was extremely useful.

**PARRISH:** There's a real authenticity from people who made the decision to devote many thankless hours to this art form. There's a certain passion that you can't hide about the product that you're trying to get supported.

We've entered a new time, and the idea that artistic excellence can exist as its own goal, outside of the relationship with the audience—that time is over. — James Roe

**ROSEN:** Now you're in charge of whole institutions. How were you able to walk into these roles after years as a professional performer?

**ROE:** I got my first job playing in a professional orchestra when I was fifteen, and the next year, I got an administrative job with the high school band. Except for a one- or two-year break at Juilliard, I always maintained a position in both areas. I had an epiphany the summer I turned 40. I had been playing professionally for 25 years, I had made my concerto debut at Lincoln Center, I had played a concerto in Carnegie Hall, I had done more than I ever could have dreamed professionally as an oboist, and I started looking in earnest to make the switch to administration. When the opening was announced at New Jersey, a new horizon opened up and I threw my hat in the ring.

**PARRISH:** I always had a bit of entrepreneurial activity on the side. I was involved in the founding of the Washington Symphonic Brass Ensemble when I was in the D.C. area. When I came to Hawaii, I started playing with Chamber Music Hawaii. There were administrative things that needed to be done, and I just started doing them. Pretty soon, I was doing everything. Then I began to reach an age where I realized that I've had some good, professional playing experience, done some very good stuff—but is this all there is for me? Is there something more I can contribute? I came to Honolulu hoping to play in a really good orchestra, which I did for a number of years. But I stayed in Honolulu to make sure that there's a good orchestra there. My wife and I had been in Hawaii for sixteen years, and we were considering a move back to the mainland. Ultimately, we decided that I couldn't turn my back on the opportunity to have a major impact with the symphony in Honolulu. I couldn't have that impact representing the musicians and being their spokesperson, I couldn't have that

impact as a voting board member, which I had been previously, and here I was being offered an opportunity to have a real meaningful, positive impact on the future of the organization.

**NIEHAUS:** Jonathan, you stepped into a risky situation. But you had the

it's supposed to do and how it's supposed to function. What I brought to the table that nobody else could at the time was credibility and trust with the musicians, because they knew that I had spent many years in unpaid service representing their interests. From the board standpoint, what I brought was an understanding of what's often seen as a challenge to hiring an executive director in Hawaii, which is, you can find somebody who's a professional in the industry, but aren't familiar



James Roe (left) in performance with fellow New Jersey Symphony Orchestra musician Andrew Adelson and the NJSO

institutional knowledge and ability to create buy-in from the different constituencies that needed to come together to avert a complete disaster. I'm not sure if that would have been accomplished by someone from the outside. I know that Steve Monder worked with the orchestra, but you had the internal credibility from all sides. There's no substitute for that in a crisis.

**PARRISH:** In all our cases, including Mike's, we were hired from within the same organization, and I think that's significant. Even though there are many things to learn for the job, the reality is that we've been working in this type of an organization all our careers and we know what it's supposed to look like and what

with Hawaii, they don't know the culture. And I did know that. What I hoped to bring was credibility from all sides, so that people could begin to believe again in this orchestra.

**ROSEN:** Having been in these two roles as performers and top administrators in your orchestras, what message would you send to fellow managers? What would you want musicians to know?

**SMITH:** My primary message to fellow managers is that everyone needs to be a part of the success. After every board meeting, we now gather with all of our musicians, all of our staff, and key board leadership in the same room to have a frank and transparent dialogue about our successes and challenges. While we have

different roles in producing great concerts or meaningful educational activities, we can't do it without the entire team functioning well. Bringing everyone together has helped develop an overall understanding and respect for what each member of our team brings to the success of our overall mission.

To the musicians: We work for you! Your ability to adapt to changing times is critical. Your flexibility is appreciated. Be open to new way of doing things, new ways of being involved in the community, more meaningful ways of educating a



Hawaii Symphony Orchestra's horn section, from left: George Warnock, Maura McCune, Marie Lickwar, Jonathan Parrish, and Nick Lobanov-Rostovsky.

different generation. Be willing to step out of your comfort zone. We want nothing more than to provide the best possible environment for you to be able to perform at the highest level. Don't be shy about bringing your concerns to management—

**There is something to being in the trenches and understanding the life of a working musician that inspires me to want to provide a steady platform for my friends and colleagues to flourish. — Michael Smith**

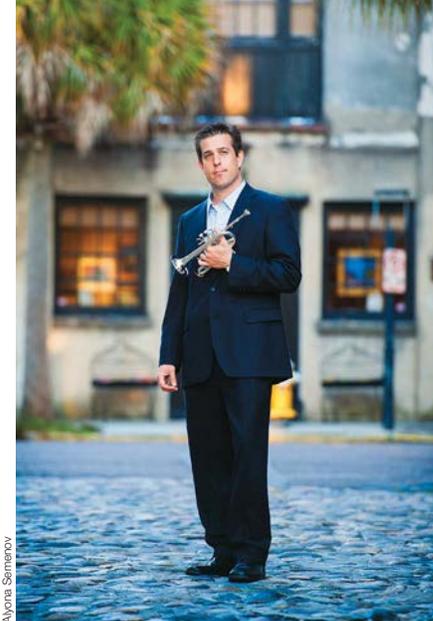
and be prepared to have a constructive dialogue to find solutions. Trust is a two-way street, and open communication is the best way to meet in the middle.

**NIEHAUS:** I'm tired of reading managers quoted in the paper talking about how hard it is, or that the art form is less relevant or valued; I don't think that's productive, and it's just wrong. My feeling is, okay, then get out of the way and let somebody else do it. I hate seeing the dirty laundry aired in the press. Thoughtful people should be able to sit down and figure out what's best for the organization,

which means that over time a process of collaboration and trust has been built. A Milwaukee musician would never say during a negotiation, "We just don't believe the numbers," because for 20 years musicians have been on our finance committee, and all other committees. None of us like the numbers, but in Milwaukee we do our best to solve our differences in private and then speak to the community with one voice. Many of the challenges we face are external and involve our "deal" with the community. The sustainable business model involves more than just the organization itself. We are inexorably linked to the environments we live in.

From the musician side, it's about artistic excellence. One mantra I've been hearing over and over is, there was a day when artistic excellence and operational efficiency were enough. Well, we live in a time when that in itself is not enough for many of our organizations to remain vibrant in their communities. The Cleveland Orchestra is a shining example of operational efficiency and artistic excellence—their budget was never crazy, and they're regarded as one of the finest orchestras in the world. And when even that was not enough to sustain them financially, they started going to the Salzburg Festival and established a Miami residency and New York, and they're doing neighborhood

residencies and creating partnerships. They figured out that they have to do something else if they want to maintain what they have. That doesn't mean you have to dumb down your product or ask your musicians to go play bar mitzvahs and weddings. It means that the organization has to look at how it can partner with the community and be relevant and create value for people. No one wants a brain drain in Milwaukee, in which some of the brightest and most creative people leave. Milwaukee wants to keep them, and the best way to do that is with a vibrant arts scene.



Michael Smith in Charleston

The cities that have and retain the creative classes have the arts. Some Milwaukee business leaders may not give a damn about Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, but they care if their smartest engineers leave because they don't like living in Milwaukee—or worse, won't even move here. The symphony is part of that answer. A lot of times musicians are resistant to hearing that, because they think the nature of their job will change so that excellence is no longer primary. Artistic excellence and operational efficiency are givens now. It has to be excellent and it has to be run well. Now, we have to do these other things, too. And that takes resources that are already stretched thin.

**ROE:** What we as musicians see on the faces of the people in the audience tells us a lot about how we're doing. Of our constituencies, right now the audience is the most important. We've entered a new time, and the idea that artistic excellence can exist as its own goal, outside of the relationship with the audience—that time is over. The New Jersey Symphony plays in six different venues, we have very vigorous community-engagement and education programs, and we're focusing on how to build relationships with all of those audiences to create sustainability for the organization. Along those lines, I want to quote something quite brilliant that my friend Matt Herren, who's the new executive director at the Symphony of Northwest Arkansas, said to me the other day: "We have to remember as a performing arts group that we are guests in the lives of our audience." How many concerts does

someone attend in a year? If someone attends once or three times or eight, aren't we are really guests in their lives? How do we make our existence as a guest one that fosters a deeper connection?

**PARRISH:** I would echo what Mark said about some people giving up because it's just too hard. With us, the last thing on our minds is shutting down. We're so committed to the value of what an orchestra is and presents—we love it so much, we love the music so much, that we're going to find a way to make it work. We really believe in it. A big part of the reason I accepted the job was because I care about these musicians, this orchestra, and this community.

**ROSEN:** In the last two years, five musicians have become CEOs of the orchestras they play in. What do you think this means, and what are the implications of these recent appointments?

**ROE:** If there is a meaning, it goes to shared passion across all sectors of our industry for bringing people and music together, something so beautifully echoed in what Jonathan, Mark, and Mike have said. I think it also underscores an essential optimism in people who are involved in this work. All the members of our staff have that passion and that optimism. In the end, this work is about bringing to life the greatest artworks of our culture, and sharing those artworks with an audience that not only wants to hear it, but needs to hear it, and whose humanity is enhanced by the shared experience.

**SMITH:** I think we all share a passion for orchestral music, and a deep respect for the work and personal sacrifice that goes into each great performance. That's not to say that someone can't perform this job if they have never been onstage, but I think there is something to being in the trenches and really understanding the life of a working musician that inspires me to want to provide a steady platform for my friends and colleagues to flourish.

**PARRISH:** It does seem to be a bit of a new trend, although there are lots of managers who are musicians. I think this trend is a little bit coincidental. I'd like it to be not so novel; I don't think people

would think it's so novel that a physician would be the head of a hospital, or that a baseball player becomes the manager of a baseball team. There are multiple pathways, but I think the one that works with musicians is you're taking people with passion and maybe some raw skills, and equipping them with more. Hopefully,

that benefits the whole organization—and the industry—in the long run. **S**

For a look at other musicians-turned-managers, check out *Symphony's* 2010 article, [Hidden Talents](#).

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