



Complex and Emotionally Risky - A Study of the Dynamic Challenges in the Artistic Profession and Leadership in Arts Organisations

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Abstract. By studying two Norwegian arts organisations: The Norwegian National Opera & Ballet and the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra; this article takes a closer look at the performers – the artists. The article addresses two issues: what are the main challenges facing an artist in an arts organisation and what are the leadership needs these challenges create. The objective is to bring light on the artistic profession at a micro level to fill a void in the literature on arts management. The study identifies three dynamic challenges that seem to be crucial in an artistic profession and are therefore central to understanding leadership in this context. A profession in the arts seems to be complex and emotional risky, constantly shifting between competition and cooperation, nervousness and flow, even for employed artists in an arts organisation. From a leadership perspective this seems to create a need for leadership that is both demanding and supportive.

Keywords: artistic profession, arts management, challenges, competition, cooperation, leadership.

1. Introduction

The dream of fame and the glory in the spots on the stage is a dream for many artist wannabe's. But this profession is a risky one: there is no guarantee that the artists can maintain their talent. The less romantic aspect of the artist's profession is about internal and external competition, sky-high performance pressure from internal and external quarters, stress and a vague distinction between work and leisure. This is also the story for salaried artists, with a formal, lifelong relationship with an organisation in the arts, such as an orchestra or opera house. All artists experience and live with ambiguity, insecurity and emotional stress and there are numerous, internally complicated tensions involved in artistic professions.

This article is about the artistic profession and analyses the main challenges of this profession in the arts organisation. Arts managements is a growing field that deals with managing and organising artistic work and organisations. Traditionally, the research field has focused macro issues. This article tries to fill a void in the existing literature by proposing analyses of the artistic profession at micro level; experiences, emotions and thoughts expressed by employees in arts

organisations. The article seeks to determine what are the main challenges facing an artist in an arts organisation and what are the leadership needs these challenges create. By studying data from two Norwegian arts organisations: The Norwegian National Opera & Ballet and the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, we will take a closer look at the performers – the artists. In addition, we will consider the challenges this complex and multifaceted occupation creates for the individual and for the leadership¹.

This study identifies three dynamic challenges that seem to be crucial in the artistic profession. These are important and necessary in the creation of art and in the artistic profession. They generate important energy in the production of art and in the constant development of the art, the artist and the artistic profession. These challenges are crucial in developing knowledge about the profession and its leadership both for researchers and practitioners.

The article is structured in five main sections. The theoretical platform is presented after the introduction. The methodology, research design and context are presented in Section 3 and the analyses and discussion follow in Section 4. The article is concluded in the last and fifth section, Finale.

Sections 2, 3 and 4 are each divided into three subsections. Section 2, the theoretical platform, consists of a) a brief overview of the field of arts management, b) a presentation of the charismatic myth and c) research on the salaried and employed artists in arts organisations. Section 3 consists of a) methodology, b) the context of the two cases and c) a presentation of the process of reanalysing the data. Section 4, the analyses and discussion, also consists of three subsections: a) competition and collaboration, b) nervousness and flow and c) demanding and supportive leadership.

We can now turn to the theoretical background with contributions from the research in arts management, a presentation of the strong myth and research studies of the employed artists.

2. Theoretical Platform

2.1. Arts Management

Arts management is a growing multidisciplinary field that deals with issues related to organising, financing, marketing and managing artistic work and organisations (e.g. Chong, 2002). Arts management draws on different fields such as managing, marketing, sociology, aesthetics, economics and law and is clearly multifaceted (Koivunen, 2003). For some researchers, arts management

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scholarship is grounded in policy and not-for-profit management studies and the range of organisational studies that shape, influence and structure the ways in which institutions manage and deliver the arts (Rentchler and Shilbury, 2008: 60). For others, arts management can imply the management of an arts organisation or consumption in the light of aesthetics (Wetterström, 1997). An overview of the field highlights its development as a complex and growing area (Chong, 2003; Colbert, 1997). Arts management scholars use numerous arguments, including those from cultural policy, aesthetics and economics, to develop the sector and area of research (Bégin, Colbert and Dupré, 2000; Schroeder, 2005; Rentchler and Shilbury, 2008).

Arts management research has traditionally focused on macro issues through approaches such as cross-national comparative studies, economic impact studies and audience surveys (Chong, 2002). Several researchers claim that the field should respond to the rapidly changing and growing complexity in the arts sector by applying multi-perspectives and multi-level analysis (e.g. Stenström, 2000; Koivunen, 2003; Köping, 2003). The research field has also been criticised for the dominance of business models and it is argued that the economic and business approach is not appropriate to the arts context (Stenström, 2002; Köping, 2003; Wennes, 2002; 2006). More specifically, Köping (2003) claims that the field needs to develop context sensitive leadership knowledge for the arts.

This article aims to fill a void in the literature by providing a relevant description of the artistic profession inside the arts organisation. The article makes use of micro level analysis and provides context specific knowledge about leadership in the arts. In order to gain knowledge about the artistic profession, we therefore have to get beyond the mystery of art and the artistic profession.

2.2. The Charismatic Myth

The descriptions of the artistic profession we find in everyday language and the mass media are filled with myths and metaphors as well as a dash of magic as well (Wennes, 2002; 2006; Stenström, 2000; Gran and De Paoli, 2005). The strong myth of the charismatic artist is still alive and kicking (Abbing, 2002; Mangset, 2004; Røyseng et al., 2007) and the creativity of the charismatic artist is expected to depend on strong inspiration and a forceful vocation. Kris and Kruz (1979) trace the charismatic inspiration – a sort of “divine madness” – back to the Platonic tradition, where artistic inspiration assumedly came from the heavenly “world of ideas.” Even today, it is often said that the talented artist was “born to become an artist” (Mangset, 2003; 2004).

Artistic occupations are highly attractive (Menger, 1999). According to Caves (2000), there are numerous starving artists and there are only a few who can look forward to a long-term and salaried relationship within an organisation in the arts. Many “wannabes” aspiring to an artistic profession overestimate their

chances of success (Heian, Løyland and Mangset, 2008). Becoming a good performing artist, whether it is as a musician, dancer or singer, is often a lonely, hard-working and demanding professional road to follow. It involves individualistic training with the same teacher(s) over several years who cultivate the student's best attributes and remove the (assumedly) poor ones (Wennes, 2006). This could mean countless hours alone in a rehearsal room with the instrument one often ends up loving and hating at the same time. Inherent talent is rarely enough to be really good. That talent needs to be developed and released together with technique and attitude.

Nor is it a lasting existence to remain a good performer in one's chosen art form. The choice of a profession in the performing arts will always require continuous rehearsal, training and development in some way or another. The ambition of becoming "the best" could also represent a self-motivating, and in some cases, self-effacing driving force (Wennes, 2002; 2006).

2.3. Emotional Risky

The choice of a profession in the performing arts is therefore, consciously or not, also a choice of lifestyle (e.g. Stenström, 2000; Koivunen, 2003; Gran and De Paoli, 2005; Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006; Stein, 1981; Becker, 1982; Caves, 2000). Kemp (1996) summarises two decades of research indicating that in comparison to the general public, symphony players are emotionally open (imaginative and intuitive), less bound by conventional beliefs and restraints, prefer complexity (ambiguity and a multidimensional outlook) and are characteristically exhibitionistic (able to transmit emotions at will and thrill others). Further, orchestral musicians must be able to dare the risk of success or failure, and possess the courage to tolerate lack of appreciation on the part of judges (Brodsky, 2006).

Finally, their passion for their vocation is enhanced by the sensory pleasure in the exercise of superior skills and capacities (Kivimäki & Jokinen, 1994). The personal, emotional and physical investments make the artistic profession a risky one. For all artistic activity there is an endless list of risks in the art form and production (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Guillet de Mounthoux, Gustafsson and Sjöstrand, 2007; Stenström, 2000; Köping, 2003; Koivunen, 2003; Wennes, 2002). Even salaried and employed artists in the arts organisation such as symphony orchestras or operas explore the uncertainty and risk in their occupation, though their risks are somewhat different than for the freelancers trying to survive in the open and overfilled market of artists. For the employed artists, the risks are particularly at an emotional level and to survive in the artistic profession you have to find ways to deal with these emotional risks.

The following describes the road to new knowledge: methodology, the context of the two Norwegian arts organisations and the process of entering “old” data to gain new knowledge.

3. Methods

3.1. Methodology

This article is based on the case study research strategy (Verschuren, 2003; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The study consists of qualitative data from the two cases (Yin, 2003; Eisenhardt, 1989; 1994): The Norwegian National Opera & Ballet and the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, both located in Oslo, the capital of Norway. The two cases were studied in the period 1999-2002 through systematic observation, 33 interviews and archive studies.

The in-depth, individual interviews (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), ranged from 1 to 2.5 hours, and were carried out with musicians, managers, staff members as well as other experts in the world of music, opera and ballet. These case studies provided rich data: Nearly 500 pages of transcripts from the interviews were studied and analysed. The data from the systematic observation (Adler & Adler, 1994; Pettigrew, 1990) are based on field notes from visits to the two organisations including notes from informal discussion both inside and outside the main buildings. The data were gathered by attending concerts, rehearsals and talking unofficially with the musicians back stage after rehearsals and concerts. Documents such as annual reports, programmes, strategy documents, evaluations, mapping documents and recordings were also studied and analysed (Yin, 2003; Maxwell, 1996).

The data were originally collected for a doctoral study of leadership in arts organisations (Wennes, 2002). The original study focused on the paradoxes between art and leadership and concluded that there were seven different leadership-related paradoxes within the artistic organisation (see Wennes, 2002). This time, and for this article, I revisited my research material to search for descriptions of the artistic profession and look for the relevant characteristics of this type of profession from the artists' description.

Reviewing the interviews I found many relevant quotations that I had not paid attention to in the original study. There were quotes from both the musicians and the administrative staff that filled out the picture of the artistic profession in another way than the charismatic conception. The data from the interviews were the central source of insight this time, and not so much the data from the observation and document study. Perhaps the greatest challenge in the reanalysing of the data was not the 500 pages, reprinted, empty of notes and categories, but the hard work of getting motivated to go back into the data that for

a long time I considered was exhausted and could not provide new knowledge. Fortunately, the data showed me new patterns of insight into the artistic profession.

Because it has been several years after the original field study was carried out, my understanding of art, art as profession and leadership has naturally increased. In addition to my academic work, I have been working as a choir conductor for over 20 years and this context has implicitly helped my understanding of music and musicians. It is through a slightly altered lens that I now analyse the data that I had acquired previously.

3.2. The Context of the Two Norwegian Arts Organisations

The Norwegian National Opera & Ballet, also called The Norwegian Opera or the opera house, is Norway's largest musical and theatrical institution and consists of two companies; The Opera Company and The Norwegian National Ballet. The Norwegian Opera was founded in 1957 and gave its opening performance in 1959. Today the opera house is organised as a limited company and is 90% state-owned and 10% owned by The Norwegian Opera Fund. The Norwegian Opera & Ballet has 550 employees representing more than 50 trades and professions. After a highly successful debut on April 12, 2008, the new opera house on Oslo's waterfront has already hosted a vast number of exclusive productions – including ballet, orchestral concerts, rock and opera. Some 400,000 visitors have taken a walk on its white marble roof, and many of them have experienced the inside of the house, with the Main Auditorium as the very heart.

The Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra can trace its roots back to the times of Edvard Grieg and Johan Svendsen, and in 1919 was established under its present name. Today, the orchestra hosts 110 musicians and has an administrative staff of nearly 20. The orchestra achieved a high level of international recognition with Mariss Jansons, the music director from 1979-2002. Touring activities since 1982 include some of the most of the prominent venues in Europe and festivals such as BBC Proms, Edinburgh, Lucerne and Salzburg, as well as significant venues in North- and South America and East Asia. In 1997, the Oslo Philharmonic and Mariss Jansons were honored by residency at Vienna Musikverein, with five concerts in one week.

As a recording orchestra, the Oslo Philharmonic achieved world fame during the 1980s with Mariss Jansons, with their Tchaikovsky cycle on Chandos. The orchestra's present discography includes more than 70 titles within a wide range of repertory, many of which have been awarded Norwegian and international prizes (Wennes, 2008).

3.3. Towards New Knowledge

The original study (Wennes, 2002), as mentioned, concluded with seven different leadership-related paradoxes within the arts organisation. Most of these paradoxes were at a macro level, such as art versus business, traditional versus innovation, stability versus change and autonomy versus institutionalism. Paradoxes in the arts and arts organisations are supported by other researchers as well (e.g. Stenström, 2002; Guillet de Mounthoux, 1998; Lapierre, 1991; Chiapello, 1995; Koivunen, 2003). In the original study (Wennes, 2002), there was also a paradox labelled *individual versus collective*. This paradox described the artist's expressed challenges in their daily life in the ensemble due to being an individual artist in a collective – constantly measured at both individual and collective levels.

By going back into the data, as in a hermeneutic circle in a continuous interplay between the known and the unknown, looking further for descriptions and interpretations of the artistic profession, I discovered there was more in this paradox than I had found the first time. By studying the data with new eyes, and a new research problem, rich data regarding the artistic profession became unfolded. The previous paradox was transformed from a dichotomy into three dynamic challenges, each consisting of interdependent concepts and will be further described in the following section.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Three dynamic challenges were found in the data and were developed during the process of analysis: 1) competition and cooperation, 2) nervousness and flow and 3) demanding and supportive leadership. The challenges are analysed at individual and partly group level and all three focus on the challenges the art profession can create at an individual level. In addition, the third challenge focuses on the *needs of leadership* this emotionally risky business creates. This is related to the individual needs of the artists and seems to follow from the two previous challenges. The dynamic challenges are presented in pairs of concepts to show that they are double-sided and interdependent. The challenges illustrate energy and the ongoing processes in the core of the artistic profession and work. Even though they are presented in pairs of concepts, their interdependency is hardly separate. They may all be connected in complex ways.

By competition I mean the internal and constant pressure in the arts organisation of being an excellent individual performer, measured on the individual level and constantly compared with the other artists in the ensemble, the best of yourself and a visiting soloist. Cooperation is here defined as the necessary teamwork, striving for a homogeneous sound and collective performance. The challenge competition and cooperation refers to the ongoing,

emotional pressure and energy created by individual *and* collective measurement and individual *and* collective performance.

Nervousness is here defined as the fundamental level of stress, pressure and unrest that is an integral part of an artistic profession. The nervousness can both increase concentration and the desire to create and at the same time block or hamper performance. Flow is here defined as an ecstatic, spiritual experience, a feeling of satisfaction and joy in a concentrated situation and is the ultimate target for artists. There is a fine line between the two concepts, both are well known among artists and are described as an essential dynamic in artistic work. The ultimate target is to get the “kick” or flow from the creation of art, but it is not possible without some degree of nervousness, stress and concentration.

Demanding leadership is the need for heroic, ambitious and strong leadership, particular in the artistic sense. Supportive leadership refers to the need for a caring, warm and understanding leadership style, often addressed to administrative leadership. The leadership needs are double sided as well; both sides need to be present in the leadership of the arts organization.

The three dynamic challenges will be further described, illustrated and analysed in the following three subsections by the data from the two Norwegian arts organisations. Demanding and supportive leadership refer to the expressed needs for leadership in the arts organisation.

4.1. Competition and Cooperation

In a symphonic orchestra, the roles are generally clarified upon appointment, providing a permanent place in the ensemble. If a person applies for a second violin position (*tutti*) and gets it, the person will become a permanent second violinist. If nothing unforeseen happens, one would normally remain in this position until retirement. It is perhaps the only team in modern-day economic climates that continues to provide lifelong employment; the careers of musicians in first-rate symphony orchestras have been reported to be more enduring than most other professional careers (Smith, 1988).

All of the musicians in the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra are committed to a lifelong engagement with the Orchestra. The same arrangement exists in the Opera House as well; the orchestra, the choir, the solo ensemble (13 singers) and the ballet company are all employed. However, the struggle to become best, or even good enough, is still present. Newly qualified young musicians entering the ensemble often display a better and longer education than the older ones, and in general, the standard of the performers increases (Wennes, 2002). Comparison with the other musicians, at all times, develops an internal competitive spirit, and even though this does not necessarily jeopardize their positions, it might put pressure on the individual musician, creating an underlying fear of not being good enough. The ability to convince oneself, one's colleagues and the art directors that

one is good enough for the ensemble will, in many cases, become a driving force in its own right. Constant evaluation is normal, here expressed by a musician:

We want to develop a critical attitude to our performances. The system is based on daily and intense evaluation. The conductor has the right to say what is not good enough. But also, one of the important things that we have to do on individual basis is evaluate each other. [Orchestral musician]

In art forms such as opera and ballet, competition between performers seems to grow the closer you get to the front of the stage (Wennes, 2002). Presiding in front is of course the soloist, represented by the hero or heroine of the play. As seen from the audience, the roles further back on stage would seem less prominent, and possibly also less exposed and demanding.

One thing is to get in here. Then the job really starts: You have to prove your abilities constantly. [Middle manager, Opera House].

There is a keen “fight” for the most coveted roles in a play. For each role that is assigned, there are at least a dozen others who are rejected – thus assigned to the bench – knowing that they probably never will be allowed onto the field during this game, but have to wait until the next one. The fact that competition does not necessarily create solidarity is known (e.g. Carlsen, Klev and von Krogh, 2004) but competition is also well known, expected and accepted as a necessary driving force for improved performance (e.g. Zajonc, 1965; Koivunen, 2003; Stenström, 2000). As expressed below by a dance company manager:

Competition is part of the driving force among dancers. Competition is healthy. We hear from other dance companies about razor blades being put into dancing shoes – for example in America, where there is financial competition too – there are no permanent positions. You could live well as a dancer in Norway – there should be some competition. We have a healthy cooperative environment here – those who come from the other countries always say that. Of course, there are always some personalities who try to assert themselves – there will always be some of them. [Art Director, The Norwegian National Ballet]

The competition consists of getting the best and the most challenging and profiled roles. When the roles are assigned, the participants may work as an ensemble for the individual play, letting the collegiate spirit prevail, although the internal competition never rests. Competition and cooperation exist side by side (Murnighan and Colon, 1991; Atik, 1994). Often, the strength of the ensemble, production team or collective rises to the surface at the first performance, where the feelings of solidarity and belonging could be present for a short while.

Tensions created by the different competitive and interactive patterns involved are recognised as inherent in artistic professions, and could have an encouraging (or hampering) effect on the artistic performance or product (Murnighan and Colon, 1991; Koivunen, 2003; Wennes, 2006). The individual

performer's artistic proficiency and achievements touch on the core of all artistic activity, and many performers are described as individualistic and obstinate. This behaviour is accepted, and a certain self-centred or "egocentric" behaviour is expected from artists.

The Prima Donna industry. Obstinate. Which, of course, they should be, in order to achieve something. It's all about making artists pull in the same direction.
[Art Director, Opera House]

Competition becomes a natural element in the artists' activities, both the competition which is a consequence of an open market, where good international performers challenge the national ones – and the competition that arises internally, both due to soloist tasks and the silent comparison to one's colleagues' performances. And the competition is increasing:

There has become more competition in recent years. The higher the level of the music that we play lessens the possibility of hiding within the larger unit. It is difficult for many orchestra members to keep up with the demanding expectations, which grow higher every season. [Orchestral musician]

The constant pressure of being good enough – possibly even best – could also create a high stress level among performers and a continuous "convincing process" both towards oneself and others that you are up to standard (Theorell, 1991; Sternbach, 1993). Sometimes, however, performance alone is simply not good enough:

They are afraid of not being good enough, being inadequate. These are things I sometimes have to tell them – that was not good enough – it does not measure up. This goes for all of us. We need to be good "craftsmen." It does happen sometimes that we need to terminate a fixed-term position. It's the worst part of my job. [Middle manager, Opera House]

The risk of failure in reaching targets, the risk of not being able to make a living, and the risk of not being able to keep one's health and spirits up – is the pursuit of giving and getting artistic experiences. Those who "just sit there" are the passive ones, the weary and the inactive, who in Köping (2003) are called "retired musicians" – waiting for their retirement and playing with little enthusiasm. In a symphony orchestra, as in many other performing professions, creation of music is about meeting others in active interaction, listening and answering, and in search of possible improvements.

There are noticeable critical attitudes towards the way others play in the orchestra – and this is what we want: a system is based on daily evaluation. The conductor can give feedback to us at anytime. The orchestra is not allowed to speak on stage, but we have off-stage groups, where we meet to evaluate each other and try to find ways to perform better. [Orchestral musician]

Musicians in an orchestra, or dancers in a ballet company, exercise a collective skill, aiming at a homogeneous and precise expression of each individual's competence and expertise. The individualistic and focused strive to become "best" could easily create tension in relation to the collective, homogeneous and imposed teamwork, but still represents the "keynote" of all ensembles; all members must work hard with their own instruments, but at the same time do their best to ensure collective success. Atik (1994) points out that the training of musicians is often lifelong, where several start off very young, aiming at a solo career. He believes that working in an orchestra will lead to a constant suppression of a musician's own ambitions in favour of collective tasks, which in the long run may affect the musician's motivation and later, their choice of career.

For an orchestra, the individual musician's talent, skills and development will be decisive for the orchestra's total performance, creating a conscious focus on the individuals' performance and participation. The shifting focus between the individual and the team could thus be perceived as a contradictory dilemma, or tension, presented here through an orchestral musician:

An extremely individualistic background with one's own teacher and technique meets the collective (...). To many this represents a difficult choice, a particular dilemma for the string players. It may be frustrating that an orchestra could be less subtle. They tend to change – and put more energy into making the group better. [Orchestral musician]

In his study of two Danish symphonic orchestras, Nielsen (1989) found indications that orchestral musicians are exposed to special stress factors in the collective. It is about the constant fear of making audible errors, the continuous processing of ambiguous information (for example between what the conductor says and what he or she shows, between what the sheet music says and what the group leader plays), and the risk of being criticised by the conductor. Most of these dilemmas are impossible to solve during practice (or rehearsals), meaning that the frustration and irritation must be dealt with by the individual musicians in other settings – if they are dealt with at all.

The challenge competition and cooperation embodies the dynamic process of being an individual in a collective. Being a professional performing artist such as a musician and dancer requires physical and psychological strength and daily practice. Thus, the long individualistic training that underlies the profession as a performing musician creates a dilemma when faced with the collective of the orchestra. Although many base their choice of profession in the performing arts on soloist ambitions, only very few are able to realise their soloist dreams entirely. Being a member of an orchestra and a team represents the second-best alternative for many musicians – or, in other words, a disappointment. It is the fact of not being the soloist in front of the orchestra – or the fact of not being the ballerina in front of the ensemble. Many will continue to carry solo dreams. There

is also another aspect of inherent competition within the ensemble: the pressure put on the individual in comparison with the others develops an internal competitive spirit and can create an underlying fear of not being good enough. On the one hand, the artist is an individual performer, exploring constant internal competition with the others and the best of oneself. On the other hand, the artist is part of a collective, colleague and friend, striving for the homogeneous sound and joint performance. The daily life of a performing artist can therefore be described by the dynamics between cooperation and competition, constantly shifting between the two.

4.2. Nervousness and Flow

Everyone needs to deliver their best in order to lift the artistic collective. The nervousness this creates helps increase concentration and the desire to create, at the same time as it may block or hamper superior technical and musical achievements, as described here by an employee of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra's organisation:

I don't think they (the musicians) can relax here, because they have to keep up with the high standards. They have to keep up with the orchestral development and they are terrified of the thought of not being good enough. I think they lack self-confidence. They don't know how good they actually are. [Administrative staff about the orchestra]

In creativity research, it has been known for some time that creativity, anxiety and unrest are closely connected (Köping, 2003; Cullberg, 1992). In a Swedish study, artists of all ages were examined and the conclusion was that anxiety and unrest are important elements in the creative process. Smith & Carlsson (1990: 213) point out that "(...) creative people are ready to confront very diverse aspects of their private world, dark as well as bright, frightening as well as soothing, primitive, incomprehensible, demonic etc. Obviously, these people are tolerant of the anxiety likely to be aroused by such confrontations. Without this tolerance, their freedom to exploit new paradoxical aspects would be impeded." As a result of the study, they claim that the distinction between creative and non-creative people is that the creative are able to deal with anxiety and unrest if these feelings are not too strong. According to Theorell (1991), with support from an international study, performance anxiety constitutes a problem for around a quarter of all musicians. This performance anxiety is, of course, related to the musician's own ambitions and his or her professionalism, and – as previously described – forms a natural part of being a performing artist in ensembles.

We have a pretty intense job. We notice the pressure and hard work, and we have always someone on sick leave. We are supposed to be on top – always. [Orchestral musician]

The psychotherapist that joined the orchestra on the last tour said that sometimes he has to literally build up a musician to get on stage because of all of the tensions. [Administrative staff in the orchestra]

For dancers, there is the additional risk of getting injured. For them the bodily strain could sometimes be extreme, and the working conditions are not always predictable. On tour, the quality of the stage floor can vary greatly, from outdoor stages to industrial floors or sports arenas. According to Ramel (2001), six out of ten dancers suffer from work-related injuries during a period of five years and as many as 95% suffer from pain each year. The “survival of the fittest” applies to dancers. The number of dancers increases every year, although the number of permanent positions is more or less constant. The freelance market is merciless, and the career is short with a retirement age around 41 (Ramel, 2001).

It is visible – everything we do. And all the mistakes are visible [Middle manager, Dance company].

In spite of the injuries, pressure and uncertainty, the forceful experience of creativeness is so great that many think it is worthwhile to continue (Mangset, 2004). For many, the ultimate target is to get into a condition of *flow* – described by conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen as an ecstatic, spiritual experience (Köping, 2003: 99). Or, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990); a feeling of satisfaction and joy in a concentrated situation. The concept of flow has been used to a great extent in the explanation of performing artists’ experience of artistic performance and the artist profession. The strong force of “flow experiences” is emphasised in explanations of why they never give up the dream of becoming a “real” artist: i.e. an artist who can realise his or her creative ideas and making a living of doing so. Marotto et al. (2002) believe that flow experiences lead people to a new and different reality: For a while they are fully immersed in the aesthetical experience of music or creation. Flow in the words of Nyeng (2006) is to be absorbed with perfecting and succeeding in one’s daily work.

The most motivation fact is that everyone wants to perform better and make better concert every time. People want to go on – in being a better orchestra and as an individual musician. The self-critique is high and people are really in to it – it is idealism. That is inspiring. [Orchestral musician]

The dominating definition of flow is based on individual and subjective experiences. However, according to Köping (2003: 99), the concept could lend itself to the condition which orchestral musicians express as “kick”, emotional discharge, excitement, concentration, atmosphere, mood, mental sphere of freedom, becoming whole, and which is created and experienced in collective contexts. Such experiences may be rare, but the feeling is so absorbing that they seek to experience it again and again. Probably, such strong experiences help explain why the artist profession is so consuming – the distinction between night

and day becomes unimportant, and the distinction between work and leisure, as well. The feeling of première night will never fade:

We hug at premières! Everybody is then a bit more focused, more positive and happier. At première night everyone feels happy [Opera Director]

To sum up, the challenge nervousness and flow is about the dynamics between the possible nervousness, stress and depression on the one hand and the creativity, flow and creation on the other hand. Orchestral musicians, like many other performers in artistic contexts, are often described as a group exposed to nervousness, stress and depression. The risk of failure is imminent, but if you do not take part, you will miss the joy and happiness of being part of a creative fellowship and therefore miss the feeling of flow. There is a fine line between the two extremities and the dynamics between the two is well known among the artists.

4.3. Demanding and Supportive Leadership

Many organisations in the arts have old traditions when it comes to emphasising and pursuing stories about past great achievements – including leadership achievements, which also seems to be supported by the media in portraits of artistic leaders. To Koivunen (2003), it is a paradox that even though orchestral musicians express substantial dissatisfaction with authority, there is a great need for strong leaders² and that there always will be a certain need for heroic leadership; a person who is able to turn around negative developments, poor results, or lack of self-confidence. There is a need for a strong father, metaphorically speaking:

There are expectations of a good, loving and strict Opera Director, just like a father – good and strict. Our Opera Director is an old-fashioned dad. [Middle manager in the Opera House]

According to the data in this study, there seems to be a need for heroic and demanding *and* careful and supportive leadership. On the one hand, there is a need for a leader figure (or function) who is admired, respected and obeyed, and who exerts great influence on and control the employees' efforts. On the other hand, and at the same time, there is a need for care and support. Although this picture is not completely clear, it may seem that the need for demanding leadership is related to artistic leadership, while the need for supportive leadership is expected to be represented in administrative leadership or in supportive

2. Norman Lebrecht (1991) has written a book about the maestro myth and the strong position of conductors.

administrative functions, such as an HR department. We can consider the demanding side first:

In artistic leadership, there is often a demand for people to admire and look up to. Someone who is strict and demanding, setting high and ambitious targets for the artistic organisation, making the individual artists go to the greatest possible lengths. The artistic leader could thus represent the notion of an “old-fashioned” authoritarian leader, who will always make great demands on effort, performance and improvements.

I am very restless – I want things to be done – and I want results [Opera Director]

The performing artists feel a need for recognition from the senior artistic leader. The only right source of recognition is to be seen by most important artistic leader. In the case of Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra this role is given first of all to Mariss Jansons, the chief conductor for the 20 years prior to 2000, but also other great guest conductors may achieve the same role and create equivalent needs.

I don't experience conflicts with Mariss – I rather see it as a learning process.
[Administrative staff in the orchestra]

What Mariss has done with this orchestra, benefits all orchestras in Norway. Better pay, more players, better conditions overall. Without him, we would have been just average. [Orchestral musician]

He is our image – he is better known than us (the orchestra). We have been lucky to have him for over 20 years. And we all agree with that. [Administrative staff in the orchestra]

He develops me – through the results he demands. It is very intense and we all show more effort when he is here. We can't have it like that always – all year around. [Orchestral musician]

As for support functions, such as administration and organisation, it seems as though the employees want a considerate and caring leader – or department. Long days, pressure and stress create a need for a caring function, a place where new or even over-ripe frustrations could be vented. In both the organisations studied here, care and support are primarily expected from the administrative staff and preferably from the business director. A human resources department is expected to represent a place for help and care. This repeats itself in several arts organisations: The need for an untraditional human resources department, which does not only handle social security forms and salaries, but which could also be used as some sort of “consultative function” where one could talk things over and get care, support and encouragement (Wennes, 2002; Wennes, 2006).

They feel they don't have any one to go to – they need a kind of Human Resource Manager who can take care of their needs. [Administrative staff in the orchestra]

They would rather have a masseuse than administration staff. The musicians need care – and, sometimes, even service beyond normal expectations [Administrative staff in the orchestra]

We need to have a better personnel leadership! [Middle manager in Opera House]

Although the demanding role here is attributed to artistic leaders and the caring role to administrative leadership, the need for both could be addressed to one and the same person. This is, for example, reflected in The Norwegian National Opera. The employees express a need both for demands and care, and they expect to get both from their CEO (Opera Director). The Opera Director's decisions are unshakable, which is generally known and accepted in the organisation. The Director puts his demands forward and expects the best of efforts from all employees in the opera. Most people in the organisation say they accept his demands regarding efforts and results. At the same time, he clearly expresses his sympathy and understanding for the demanding and exposed artist profession. His role as a demanding *and* supportive is obvious and clearly important to the employees in the organisation.

There is, to sum up, a common agreement among the employees in both organisations that there is a need for a united leadership with both a strong and efficient side (demanding) as well as a warm and understanding side (supportive). This need is particularly articulated by the artists in the organisations, but also by the administrative staff. It seems that the needs for demanding (strong and efficient) leadership is addressed to the artistic leader in both organisations, in the Opera House this means the CEO (opera director) and in the orchestra, the chief conductor hosts the same role. The need for a warm and understanding leadership style is addressed to the administrative leadership, a kind of human resources department, or even the CEO. In both of the arts organisations studied here, the supportive leadership is partly missing and therefore this need is unfilled.

5. Finale

As this article has shown, the performing arts as a profession may not be particularly glamorous. It is a profession that seems to be an emotionally risky profession, constantly shifting between highs and lows, competition and cooperation, and nervousness and flow. By studying, and restudying, two Norwegian arts organisations we have seen that this is the story not only for the freelancers, but also the employed artist within an arts organisation. A lifelong employment contract cannot remove the inherent and inevitable insecurity of the

artistic profession. Artists will never feel totally secure. But at the same time this insecurity may be an essentially important element in the artistic profession.

This article has explored the artistic profession throughout three dynamic challenges that seems crucial in the artistic work and profession and leadership in the context. These are 1) competition and cooperation, 2) nervousness and flow and 3) demanding and supportive leadership. These challenges are developed from the data from the two Norwegian arts organisations studied. The scope has been to bring light on the artistic profession at a micro level to fill a void in the arts management literature.

The artists employed in the two organisations are committed with a lifelong engagement to their organisation. And the highest goal is to create fine art with a homogeneous expression from the ensemble. However, ongoing comparison with the other artists and themselves develops an internal competitive spirit. Competition is part of the driving force among artists and can bring out the best in the individual. But the constant pressure of being good (enough) could also create a high stress level. The balance between competition and cooperation, even in an ensemble with lifelong engagement, is therefore fragile and at the same time important as a source of energy in the artistic profession and its well being.

Creativity research shows that creativity, anxiety and unrest are closely connected and the data presented here show similar connections between nervousness and flow for artists. There seems to be constant shifts between the highs and lows. Performing anxiety is related to the artist's own ambition and his or her professionalism and forms a natural part of being a performing artist in ensembles. And in spite of the pressure and uncertainty, the forceful experience of flow – or creating great art – is the ultimate target and worth the pain. The balance between nervousness and flow is therefore also fragile but at the same time crucial important in the artistic work, progress and profession.

As this article has shown, there seems to be a need for heroic and demanding leadership – and careful and supportive leadership. The employees in the two arts organisations express needs for a joint leadership featuring both a strong and efficient (demanding) side as well as a warm and understanding (supportive) side. The performing artists feel the need for recognition from the senior artistic leader. As for support functions such as administration, it seems that the employees want a considerate leader. The double-sided need for leadership seems to be connected to or even grow out of the challenges that are already described.

A profession in the arts, as described here, means constant shifts between highs and lows, competition and cooperation, nervousness and flow and creates the need for a double-sided leadership that is both demanding and supportive. Leaders in the arts context must be aware of and balance the dynamic challenges in a satisfactory way. By removing an element, the dynamics and energy in the artistic production can fall apart and new problems will be created. A good leader in the arts will see the challenges as fundamental to artistic work and will therefore make the effort to balance and stimulate the processes in a constructive

matter. The need for a “dualistic leadership” may implicate a dynamic and perhaps most important – interactive – leadership model. Or maybe even an emotionally sensitive leadership.

Complex and Emotionally Risky - A Study of the Dynamic Challenges in the Artistic Profession and Leadership in Arts Organisations

Executive Summary

Introduction

This is an article about artists in two arts organisations and the main challenges they face in their work and profession. The dream of fame is a dream that many follow. The dream of standing in front of the orchestra as the performing soloist is powerful and desirable. But there is another side to the powerful dream of an artistic carrier that is not described so often: the artistic profession may not be particularly glamorous. A profession in the performing arts can be an *emotionally risky business*, constantly shifting between highs and lows, competition and cooperation, and nervousness and flow. This article shows that this is the story not only for the freelancers, but also the employed artist within an arts organization. A lifelong employment contract cannot remove the inherent and inevitable insecurity of the artistic profession. The emotionally risky business consists of dynamic challenges that are at the core of the artistic work and profession.

Conclusions

By studying two Norwegian arts organisations, The Norwegian National Opera & Ballet and the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, we take a closer look at the performers and identify three dynamic challenges that seem to be crucial in the artistic profession, which are 1) competition and cooperation, 2) nervousness and flow and 3) demanding and supportive leadership. These challenges are important and necessary in the creation of art and in the artistic profession. They create important energy in the production of art and in the constant development of the art, the artist and the artistic profession. These challenges are crucial in developing knowledge of the profession and leadership, both for researchers and practitioners.

Contribution

This article explores the artistic profession throughout three dynamic challenges that seem crucial in artistic work, profession and leadership in this context. These are 1) competition and cooperation, 2) nervousness and flow and 3) demanding and supportive leadership.

The artists employed in the two organisations are committed with a lifelong engagement to their organisation. Their highest goal is to create fine art with homogeneous expression from the ensemble. However, comparison with the other artists and themselves, at all time, develops an internal competitive spirit. Competition is part of the driving force among artists and can bring out the best in the individual. But the constant pressure of being good (enough) could also create a high stress level. The balance between competition and cooperation, even in an ensemble with lifelong engagement, is therefore fragile and at the same time important as a source of energy in the artistic profession and being.

Creativity research shows that creativity, anxiety and unrest are closely connected and the data presented here show similar connections between nervousness and flow for artists. There seems to be constant shifts between the highs and lows. Performing anxiety is related to the artist's own ambition and his or her professionalism and forms a natural part of being a performing artist in ensembles. In spite of the pressure and uncertainty, the forceful experience of flow – or creating great art – is the ultimate target that is worth the pain. The balance between nervousness and flow is therefore also fragile but at the same time crucially important in the artistic work, progress and profession.

There seems to be a need for heroic and demanding leadership *and* careful and supportive leadership. The employees in the two arts organisations express the need for a joint leadership featuring both a strong and efficient (demanding) side as well as a warm and understanding (supportive) side. The performing artists feel the need for recognition from the senior artistic leader. Regarding the support functions, such as administration, it seems that the employees want a considerate leader. The double-sided need for leadership seems to be connected to – or even grow out of – the challenges that are presented here.

Practical implication for leaders in the performing arts

The three dynamic challenges in the arts organisation are in the core of the artistic work and are therefore important to understand as a leader. Leaders in the arts must be aware of and balance these dynamic challenges in a satisfactory way. By removing an element, the dynamics and energy in the arts production can fall apart and new problems will be created. A good leader in the sector will see the challenges as fundamental to artistic work and will therefore make an effort to balance and stimulate the processes in a constructive matter. The needs for

“dualistic leadership” may implicate a dynamic and perhaps most important – interactive – leadership model. Or maybe even emotionally sensitive leadership. Leadership will never be an easy craft – especially in the performing arts. You need knowledge at the micro level to be able to balance these challenges. You also need knowledge about the profession you are supposed to lead.

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