Leader of the Band

BY VANESSA BUSH MULRAIN

HENRY FOGEL recalls sitting at a Syracuse Symphony Orchestra board meeting in 1968, “listening to the usual crying about money, and I said, ‘Gee, Jerry Lewis does this thing on television. Maybe we can do something for orchestras.’”

In June of that year, Syracuse radio station WONO, which Fogel and a friend had purchased five years earlier and converted to a classical music format, broadcast the nation’s first radio marathon. It raised $8,000 for the Syracuse Symphony.

“We’d only expected to raise $5,000, so that was a success,” says Fogel. The next year the marathon raised $11,000, and just like that Fogel had developed the concept of using radio marathons to raise funds for orchestral organizations.

The concept caught on with other symphonies, many of which asked Fogel to come and help them organize similar broadcasts. He has traveled to more than 60 cities, throughout the United States and in Canada, to act as a consultant on fund-raising radio marathons. He reports that radio marathons have raised more than $35 million for orchestras in the almost 10 years since they were widely adopted.

HENRY FOGEL is executive director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

But radio marathons did more than balance orchestra ledgers across the nation. They also launched Henry Fogel, previously WONO’s station manager, into an unexpected career in orchestra management. Today he is the chief operating officer of a corporation with a $24-million annual budget, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

“I accepted, and that’s how I jumped into the orchestra field,” says Fogel, who was a fine arts major at SU, Class of 1964, before working at WONO.

“Music has always been a passion for me,” Fogel remarks, adding that he once had ambitions to play in an orchestra himself. “I’m not a good enough performer. I play piano, but not on a professional level. And I once played oboe, but even worse.”

Fogel left the New York Philharmonic in 1981 and joined the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C., as executive director. He recalls that the most difficult part of managing the National Symphony was dealing with Washington’s “peculiar base,” which is comprised of a very transient population that doesn’t lend itself to a loyal symphony subscriber and contributor base.

“There are no major American corporations headquartered in Washington. So you don’t get the kinds of large corporate support to build an endowment,” Fogel explains.

Fogel joined the Chicago Symphony in 1985, as both executive vice president of The Orchestral Association and executive director of the symphony. In addition to managing the orchestral musicians, Fogel also manages a staff of 65 people who handle everything from fund raising, marketing, program scheduling, financing, and physical operation of the Orchestra Hall facility where the Chicago Symphony performs.

At the time Fogel arrived, The Orchestral Association, which includes the symphony and ancillary orchestral and choral groups, was operating at a deficit. Fogel set three goals for himself: balancing the budget, increasing subscription series, and reviving the Allied Arts Association, the arm of the symphony that presents independent concerts not related to the Chicago Symphony.

Fogel has met all those goals. Since he has taken over the operation of the association, its budget has been balanced and it has shown a modest surplus in each of the last two years, after more than a decade of deficits.

Fogel has begun to focus on increasing the symphony’s endowment. Most
orchestras are partially funded by endowments. Endowments are raised from contributions; the principal amount is placed in an investment vehicle and the interest used to offset operational costs.

The Chicago Symphony, despite its importance, has traditionally had one of the smallest endowments among major orchestras, Fogel says. Under Fogel's guidance, the symphony, in the middle of a $30-million endowment drive, had raised $22 million by the end of 1987.

"When we get the endowment level up, we may be able to take some more artistic risks," Fogel says, "perhaps commission more new pieces of music—those things we've had to hold back because funds weren't available. I'd like to see the orchestra more involved in music of our times."

Fogel enjoys the relationship between artistic excellence and a sound budget. When he looks at the bottom line, he does so with that balance in mind. When he negotiates with labor, he sits down with a union representing not just any workers, but 105 orchestral musicians.

Fogel points out that dealing with the musicians is a major aspect of his job that sets it apart from simply operating a corporation. He notes that it can be difficult to deal with artistic people in labor negotiations. However, "I don't find it overly difficult because I go into it, frankly, with a tremendous respect for the artistic talent that is involved.

"Orchestras have different personalities," he adds. "In Chicago, there is a phenomenal community pride in the orchestra that shows in the pride the musicians have in the orchestra. I have never been involved with an orchestra where the musicians' commitment to the way they play is at the strength that it is in Chicago. Even when they're on tour in a small city, more than half the orchestra is at the concert stage one hour before the concert, warming up and getting used to the acoustics of the hall..."

"I think, sometimes, people in the corporate sector don't understand that you're not dealing with assembly line workers who can be replaced like interchangeable parts," Fogel says. "Musicians have special needs."

For example, he says, the average string instrument in an orchestra costs between $50,000 and $75,000. "Therefore, I'm not very sympathetic to a point of view that says we pay musicians too much," he says.

On the other hand, Fogel notes that the musicians' union contract is more than 100 pages long and "only a few pages deal with salary. The rest deals with working conditions."

Musicians are very particular about their working conditions. "Some of it is a reaction to the time, 25 or 30 years ago, when the unions were not very strong," says Fogel. In the past, orchestral musicians, who often teach or give lessons to supplement their income, would have no recourse if rehearsals or performances went overtime and interfered with other commitments.

Worse yet, "there used to be a time when the conductor would fire you if he didn't like the way you parted your hair," says Fogel. "Those times have changed."

On the artistic level, another balancing act comes into play when musical selections are made. "On the one hand, you're trying to market and to please your audience," Fogel says. "On the other hand, you have to lead them. It's not a popularity contest."

Taking artistic risks is part of the process. "You look at every possible decision you could make and ask what is the balance between those two factors," he says. "The reward is when you take that kind of risk and everybody says, 'That was the right thing to do.'"

"It's often asked, Is Chicago really the best orchestra? I don't know the answer to that,' Fogel says. 'It's not like baseball. We don't have hits, runs, errors, wins, or losses. What measures what we are is much more subtle and harder to find. But it's there if you listen to the orchestra and talk to people who are knowledgeable."

Fogel believes that an orchestra has to carry out the idea of marketing music in such a way that it always is doing something that pleases the audience, to which the audience responds. That response, he admits, is measured in attendance and contributions.

And occasionally, he adds, "you also do what you feel perhaps, artistically, might not have been the easy choice. But nonetheless you've done it and it's worked with the audience. That's a great satisfaction."