



# The (fr)agile Orchestra

Empowerment Strategies for Orchestras

Gerald Mertens (Ed.)

Edition das Orchester

 SCHOTT

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## Introduction

What this book is about:

The Corona pandemic has affected orchestra administrations around the globe since January 2020. On January 23, the Wuhan Philharmonic in China was the first orchestra to announce that it had to close down operations. Most of the ensembles – beginning in China, later in greater Asia and the rest of the world – were forced to stop operations during periods of hard lockdown in public life. Concert halls were closed down. Some orchestras, especially in the U.S., reacted with severe cuts and layoffs to their staff and musicians. Freelance ensembles and privately funded orchestras faced even higher pressure than those that are state-funded. As based on differing national funding structures, social security systems and historical contexts, orchestras and musicians have suffered on different levels. State-funded orchestras in China and other parts of the world could keep almost all musicians and staff members on board, often with reduced salaries. However, in terms of cancelled touring and concert businesses, all ensembles were left sitting in the same boat.

### **The pandemic has shown how fragile orchestras may be.**

The pandemic has brought forth a boost of creative alternatives from individual musicians, ensembles and orchestra managements to keep operations going under new physically distanced conditions and online. The highest flexibility has been shown in artistic planning, from creating new programs, to digital and recording work; from outreach and education activities to new concert formats or support for pandemic-related charity campaigns. Things which always seemed to be “impossible” in the orchestra and artistic world were made possible in a small window of time.

### **The pandemic has shown how agile orchestras might be.**

Many of these topics are not really brand new in the orchestra management business. However, the pandemic has brought to light orchestras’ strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats they face (“SWOT”).



The questions are: What lessons can be learned from the challenges of the pandemic? What new structural approaches can help musicians and managements to rethink orchestral organisations for the post-pandemic future? How can an organisation enhance the engagement of its own musicians and staff? How can the ties with the members of loyal audience groups be further strengthened? And even more importantly, which new formulas have been found to get in touch with new audience groups which had been under the radar in the past? Where did supporters show up who weren't in focus in the past?

Every co-author of this book is a specialist in his or her field. Together, we're exploring all areas in which we think that orchestral organisations should accept the winds of change and rethink their operations in the "new normal" after the pandemic. There is no step back, only steps forward.

Sven Scherz-Schade has taken a journalistic approach to survey orchestral and musicians' activities during the pandemic and several lockdowns. Which of these new activities might have the potential to be sustained in future, and which not? Elena Kountidou focuses on virtual reality and augmented reality experiences and the potential for new levels of perception of orchestral music. Lydia Grün contributes about the latest developments in educational outreach and how orchestras can widen the range of accessibility. Irene Knava thinks about implementing and developing quality management systems to foster artistic quality as well as audience experience. Beat Fehlmann writes about leadership skills and experiences that are needed for the implementation of a new spirit in an orchestral environment. Magnus Still believes in the power of subscription as a backbone of every orchestra in terms of stakeholder commitment and budget stability. Peter Gartiser reports on his experiences about change and change management in arts organisations, which is very important on the path to becoming an agile orchestra. Claudia Spahn and Nico Hutter write about health and well-being, aspects which are essential parts for a healthy workplace. I myself explore a "Manifesto of Agility" for orchestras and considerations about sustainability that are becoming more and more important. Now you know what this book is about.

What this book is not about:

It's not really about funding. Funding of orchestras is a tricky issue. It's as diverse as orchestras are themselves. However, the systematic approach of becoming a more agile organisation in terms of orchestra funding is essentially the same across the globe. Whether we talk a) about a more or less public (state) funding model which covers the majority of professional orchestras or we talk b) about a more or

less private funding model or c) about mixed funding models, they are all about the commitment of stakeholders. From this perspective, there is no real difference between funding models. If you are state-funded, you need the support of only a small group: the (political) decision-makers in administrations and parliaments of the city, district and federal state; maybe state-supported foundations, too. If you are privately funded, you need the support of a couple of decision makers: powerful members of the orchestra board (for example in the U.S. model), CEOs of major corporate funders and private donors etc.

If the commitment is poor, any orchestral organisation will have to struggle for survival. If the commitment is great, the challenge for the orchestral organisation is to maintain this status on the highest level possible. A more agile orchestra will have better assets in the stiff competition for audience support, public awareness and financial contributions.

At the very least, all these things are interconnected. Perhaps this book can help you to make the orchestra world a little bit more agile for the future.

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## The agile Orchestra

What is an agile (arts) organisation? A not only theoretical approach

**How is it possible to transform an orchestra into a more agile organisation? What core values and principles should be implemented? What ideals should be followed, and what should the new role models and tasks for management, musicians and staff should look like?**

Agility stands for the “ability to move quickly and easily” as well as the “ability to think, understand and move quickly.” However, it's much more than just being flexible. The idea of organisations becoming more agile is rather new: In 2001, a couple of frustrated software engineers met in the middle of nowhere in Utah. At the end of a weekend full of discussions, they agreed on the “Manifesto for Agile Software Development.” This manifesto contained four core values and 12 principles about the development of software, internal communication, and a kind of co-working or customer relations.

*An agile organisation is much more than just flexible.*

The four core values were these: 1. individuals and interactions over processes and tools 2. working software over comprehensive documentation 3. customer collaboration over contract negotiation and 4. responding to change over following a plan. You might say: Come on, the world of software and computer nerds is completely different from the orchestra business. Just wait a moment. We'll come back to these points later.

The German business coach Andreas Diehl has analysed six steps towards an agile transformation. In the business world, agile organisations are able to adapt their business model in a very short time to a changing environment. Agile organisations are pro-active and take initiatives to seize opportunities. Agility within the organi-

sation means a balanced mixture of “doing agile” (methods) and “being agile” (mindset). Agile organisations develop a unique DNA. The main factors are: mission, customer commitment, new agile leadership style, doing agile (methods), constant improvement (inspect and adapt), culture and mindset. According to a quote by Stephen Dennings, “Agile is the best kept management secret in the world.”

*Agility needs a new approach  
to leadership.*

In an agile organisation, the customer is the most important part of the value chain. It's a very good habit to reserve a vacant customer seat in every business meeting for never forgetting about the customer perspective. An agile work style doesn't mean chaos or anarchy. But it doesn't mean command-and-order, either. Agility demands leadership. However, it's a servant-leader approach. This leadership model is not oriented towards the leader; rather, it puts the interests and perspectives of the team members at the centre: a high autonomy of teams and team members within the defined mission, which is fostered by a mutual view of the goals to be reached. Essential are structures of co-working, the surveying of customer needs and the handling of complex processes. Feedback, reviews and retrospectives are tools to control, inspect and adapt processes. The most difficult but most powerful part of becoming more agile is the mindset of every single employee. Error culture is part of the learning process. Handling and behaviour should be characterised by trust, respect and transparency.

Let's see how we can adapt these elements to the orchestra world.

## **The Future in the Past**

The oldest (and still existent) orchestra in the world was founded in 1448 in Copenhagen (Denmark), at the court of the Danish King. This is a rather long tradition. And in the orchestra world, the more we refer to tradition, the better. However, if we get stuck in tradition, if we are not forced to change behaviour, it seems to be quite human to remain stuck in old patterns and avoid change as long as possible. Especially orchestras are good at this, when you think about how long it took to accept women as regular orchestra members (the belated movements within the Berlin Philharmonic and the Vienna Philharmonic are legendary). The same story