



CHRISTINA KOCI HERNANDEZ / The Chronicle

Orpheus members Eric Wyrick and Liang-Ping How chatted prior to a rehearsal observed by UC Berkeley business school students.

Striking a chord with future MBAs

Leaderless ensemble talks teamwork

By *Joshua Kosman*
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They came bearing violins and oboes, French horns and double basses. They came with an organizational model that they figured the future corporate moguls at Berkeley's Haas School of Business could learn something from.

Instead of "Who moved my cheese?" they asked questions like, "That opening melody has a nice shape, but why would we want to separate the second note from the third?"

The musicians of the New York-based Orpheus Chamber Orchestra swung by Berkeley last Thursday on their way to a weekend concert in Davies Symphony Hall, just to show some 100 young MBAs-in-training how to run an orchestral rehearsal without a conductor.

And the audience members — who are more accustomed to being addressed by such luminaries

as Alan Greenspan or Charles Schwab president and co-CEO David Pottruck — were entranced. Either that, or really, really polite.

Not that playing Haydn symphonies is apt to figure very prominently in anybody's future career — although an informal show of hands at the beginning of the afternoon-long seminar suggested that about half the students present had some musical training.

But for nearly 30 years, Orpheus has been a sort of trailblazer, from the perspective of organizational behavior, by performing symphonies and concertos — often quite intricate ones — without a conductor's guiding hand. And the strategies the group has developed for working together might well have some kind of applicability in the wider corporate world.

That, at least, was the theory behind the seminar and behind "Leadership Ensemble," a book published this year by the orches-

Orpheus guides without a leader

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tra's executive director, Harvey Seifter (the former artistic director of San Francisco's Magic Theatre), and business writer Peter Economy that offers "Lessons in Collaborative Management."

So the musicians unpacked their instruments in the auditorium of Berkeley's International House and showed how to put together the first movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 63 — without any help from a guy with a big stick (and usually a big ego to go with it).

First, a "core group" of nine players ran through the movement and identified some of the key interpretive issues that were likely to arise. How fast should the movement go? What would be a good phrasing for the opening melody? At a particularly rambunctious moment, would it be more effective to relax a bit, or to ramp up the intensity even further?

This was what violinist Ronnie Bauch called "choreographing the leadership." It's less important to iron out all the details, he suggested, than to make sure everyone knows the piece and where the critical junctures are.

With that segment done, the entire 22-member orchestra gathered to run through the piece again — and now there

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JOHN MCGEEHAN of Morgan Stanley, observing the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business

were plenty more countries heard from.

"I like this tempo," said one violinist, "but it almost feels like presto instead of allegro — the last notes of all the phrases are getting obliterated."

"In a traditional orchestra," Seifter told the students, "the violas never tell the bassoons what they think of what they're doing. It simply isn't done.

"But we break that taboo every day."

The results, he said, are beneficial not only artistically but psychologically as well. He cited a 1996 study by Harvard professor Richard Hackman that assessed the job satisfaction of people in different walks of life.

"In this study, orchestral musicians ranked just below federal prison guards in job satisfaction. After all, you've trained for years to be able to do this thing, and you find yourself in a situation where your superior stands on a podium so he's taller than you, and communicates by waving a wooden stick at you."

But if anyone imagined that pure consensus-building was likely to take root in the business world, the corporate bigwigs who witnessed the orchestral demonstration — including Pottruck and John McGeehan of Morgan Stanley, which funded the affair — soon put that idea to rest.

"Democracy, though a wonderful model, is awfully hard," McGeehan observed.

And Pottruck, though he had praise aplenty for the sense of teamwork and the "emotional intelligence" on display, was quick to point out that in the real world, "we can't afford the inefficiency of the democratic process."

The afternoon's best question came from one student who was curious to know whether after all the insight they'd offered their audience, the musicians themselves had got anything out of the seminar — "aside from the cash flow?"

"Yes," said Bauch, clearly unable to elaborate further.

"Yes," said violinist Eric Wyrick, equally stumped.

Such as?

"Well, getting to answer questions like that one."

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