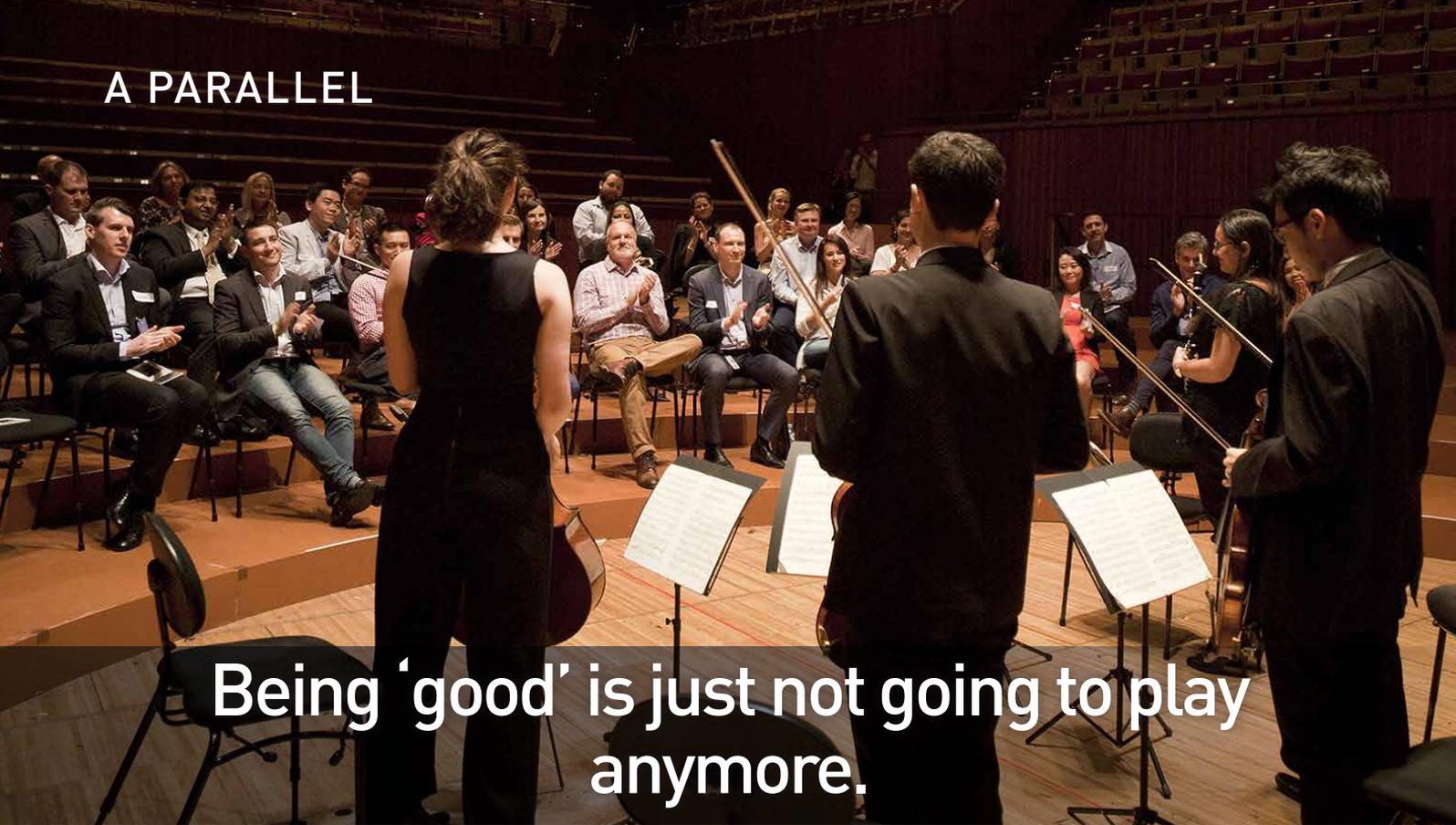


A PARALLEL



Being 'good' is just not going to play anymore.

How the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's Fellowship program helps talented young musicians manage themselves within a high-performing team.

By Peter Braithwaite

in association with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra



"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."

Aristotle

What builds excellence? It's not the great ideas, the sexy program. It is the hard grind of practice, practice, practice until it becomes automatic or a habit. This is the challenge to most organisations around shifting or lifting their culture; they do not provide sufficient support or drive to ensure that what has been installed becomes a habit: "This is how we do things around here now."

Being good is not sufficient in 2016. Always trying to be better and striving to be great has to be the aim. And it can only be achieved through a combination of hard work, practice and discipline. Talent may get you a seat at the table; then you have to work hard to continue to merit that seat at the table.

There is always a tension around what good looks like. You can compare to others but, ultimately, you have to set your own standards of what good looks like – and then drive to first meet this, and then target exceeding it. Staying ahead of what your customers expect – without gold-plating – is critical. If you are not working from the customer perspective, you become complacent and self-serving around your performance.

"I play every gig as if it could be my last, then I enjoy it more than ever."

Nigel Kennedy

In this case study, we look at a group of talented young musicians at the start of their professional careers; and how the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's Fellowship program works to set them up with the requisite skills to manage themselves as individuals and as members of a high performing team.

Each year, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra runs a structured mentoring program for talented young musicians. Positions are heavily sought after and gained through a rigorous audition process. For a year, this group works together and as part of the orchestra to build the skills that will make them employable as professional musicians. They come with the ability to play their instrument well; now they learn how to play with others, in a very corporate sense.

Much of what they learn translates into the corporate world.

Let's start with **planning**. The team starts with a plan – a score, written by a composer that sets out the notes to be played and often with instructions on pace and intensity. Some composers are more detailed than others. But this is the starting point; much is fixed, but the group, often led by a conductor, then works out how they intend to EXECUTE this plan. The Russian conductor, Semyon Bychkov, compares conducting to being like building a house to an architect's plans.

But, typically the group won't come with a clean slate of "so what are we going to do today?". Each person will take their part and work through the mechanics

"The word 'listen' contains the same letters as the word 'silent'."

Alfred Brendel

A key management skill is in listening to what your people are saying. Truly listening. Too often a conversation is filled with people waiting for the other person to stop talking so that they can re-start talking. Or a manager's 'conversation' is one way. Providing the space and time for others to talk will provide a manager with powerful insights into what is actually going on in their business.



"There's nothing remarkable about it. All one has to do is hit the right keys at the right time and the instrument plays itself."

Johann Sebastian Bach

The well oiled machine. Operations that provide the right processes, tools, training and support find that their people DO "hit the right keys at the right time". This becomes your BAU. And people find this remarkably unstressful. Whilst some organisations thrive on a fire-fighting mentality, with heroes fighting battles every day, this is ultimately a recipe for failure. Imagine flying with an airline that enjoyed the drama and stress of firefighting? Literally flying by the seat of their pants? Would you enjoy flying with them? Or would you prefer a seat with that well-oiled operation where there are consistently executed systems and processes that provide a sense of true calm and expertise?

of their part – the notes. The group then comes together to **plan** and **practice** how they want to deliver the music. It may require some testing – "let's see if it works if we do it like this ..." – and it requires practice. Maybe within a section of the orchestra, or it may be how the different sections come together. But they practice, practice, practice. Individually, as a section and as a whole.

As part of the practice cycle – and following any performance – the role of **feedback** is important. Whether from a section lead to a musician, a conductor to a section, musician to musician. It is a community working together and the ability to have open and honest conversations around performance is essential. It has to be couched in respectful terms and be focussed on what someone can impact – which is typically a 'behaviour'. For instance, pace, tone, volume or how a musician 'enters'.

There are a number of means that are used to ensure this comes together.

"Whoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times."

Niccolo Machiavelli

To disrupt or be disrupted? That is the question! Questioning what you do and how you do it is critical to staying AHEAD of the crowd. Complacency leads to failure. If you're not sure about that, reflect on how "uber" is now a verb: meaning "to use a service that is on call and taps into an informal but effective network; to destroy a fat, lazy non-customer centric business that did not stay with the times."

Role clarity is a critical aspect. Sections of musicians (where they all play the same instrument) will have a leader who sets pace and tone; the rest follow. Who sits in this seat can change. Leadership within a piece can also change; one section or musician may lead off the work, then hand the leadership to another musician or section; and this can happen quickly and often. Being clear on who is leading and how and when that will change is absolutely critical. Role clarity prevents chaos or confusion.

The interactions within a performance are critical. The group is in full flight, so has developed a range of means to maintain **communication**. It can take the form of eye contact, breathing, or movement (such as ducking one's head). They are typically understood by colleagues and often subtle, such as an intake of breath indicating that the lead is about to start setting the timing for the others. The lead has to be able to trust that once they send the signal and they launch into the piece, that the rest will follow to the agreed plan. The role of a conductor focuses on

"If I miss a day of practice, I know it. If I miss two days, my manager knows it. If I miss three days, my audience knows it."

Andre Previn

The truth will always come out and there is always a need to stay focussed on how to deliver a consistent product or service. Being honest about what you are truly achieving helps you improve; reporting what you THINK management wants to hear will ultimately come unstuck if it does not reflect the customer experience: your customer will soon tell you.



the big picture, setting a clear direction and then guiding (sometimes lightly, sometimes in a very directive manner) the orchestra through the piece to the agreed plan or approach. They use gestures, facial expressions, body movement, body position – all communicating signals.

Understanding what 'good' looks like (or more appropriately – sounds like) is also important. All musicians will have views on who they admire, whether an individual or an orchestra. Listening to how they perform specific pieces assists musicians frame and develop what they want to deliver. It isn't about mimicking, but more about striving towards what one views as excellent. It is important data that helps focus the group as they produce a finished product.



"All the conductor has to do is stand back and try not to get in the way. Mozart is doing all the work."

Sir Colin Davis

Managing in any situation is nuanced. Understanding what the prevailing circumstances need is critical: what direction, guidance, support are needed to meet the set objectives. It should be fit for purpose and be tangible in how it improves the process. Sometimes things are moving so well, that management's touch should be light; but accountability still sits with management to get it right. Make no mistake, Davis still was present on the podium conducting Mozart – he never left any orchestra to themselves.

"I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones."

John Cage

Being open to the challenge of the new is often the first step to continuous improvement.



Risk taking: much music is very complex; it can be a high-wire act without a safety net. If a safe outcome was needed, then banality follows. Musicians take risks, often pushing the physicality of what they are seeking to deliver; exquisitely soft music, extraordinarily loud and pounding, fast pace, dissonance. Often composers push them into areas that are strange and difficult. But without the risk we get repetition. Finding the balance of risk and discipline becomes key.

Discipline is an underlying competency that we all must have. Whether it is in the discipline of daily practicing to maintain

or grow a technical skill to being ready for a rehearsal with one's part analysed and practiced. Or the most critical one; being ready on the night of the performance. All the effort to date is focussed on this moment. It is the commitment to their customer – the audience – that they can deliver on time, in full on every occasion. Sure, things can go wrong, but most circumstances can be dealt with. An audience is unlikely to accept a "sorry folks, but we didn't quite get our rehearsals finished, so we decided to play something else". Is this a form of the "we are

"Those who have achieved all their aims probably set them too low."

Herbert von Karajan

Complacency around what 'good' looks like will ultimately be any organisation's undoing. Constantly looking and questioning how something can be done better is a critical aspect of improving and surviving. Imagine if our sporting stars only sought to replicate the performance of previous generations? Not only does the improvement lead to better things (cheaper, faster, smoother, clearer) but there is an excitement and energy when performance is lifted to a new level – and this now becomes the standard. For today.

"To achieve great things, two things are needed; a plan, and not quite enough time."

Leonard Bernstein

Also known as USD (University Student Disease). A plan sets structure, expectations and boundaries. Of course plenty of time to deliver can be useful, but more importantly the right amount of time – and no more – is much more focusing. This isn't about sweating; it's about ensuring clear focus and precise delivery. The paradigm that 'work expands to fill available space' is reflected here. Providing tight but reasonable plans exposes early when things are starting to go outside of normal – and allows you to take corrective action at a point when you can readily fix it.



experiencing unexpectedly high call volumes and cannot take your call at this time.”? An audience will understand that a conductor may have slept through multiple alarms due to jet lag – so long as the show still goes on.

This group of young talented musicians is embedded in a world-class organisation, doing a form of MBA; they learn a set of skills that teaches them how to succeed as professionals. It embeds the behaviours of planning, practicing and how they interact with their peers and others. All focussed on providing a compelling customer experience.

“A creative artist works on his next composition because he was not satisfied with his previous one.”

Dmitri Shostakovich

Clarity of actual performance, honesty in assessment, high degrees of self-awareness make one hungry to continually improve. Nothing is perfect (in that all things can be improved). Sometimes the improvement is driven by delivering the same product or service to an improved quality, ie. less errors. But other times, improvement can be about re-setting what good looks like. Better to always strive to improve, manage that conversation with your customer than let them tell you that THEY’VE changed their mind about what satisfies them.

What we did

Working with Roger Benedict, Principal Viola of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Artistic Director of the Fellowship program, we created a session that provides people from the corporate world access to the working life of a creative industry. Cross-industry insights can be powerful as they expose both commonality of issues and those that are distinctive to the specific area.

In this session, on the stage of the iconic Sydney Opera House, Roger takes us on a journey that allows the players to explain and demonstrate how they have come to work as a team. It is the practice, the discipline, role clarity and strong focus on the listener, their customer, that shines through. It is an interactive session, where the participants become immensely curious and work to understand what is going on in front of them. And they take powerful learnings back to the workplace. As participants said from a session run more than 12 months ago:

“This was a fantastic event that we still fondly remember and discuss.” And “I still remember clearly my experience last year and found it very valuable and fascinating so hope that we will be able to get some others to experience it for themselves.”

“Without craftsmanship, inspiration is a mere reed shaken in the wind.”

Johannes Brahms

Craftsmanship is skill, the ability to replicate to an agreed quality. This requires training, practice, coaching, and feedback. Inspiration only takes one so far; an inability to ‘fill in the gaps’ soon starts to become evident. We’ve all worked with the inspirational colleague who was long on ideas but short on how to make them real; this is where craftsmanship turns the bright idea into a reality.



The Sydney Symphony Orchestra Fellowship is recognised as one of the world’s leading orchestral training programs. Each year, the program brings together up to 16 talented young instrumentalists from throughout Australia for an intensive period of mentoring, workshops, performances, and immersion in the world of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Since the program’s beginnings in 2001, Fellowship alumni have won positions in some of the finest orchestras in Europe, Asia and Australia, including nine past Fellows who now hold permanent positions with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Learn more about the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and its exciting program of performances at the Sydney Opera House in 2017.
www.sydneyorchestra.com



Learn more about how the business improvement services offered by Coxswain Alliance can help you improve the performance of your team and your business.
www.coxswainalliance.com

