

Skills profile for training orchestra musicians

For years, all opera and concert orchestras organised within the Deutscher Bühnenverein have been lamenting the inadequate preparation of musicians for the demands of their profession.

This concerns both creative ability and social and personal skills. At the beginning of their careers, most orchestra musicians are unaware of the occupational risk of their creative work becoming routine. This in turn gives rise to difficulties maintaining motivation over more than thirty years of professional life. At the same time, orchestra musicians often feel unable to cope with the growing burden of expectations that are placed on their shoulders. These expectations relate in particular to the steady rise in teaching assignments, but also to the unavoidable need to experiment with new presentation forms – particularly in concerts – or the requirements of the modern media society. It is these additional requirements that make it necessary to enhance the social skills of orchestra musicians with a view to minimising the risk of conflict within the orchestra. With regard to establishing a skills profile for orchestra musicians, the Deutscher Bühnenverein has identified the following overall requirements:

1. Creative ability

It is vitally important that training should not focus primarily on soloist activity, but rather on the work of an orchestra musician. This is because the vast majority of musicians will not end up as soloists but as musicians in orchestras of various sizes. This does not alter the fact that the training of orchestra musicians should be geared towards musical excellence. Musicological expertise is also of great importance, particularly when it comes to teaching music. However, training should also serve as a preparation for the latter. Time and time again, we hear reports of musicians being inadequately prepared for orchestra auditions. This means that they should study relevant pieces from key orchestral works in regular mandatory audition training during their time at music college. And there is little doubt that intermediate examinations – whatever form these may take – would serve a useful purpose in deterring those students whose creative and technical abilities are insufficient for a successful career as an orchestra musician from continuing their studies.

2. Social skills

Owing to the requirements of an orchestra illustrated above, strong social skills are becoming more and more important for orchestra musicians. Accordingly, a significant part of training should be devoted to improving communication skills. This refers both to the ability to communicate with orchestra colleagues and – particularly in connection with teaching activities – to communicate with the audience or with specific target groups within the audience. Section leaders, whose job is above all to take responsibility for their groups, to assume leadership responsibilities and to resolve disputes between colleagues, should have especially good social skills. However, given the difficult times that lie ahead for many orchestras, the ability of musicians to interact with employer representatives should also be honed.

In this regard, regular coaching on dialogue and communication culture would be important within the scope of overall training, although this kind of coaching would also need to be within the expertise of teaching staff.

3. Personal skills

Being an orchestra musician is a career that requires a high degree of professionalism. This not only relates to the skills touched upon above, but also to a musician's awareness of their own role and plans for their life and career. In the course of an orchestra musician's career, it is necessary to take decisions that are of central importance for their life as a musician. This begins with the decision whether to seek out a fixed position or to "go it alone" as a freelance musician. Musicians must also be prepared to jettison plans for a soloist career if necessary. At several points in the course of a musician's life, they may decide to change orchestras, which generally involves relocating to new surroundings. It is also important to know about the different types of orchestras and the differences that these entail for professional life (opera orchestra, concert orchestra, radio orchestra, etc.). Having said that, musicians should also be prepared for the eventuality of remaining in the same orchestra for 30 years of their professional life or more. In any case, it is vital to be open and sensitive to new developments in music and performance technology, particularly with regard to electronic media. In future, it will not be possible for musicians to rely on a standard repertoire.

The aim should be for musicians to take on the challenges of an orchestra position with an authentic personality together with a willingness to express themselves creatively and to integrate themselves within the collective as a whole. It is absolutely essential for musicians to be aware of the various possible ways of keeping the fire burning throughout a long career. Top performance is always expected from musicians. As no musician is in a position to live up to this expectation every day and at every stage of their lives, they will need to be able to cope with criticism or to face consequences such as stage fright or professional crises. Every musician must learn to deal with such matters and help from employers is imperative.

4. What this means for the training of musicians

All in all, music colleges should gear themselves towards a skills profile for orchestra musicians along the lines of the one outlined above. This is closely connected with the type of profiles exhibited by professors and lecturers at music colleges. Even as early as the student selection stage, the aforementioned skills profile should be borne in mind, ensuring above all that training is “in sync” with the requirements of the market. After all, it is this skills profile that more and more employers will use as a basis for filling orchestra positions.