

# Why Is It Difficult to Manage an Opera House? The Artistic-Economic Dichotomy and Its Manifestations in the Organizational Structures of Five Opera Organizations

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In the course of the research and in this article as well, three models based on theoretical considerations are created. They include the artistic production side of producing opera; the sources of the resources needed for this process, including their values and quality assumptions; and the holistic model bringing these issues together. Based on these models, five case studies have been conducted on the organizational structures and socio-economic frameworks of the Deutsche Oper Berlin, the English National Opera, the Finnish National Opera, the Glyndebourne Festival Opera, and the Opéra national de Paris. The main finding of the case-study analyses is that a dual organizational structure seems to exist in all of these opera houses: one official and economic and the other unofficial and artistic. This dual structure is undoubtedly one of the main reasons for the organizational problems often experienced in opera organizations.

The models are created to assist in the discussion of the difficult relationship of creative freedom and quality versus the expectations of commercial efficacy and accountability that increasingly face opera organizations in the future. It is hoped that mapping and naming these forces as well as the values

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## *Why Is It Difficult to Manage an Opera House?*

and quality assumptions involved can help in making informed choices about the way forward for opera organizations.

### The Research Project in Question

The starting point of the research project in question has been the frequent problems in the management of opera organizations throughout Europe recently. The best-known examples are undoubtedly the Paris Opéra's experience with Daniel Barenboim in the late 1980s and the London Covent Garden's problems in the last few years. The Finnish National Opera witnessed a similar turbulent period in the early 1990s when the administrative director resigned after a series of problems with the general director—who subsequently resigned due to a lack of confidence toward his work.

These difficulties—which appear rather frequently and seem to follow a pattern—could naturally result from the incompetence of opera house managers. One cannot help wondering, however, why the greatest opera houses in the world would repeatedly be trusted to incapable leaders. Rather, the assumption in this research project is that there are inherent tensions in running an opera organization that cause the difficulties in its management structures and finances—the two most frequent and often coinciding problems.

The managerial and financial problems of opera houses have been extensively discussed in several reports and consultancy papers from the internal organizational point of view over the last decades. The main opera houses in the United Kingdom, for example, have been analyzed at length by outside consultants and government bodies several times in the last forty years. These analyses have been carried out with respect to expenditure, planning and budgeting processes, working practices, and possible additional income. Similar reports have been created in several other countries as well (Eyre 1998; Associazione Nazionale Enti Lirici e Sinfonici, 1990; Gall 1993, 1997). These reports, however helpful they might have been at their time to the existing management of the houses, have not aimed to create any general understanding of the inherent managerial and economic difficulties of opera organizations. This point is often admitted in the conclusions of the reports and is also well demonstrated by the recurring need to return to the issues (see, for example, Auvinen 1996).

My goal in this research project has been, therefore, to take another view of the functioning and the structures of opera houses. Instead of analyzing the organizational structures of a single opera house from the inside (this has been done frequently enough without any long-standing success), I will try to explore and to map some of the external forces influencing these structures and to find possible correlations between these forces, the organizational structures, and the difficulties mentioned previously. This is done from a more



abstract theoretical perspective and also by analyzing several case-study organizations to perceive possible patterns and similarities.

#### *Preliminary Assumptions of the Research Project*

Opera is an international art form. This is especially true today when all the major houses present relatively similar programs, which are produced and performed by a core group of international conductors, directors, designers, and singers. This universality has inevitably led to a great similarity in the core product and in the standards of the opera houses. Therefore, the art form itself dictates to a great extent the resources and the organizational structures needed to produce opera. For example, Verdi's *Aida* requires a fairly specific number of skilled performers, a certain type of performance space, and a certain type of sets wherever it is performed to comply with the conventions of the art form and international standards. Moreover, the importance of the performers is naturally indisputable for an opera house—the artists being the core group who are putting out the organization's product. Therefore, it is assumed that the artistic process (the product) and its influence on the functioning of an opera organization need to be investigated to create a picture of the forces influencing the organizational structures of opera companies.

Putting on opera in its current form is a costly business. This seems to be a generally accepted fact. However, there are different solutions for acquiring the necessary resources in different socio-economic surroundings. Those solutions range from almost complete funding by state and municipal authorities (e.g., the German model) to almost total reliance on private funding (e.g., the American model). There have been, however, financial and managerial problems both in the heavily subsidized organizations and in the less subsidized ones. It is assumed in this research project that to understand the difficulties and tensions in managing an opera organization, the influence of the socio-economic context in which it exists needs to be included in the analysis.

These basic assumptions lead us to the dual analytical approach to understanding the functioning of opera organizations that is employed in this research project. This approach is called an artistic-economic dichotomy<sup>1</sup> in the course of the research. The analytical apparatus presented hereinafter proposes to assist in the analysis of the artistic-economic framework in which opera organizations operate. It is subsequently used in the case-study analyses of five opera organizations and their artistic, managerial, and financial structures.

#### **The Analytical Model**

Based on the preceding preliminary assumptions, an analytical model has been created in the course of the research project. The complete argument on

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which it is based cannot, unfortunately, be presented here due to the scope of this article. The model is divided into two different sections: the model describing the artistic side of producing opera and the model describing the socio-economic side in which opera organizations need to operate, both of which inevitably influence the organizational structures.

#### *The Artistic Side of an Opera Organization's Framework*

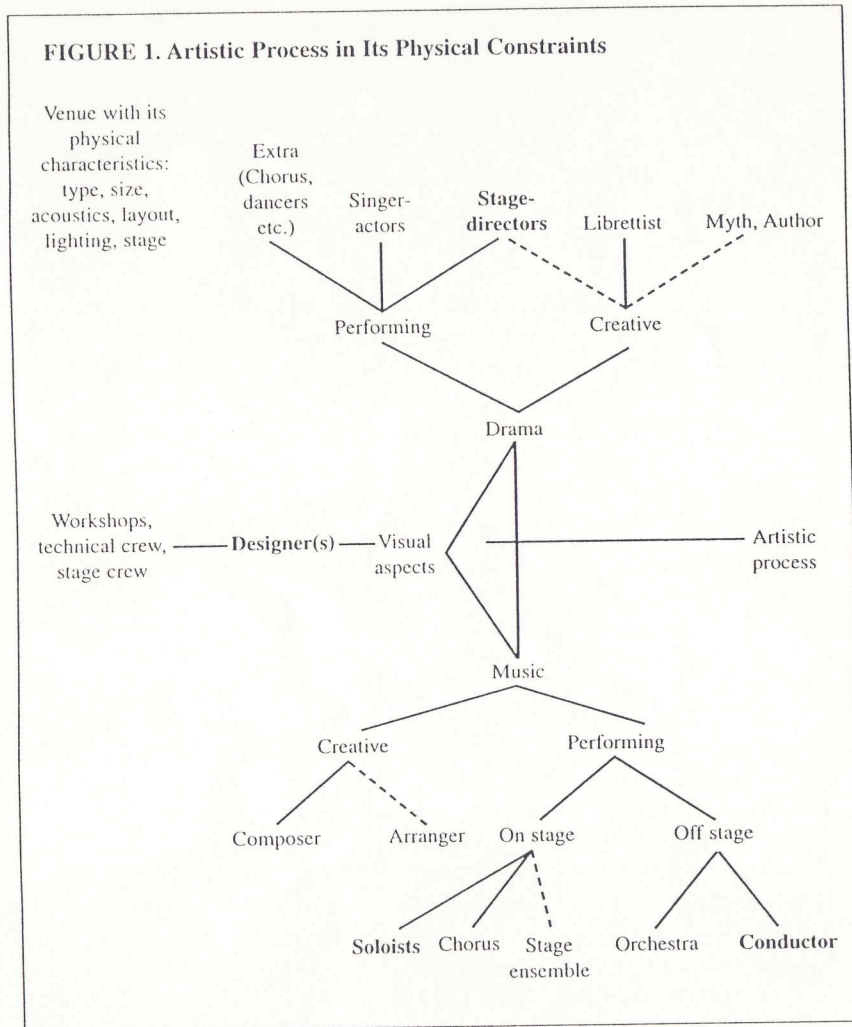
The model describing the artistic side of producing opera has been arrived at from a musicological point of view, dividing opera into its three aspects—dramatic, musical, and visual—and then abstracting from these the necessary forces and resources needed to put on an opera performance. The model describes the conventions in which the opera organizations currently need to operate (figure 1). It is considered relatively self-explanatory and will therefore not be explicitly discussed in this context.

#### *The Socio-Economic Side of an Opera Organization's Framework*

The model describing the socio-economic side of the context in which opera organizations need to operate has been arrived at from two different viewpoints: first, by creating categories for different possible sources of income available and, second, by exploring the social value systems attached to these sources. Additionally, the question of the different expectations of the quality of the product of the opera organizations is discussed in conjunction with the model created. In the real world of producing opera, the categories created in the model overlap and interact. Defining the pure categories here, however, will help us in describing the more blurred reality in conjunction with the case-study analyses. The argument for the socio-economic model—deemed not to be self-explanatory—will be included here in a condensed form to make the usage of the model comprehensible in the context of this article.

The most straightforward source of the income needed for the production process of opera would be the audience who enjoys the product—that is, performance of the opera. This—in a certain sense commercial—approach to income has not always been the case, however. Opera organizations have often needed additional resources to cover this market failure. All the different sources of income, including the audience, can be divided into two dichotomies describing the contributing bodies. These dichotomies are, first, the division between one source and multiple sources of income and, second, the division between private<sup>2</sup> and institutional<sup>3</sup> sources, combined in the model to create four different categories. These categories label only the source of the income without tackling the reason for the support and the val-





ues attached to it. In this regard, the division of society by Habermas into civil society, economy, and state will be helpful. This theoretical framework will be briefly presented hereinafter.

The tripartite model of civil society, economy, and state is based on the division of society into categories of lifeworld and system explored by Jürgen Habermas in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In his theory the lifeworld of the individual is further divided into the private and public spheres. Habermas defines his two categories as follows:

The institutional core of the private sphere is the nuclear family, relieved of productive functions and specialized in tasks of socialization; from the systemic perspective it is viewed as the environment of private households. The institutional core of the public sphere comprises communicative networks amplified by a cultural complex, a press and, later, mass media; they make it possible for a public of art enjoying private persons to participate in the reproduction of culture, and for a public of citizens of the state to participate in the social integration mediated by public opinion. (Habermas 1987, 319)

Cohen and Arato, however, in their *Civil Society and Political Theory* combine these two categories into one, the civil society, which is adopted for the purposes of this study. They define it as follows: “This concept would include all the institutions and associational forms that require communicative interaction for their reproduction and that rely primarily on processes of social integration for coordinating action within their boundaries” (1992, 429).

This lifeworld—civil society—is opposed by two media-steered systems, the state (steered by the medium of power) and the economy (the market steered by the medium of money). The function of these systems in conjunction with civil society is described by Habermas as follows:

From the standpoint of the subsystems of the economy and the state, their interactions with the respectively contiguous spheres of the lifeworld take the form of interchange relations connected in parallel. The economic system exchanges wages against labor (as input factor), as well as goods and services (as the output of its own products) against consumer demand. The public administration exchanges organizational performances for taxes (as an input factor), as well as political decisions (as the output of its own products) for mass loyalty. (Habermas 1987, 319)

This tripartite division has been introduced into the context of arts funding by Henrik Kaare Nielsen (Nielsen 1996, 1999). The application of this theory to arts support is based on the assumption that the community/audience/public finds value in the art form in question in the lifeworld context. Subsequently these three sources—state, civil society, and economy—provide support for the art form found valuable by the surrounding society. Each of them has different aims and reasons for this support that are based on their own values and assumptions. These three value systems will be briefly presented in the following pages, one category at a time, based on interpretations by Habermas (1987), Cohen and Arato (1992), and Nielsen (1996, 1999).

The value system behind support for arts by civil society is the notion of the members of society accepting shared individual responsibility for the things commonly found valuable. That is to say that whoever has the means of providing something found communally valuable is expected to provide it. The judgment for the relative value of things and the amount of support they need, however, is left to the discretion of the individual. In making a decision,



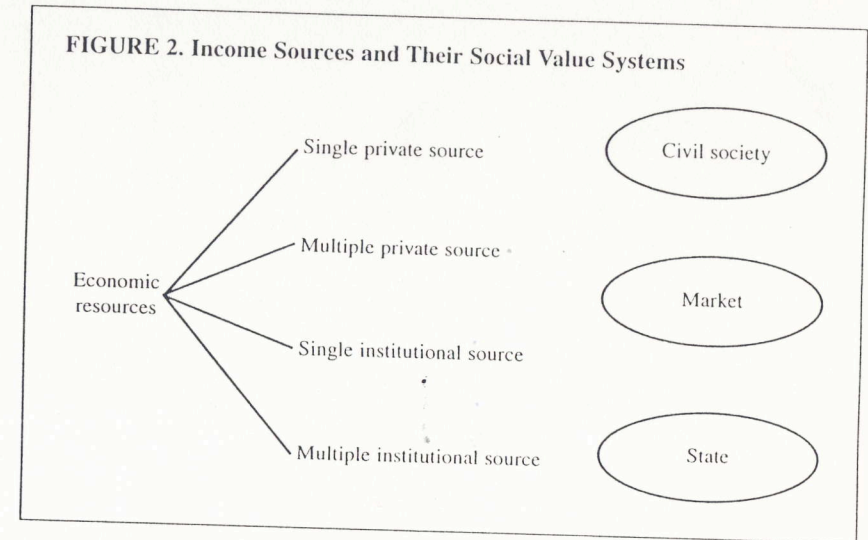
he or she is sensitive to the communal values and to the ethos of shared responsibility for the common good in his or her lifeworld.

The value system behind support from the state is the bureaucratized form of accepting common responsibility for the common good on the system's level. In this form the individuals contribute to the state (normally in the form of taxes) and the state then distributes the funds to provide services according to the priorities decided by the rulers—in democratic societies through a democratic process. In the case of a democracy, the values of competing needs in the society and their relative priorities become a more problematic issue than, for example, in the case of civil society because they need to be made more explicit for them to be commonly discussed and decided by public opinion.

The value system behind support from the economy (the marketplace or market force) is more straightforward. The support is channeled to things found valuable for the individual or organization concerned. The task of prioritizing and valuing the things competing for economic resources is, in the case of the market, a more straightforward process because it involves only one individual or organization that makes the decision on the basis of the greatest good gained in relation to the expenditure.

Closely associated with these categories is the notion of quality—used commonly as a measure of success of an arts organization—as a contextual entity as proposed by Nielsen (1998). He finds three different contexts for discussion of quality: the art institution, the political and economic, and the lifeworld as context. The quality in the context of an arts institution is “determined by a common reference to the ‘institution of art,’ conceived as an esoteric field of praxis with its own criteria for validity based on discourses stemming from expert culture” (1999, 191). In the political and economic context, “the quality of aesthetic artefacts is directly proportional to their ability to attract broad and positive public attention” (1999, 192). In the context of lifeworld, quality is discussed “in connection with, for instance, the concept of *aesthetic experience* and hence as the question of the qualitative features of the dialogic exchange between a certain artefact and the potentials of a certain user shaped by the lifeworld and the life experience of the user” (1999, 192). Naturally, the discussion of quality is very complex and is philosophically less clear-cut than described here. These categories, however, seem useful for analyzing the organizational reality in which opera houses exist, even though they could be further debated in aesthetic-philosophical terms.

With the help of these three categories, therefore, we can analyze the underlying value systems of different sources of income for opera organizations. The model of the socio-economic side of the context in which opera organizations operate is presented in figure 2. The different contextual concepts of quality have not been included directly in the model; however, they will be used in the subsequent analyses.



*The Complete Analytical Model*

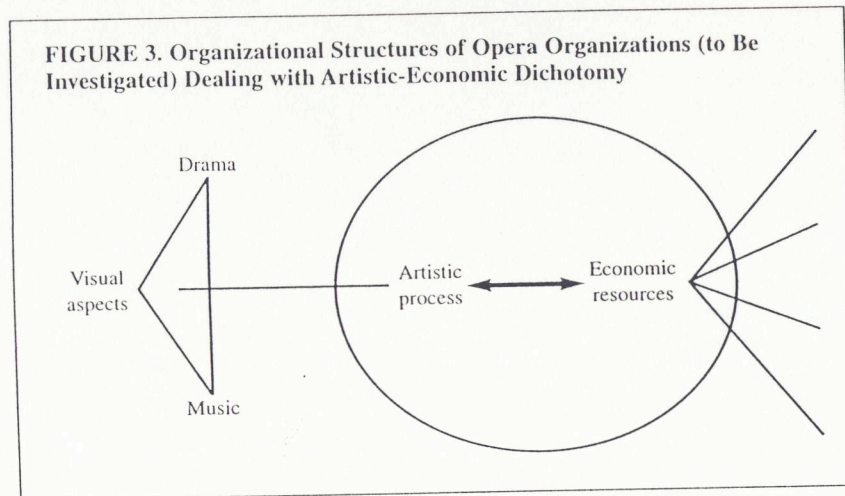
The artistic and socio-economic contexts in which opera organizations need to operate are contemplated in the case-study analyses, which use the two models presented in the preceding pages. The case-study analysis is based on the assumption that the organizations and their structures are strongly influenced by the forces mapped in the models. The core of the complete model (both the artistic model and the economic model) is presented in figure 3.

With the help of figure 3, five case-study organizations have been analyzed in the course of the research project. The aim of the study has been to map the variables defined in the analytical model as far as possible in the cases of individual organizations and to study them to find out if any correlation between those forces and the organizational structures and functioning exists. A set of empirical evidence has been collected regarding the case-study organizations—the Deutsche Oper Berlin, the English National Opera, the Finnish National Opera, the Glyndebourne Festival Opera, and the Opéra national de Paris—involved in the research. Because the scope of this article is too limited and because the conclusions are more interesting, the case-study analyses cannot be presented here. The complete case-study descriptions and data are included in “Unmanageable Opera?” (Auvinen 2000).

**The Main Findings of the Research Project**

On the basis of the case studies conducted during the research project, several observations and conclusions can be made. These are divided into two





different areas: the artistic-economic dichotomy in the organizational structures of opera houses as well as their general frameworks, which incorporate the value systems and the quality assumptions defined previously.

#### Organizational Structures

In the structures of the organizations analyzed, the absence or relative unimportance of the key artistic players in the process (highlighted in the artistic side of the analytical model) seems surprising. It seems unreasonable to assume that the star conductors, stage directors, and singers would accept the place that they have been allocated at the lowest level of the organization charts—needing, in effect, to go through the whole chain of command before reaching the general director. Rather, they should be included in the top layers of the organizations. On the basis of this observation and of the undeniable power and influence that these key players have on the functioning of opera houses (demonstrated, for example, by the fees the organizations are willing to pay for their services), it seems more likely that a dual organizational structure exists in the opera houses concerned. Before suggesting the form this dual organizational structure might take, let us discuss the organizational structures from another point of view.

All of the organizations analyzed have a relatively flat structure consisting of a general manager and a set of directors, each of whom is in charge of a department. The organizations analyzed vary considerably in size, from the 570 employees of the English National Opera to the 1388 employees of the Opéra national de Paris, a fact that naturally influences the complexity of the

organizational structures. There seems, however, to be a common basis for the division within all the organizations. Under the general director, five basic functions exist, sometimes divided among several directors: the managing director, in charge of the financial and organizational issues; the planning and production department (in some cases called artistic administration), in charge of programming and production planning; the music department, in charge of the orchestra and chorus; the ballet department, in charge of the ballet-related matters; and the technical department, in charge of the stages and workshops.

In the case of the Opéra national de Paris, altogether there are seventeen different directors directly under the general director. Because the organization is considerably bigger than the others analyzed, however, the large number of directors is explained by the division of these basic departments into smaller departments. For example, the financial and organizational issues have been divided among six different departments, including human resources, public relations, and broadcasting and recording. None of the organizational structures studied acknowledge any “vertical” interaction among these five “departments” that inevitably must exist for the opera houses to function properly without referring and communicating all the decisions through the general director. This lack of interaction provides further evidence for the claim that a dual organizational structure exists in opera organizations.

Thus, it seems possible to claim that this five-department division—without much reference to the artistic production team—detected in all the case-study organizations implicates the practical synthesis of the artistic-economic dichotomy. The role of the organization is to cater to the artistic production process, managed more or less directly by the general director, who is somewhat outside the organizational domain. The organization facilitates this process (under the temporary artistic authority granted by the general director to the key artists in the production team) with its planning and production, music, ballet, and technical departments. The role of the managing director is then to ensure that the opera house complies with the financial and organizational expectations of the surrounding society. Ensuring compliance is reflected in the structures that outline the resources needed for opera production (in the division of the previously referenced departments) but does not acknowledge the organizational powers of the key artistic personnel in the artistic production process. This lack of acknowledgement leads inevitably to conflicts of and confusions over authority—organizational versus artistic—in the organization, as anyone familiar with the everyday work of an opera house can agree.

#### The Socio-Economic Framework

One of the preliminary assumptions of the research project was that the socio-economic framework in which a specific opera house exists influences its



organizational structure considerably. This is the case on the level of the board of directors but does not seem to be the case with the actual organizational structures—apart from the inevitable value and quality assumptions discussed separately hereinafter. This places the general manager of an opera house in a difficult balancing act between three types of forces: the artistic forces not dealt with directly by his or her organization, the socio-economic forces influencing his organization in the form of the board of directors (or the equivalent) and the audience (or box office), and the organizational or managerial forces (even though in this the managing director can provide a great deal of assistance).

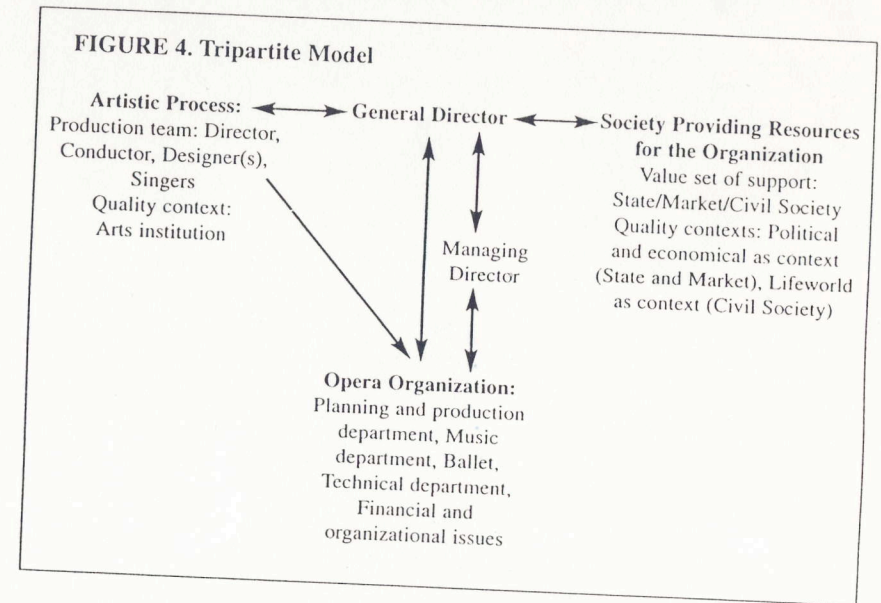
This claim can be supported by brief examples. In the interviews included in the case-study analyses, the directors were asked about the systems by which the artistic production process is and can be controlled. In the answers given, the importance of contracts was stressed—acknowledging, however, that the bargaining power of the key artists extended beyond the legal organizational realm and that in the case of a dispute (artistic or artistic-financial), the general director plays a key role in solving the tensions and in negotiating a solution to the problematic situations. Similarly, in the interviews the representatives of the boards and of the funding bodies stressed the (relative) artistic autonomy of the general directors—admitting, however, that the choice of the director is a key policy decision in the artistic sense. This provides the board with a possibility of influencing the organization and its future policy by this selection.

*The Model Combining the Analytical Model and Case-Study Findings*

On the basis of the preceding argumentation, the organizational forces involved in managing an opera house can be described as a tripartite model with the central role being taken by the general director. This model is presented in figure 4, which is naturally a simplification of any existing situation. For example, figure 4 does not take into account the influence that the audience and society have on the artistic process through communicative interaction not mediated by the opera organization. Furthermore, there is no definite way of determining that the production team's only context for quality discussion is that of the arts institution. The model, however, has been created to analyze the framework in which opera houses exist and in which their organizational structures are shaped. Therefore, it seems possible to claim that the forces—often contradictory—surrounding an opera organization can be mapped and analyzed with its help.

*Examples of Practical Applications of the Model Created*

As a demonstration of the practical usefulness of the model, let us consider some examples of the most frequently occurring problems and controver-



sies affecting opera organizations. These include financial carelessness and mismanagement, problems in the relationship between the general director and the managing director (and the whole discussion as to whether the organizations should be managed by an artist or by a professional manager), and pricing policies. The key to understanding these problems seems to be the value assumptions included in the resources allocated to the organization and the different contexts of quality discussion in which the different instances (stakeholders, if we wish to use the buzzword) operate. The general director is in the position where he or she needs to evaluate the importance of these value sets and the contexts of quality discussion to the organization. His or her success in this balancing act—the determination of the organization's artistic policy and managerial practices—determines the success of the organization.

The relationship between the organization and the artistic-production team (who are assumed to aim for artistic high quality using the arts institution to produce a quality context) has earlier been demonstrated to be mediated by the general director—apart from the direct influence and authority given to the artistic team over the organization to realize the production. Should the general director choose to accept the arts institution as the organization's sole context for quality discourse, the opera house would completely facilitate the artists in their quest. There needs to be a balance found, however, as the organization experiences economic influences, which are state- and market-oriented expectations of accountability and efficiency (with quality in the political and economic context) as well as civil society-oriented expectations by



the society (with quality in the context of lifeworld). The accusations of financial carelessness and mismanagement easily come in when the general director has, from the critic's point of view, misbalanced the equation in favor of the artistic production team, causing the issues of accountability and efficiency to be placed in a secondary position. This easily leads to accusations of mismanagement and financial carelessness when, in effect, the question is about prioritizing the artistic output of the organization rather than the market-oriented expectations of financial accountability.<sup>4</sup>

A general director's inability to successfully balance the expectations of the arts institution with the society providing the resources to his or her organization can, naturally, manifest itself as problems between the general and managing directors, whose primary functions are to assure the efficacy of the opera house in organizational and financial terms. These problems, occurring frequently, have led to different solutions in different value frameworks. For example, on the one hand, in Deutsche Oper Berlin, there seems to be a trend to move from the situation of one "Generalintendant" to the situation of two equal directors. One director would be the artistic director and the other would be the managerial director (Herrmann 1998) in the future. On the other hand, Eyre recommends a move toward a single artistic director (Intendant) at the top of the organization assisted by a general manager at the Royal Opera House rather than a general director with a managerial background, as has been the case recently (Eyre 1998, 106).

It seems, however, that both systems can produce good, as well as catastrophic, results depending on the ability of top management to correctly read the value and quality expectations of the forces influencing their organizations and then to balance them successfully and not on the numbers of, job definitions of, or backgrounds of the top directors. Naturally, a change in the managerial structure of an opera house in difficulties can provide a scapegoat for the parties responsible. Without proper consideration of the value and quality issues in the future management of the organization, however, such a change hardly provides a lasting solution.

The question of pricing—often controversial in opera organizations—can also be analyzed with the assistance of the preceding model. First, the overall question concerning the size of the expenditure of the organization—which then needs to be recouped through the box office or through other means—is inevitably linked with the artistic policy of the organization and the weight given to the artistic quality concept. As Mark Blaug has demonstrated (1976), the artistic expenditure of an opera house is greatly influenced by the artistic quality of the artists employed (assuming that there exists at least a rudimentary correlation between artists' fees and their artistic quality), which therefore leads the artistic policy to have a considerable effect on the expenditure of the organization. This effect subsequently needs to be bal-

anced by the resources attainable from the three income sources: market, state, and civil society.

The problem with this equation is that all these income sources have different value and quality assumptions that often can be contradictory. In the cases of organizations that are heavily subsidized by state authorities—the case with most of the case-study organizations—this equation becomes relatively simple because there are just two value sets, the state and the market (in the form of the box office), to consider in setting the prices. Even though the logic of setting the admission prices is opposite in these cases (low for state support to maintain accessibility and as high as possible for market to attain maximum receipts), they both endorse high attendance figures (a shared context of quality concept). Thus, the balance needs to be struck between these two aims and the prices set to the point where maximum attendance is combined with reasonable, but high enough, ticket prices.

The price setting, however, becomes more difficult and causes more drifts when there is not one clear source of economic power and when the civil society is an additional source of income, as is the case, for example, at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. The 1996/97 figures for the Royal Opera income sources were box office, 46 percent; Arts Council subsidy, 35 percent; private funding (donations and sponsorship), 12 percent; and other commercial income, 7 percent (based on Eyre 1998, 142). It is easy to notice that the importance of the box office figure endorses high ticket prices when the rationale for public support (the bureaucratic form of accepting common responsibility for the common good) strongly contradicts this.

An additional force in this balancing act and negotiation process is the involvement of corporate sponsors and private benefactors (representing an exclusive sector of the civil society) adding their value assumptions and quality concepts to the equation. As has been seen recently, this balance has not been successfully struck. It seems reasonable to claim, therefore, that the power basis needs to go either toward a market-civil society combination (or, in the case of the Royal Opera House, an exclusive section of the power basis) or a state-civil society combination (the civil society sector endorsing the importance of the aesthetic experience) to simplify the set of value assumptions and quality contexts in which it needs to operate and to set its admission prices.

## Conclusion

I hope that I have shed light on the way in which the model describing the artistic and socio-economic framework in which opera organizations operate can assist in analyzing the actual managerial and policymaking problems surrounding them. The goal has not been to claim that the model has discovered any new issues around opera organizations. It is hoped that my analysis can



help to name and map these forces and thus assist in dealing with them in organizational reality and in discussing them in an academic context.

#### NOTES

1. The complete term could be *artistic-socio-economic-organizational dichotomy*. For the sake of practicality, however, the term *economic* will be used in this connection, especially when the economic issues seem often to dominate the sociological and organizational issues. Furthermore, the source of economic power is used as the basis of the analysis of society's influence on the case-study organizations. In the analytical model, however, the social value systems will be included in the analysis of the economic resources used by them.

2. The term *private* here refers to private individuals as opposed to private institutions. The distinction between this usage of the term and the way in which term private is used in the theory of Habermas hereinafter should be born in mind.

3. *Institutional* here means all bodies that are not private individuals (i.e., belonging to the life-world), such as commercial enterprises, states.

4. An example of this can be found in the Deutsche Oper Berlin, where Generalintendant Friedrich arranges according to priority the artistic quality over the political- and market-oriented quality, which thereby leads the organization (at least semideliberately) into deficit. However, he can use his artistic power as a prominent figure of the opera world as a bargaining tool with the Senate Arts Administration, which—until 1999—was unwilling to face the public outcry that would follow from letting him go, despite the systematically occurring deficits.

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## Reflections on the Space of Flows: The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

MARJORIE RAUEN

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (GMB) has focused international attention on a depressed and deteriorated industrial city in the Basque region of Spain. Greeted with almost unanimous enthusiasm and declared the defining structure of late-twentieth-century architecture, the highly successful GMB has come to symbolize the economic regeneration of a dilapidated nineteenth-century industrial region that, in recent years, had been most notable for the terrorist acts committed by a radical separatist group. The location of Frank O. Gehry's extraordinary building in such an unremarkable and incongruous site, however, consistently raises the question, from both its many admirers and its few detractors, of whether the GMB belongs—conceptually, physically, and politically—in Bilbao.

Does the "Guggenheim Bilbao sit [. . .] like a landed spaceship in one of the former industrial parts of the city" (Becker 1999, 23), or does, "for all its iconoclastic energy, the museum sit [. . .] comfortably in gritty, industrial terrain surrounded by aging buildings, rail yards, bridges, and the waters of the Nervion River" (Henderson 1998, 32)? Does this building address its context with ingenious sensitivity, and/or is it out of scale and overwhelming? Is its strangeness in Bilbao problematic or brilliant and effective? Can an American museum in Bilbao reflect "Basqueness," or is its presence there merely a new form of cultural imperialism? All manifestations of these questions, however, rely on traditional constructions of political and geographic locality to which the GMB only tentatively conforms. A more useful understanding of this building, and perhaps of the others that may follow, is gained by recognizing

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