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AUSTRIA: general report on orchestra scene / union situation
Orchestra Vereinigte Bühnen Wien



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Esteemed members of ICSOM, it's a great honor for me to be here,
to join you all at the conference and share information with you !

As the schedule is rather tight I'll focus on just 3 topics:

First, to give a brief overview of the main issues of Austria's present orchestra scene, taking into consideration the issue of European Union Labor legislation according to the so-called 4 freedoms of movement: the free movement of goods, of services and freedom of establishment, of capital, and – last but not least: of persons (and citizenship), including free movement of workers and their impact on our business.

Second, to outline our artists' representative organizations, such as the union, guilds, and initiatives, but mainly the union, which is responsible for collective bargaining agreements.

Third, and last, but not least, to give you a short report on the present situation of the orchestra of Vereinigte Bühnen Wien, where I am not only a member but also on the works council. I'd like to touch on our upcoming negotiations of our labor agreements as well as on the future of our orchestra.

Regarding the permanent threats your orchestras in the US constantly face, the orchestra scene in Austria - at first glance - seems to be quite calm and steady. Except for the closure of a small musical theatre 10 years ago (which resulted in the dismissal of 25 musicians) none of the heavily subsidized orchestras have had to suffer losing a significant number of permanent posts, bankruptcy or greater financial cuts. Although in 2009, the Radio Symphony Orchestra's sacrosanct position was seriously jeopardized when the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation ORF threatened to withdraw its financial support.

Fortunately this plan never become reality, mainly due to a quite massive public reaction which strongly supported the orchestra. Unfortunately, no noteworthy signs of support for the Radio Symphony came from the other Austrian orchestras...

In this context it's also worth mentioning that recently the merger of 2 of the 13 German Radio Orchestras has been announced, which in the long run means the loss of numerous positions in the orchestra and about a \$ 7 Mio annual savings for the public service broadcaster.

Back to Austria: as pointed out before, the relevant issues of Austria's few bigger Vienna or regional orchestras are limited to contractual details such as the annual number of rehearsals and performances, details of travel regulations, and royalties, among others. Obviously the former extensive touring of the symphonies has become limited due to budget reasons.

As some of you still might regard our orchestra scene as a kind of paradise, you should know that the freelance musicians' scene in the orchestra sector on the other hand looks quite different. Twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, and the subsequent freedom of movement for people according to EU legislation, we currently face a one-way labor migration in the orchestra sector. This labor migration is from East to West, and not the other way around.

Austria is surrounded by three former communist countries: Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary, where the GDP (Gross domestic product) as well as living costs and average incomes are still much lower than in Austria. For example the Vienna Mozart Orchestra still offers for its mainly Austrian musicians about \$ 160,-- per concert, while its competitors who hire people from Eastern European countries sometimes just offer \$ 55,-per concert, without the need of any work permits.

The renowned Wagner Festival in Erl in Tirol f.e. relies on Ukrainian musicians, pretending to be a regular Austrian festival orchestra, who work for a daily „all-in“ fee of 30,-- to 40,-- Dollars plus accommodations.

It's the same with another popular opera festival near Vienna, where the Romanian musicians receive a compensation of 50,- Dollars, and are sometimes housed in windowless containers.

Let me please add that the destruction of the freelance orchestra market and its reasonable wages isn't only caused by an almost uncontrolled influx of east European musicians, but is also due to the business policy of the large subsidized orchestras to present and often promote themselves for the price of receiving „rock bottom wages“ just to get their running costs covered .

To touch on a further issue: some of the youth orchestras do not only exist for educational reasons, but very often present themselves as well-run business-minded enterprises. Let me also mention that most of the so called „Orchesterakademien“ (orchestra academies) within the big orchestras often don't tackle educational tasks but just replace permanent posts of retired colleagues with cheaper labor. But even highly skilled Austrian musicians in chamber orchestras and baroque ensembles like Martin Haselböck's *Wiener Akademie Orchestra* suffer from poor wages of 80 to 100 Dollars a concert, which is less than what some of the private promoters of local tourist concerts are willing to pay.

In short: the whole scene reflects a severe disparity between privileged orchestra members of the few permanent symphony / opera orchestras and thousands of colleagues, who can't make their living in the arts anymore and who therefore often have to take on any kind of work in order to survive.

To anticipate your upcoming question: what about the Austrian musicians' union ?!

In most of the cases I just mentioned the union was not present at all !

You should be aware that 6 years ago the artists' union in Austria was nearly on the brink of bankruptcy. In order to survive it had to merge with the municipal civil servant union, a group that's at least six times larger than that of the artists.

The new head of the merged organization is an electrical technician. This man is also a politician currently holding a position in the leading political party in the city parliament where he might be forced to vote for cuts in the cultural sector, while as a union leader he would have to fight against those same cuts. A good example of a conflict of interest.

For the whole eastern half of Austria there is only one fully-employed union representative in charge. The union is therefore almost incapable of intervening, let alone being willing to investigate musicians' claims. That's why more and more orchestra musicians are turning away from the union and no significant number of young musicians are joining it. In our orchestra, f.e., the percentage of union members is therefore less than 30%. The Vienna Philharmonic meanwhile lives in a world of superlatives, but unfortunately fails to back smaller ensembles. It also does nothing to create and enhance opportunities for further union work. Individual orchestra representatives of big Austrian orchestras just meet once or twice a year with no noticeable results for their fellow members. Conferences like ICSOM don't exist in Austria.

Now, just a short digression and a few thoughts concerning future trends for the Austrian/European theatre/orchestra industry:

As mentioned before: as both federal and municipal budgets are shrinking in European countries, more and more public funding for the arts has to be justified. Currently, the revolutionary, innovative repertoire of a theatre/opera house, the proficiency of the symphony's musicians or the relevance of their education initiatives are difficult to be evaluated. Arts funding is currently based mainly on economic numbers: Ebit (earnings before interest and taxes) ROI (return on investment), box office revenues, theatre capacity, and impact on tourism. But more and more, the criteria is changing with key topics being: balanced score card, „dual controlling“, SROI- „social return on investment“ and last but not least quality management, which till now was mostly known in the context of education, health-care and research.

The renowned German baroque ensemble „Concerto Köln“ came up with a quality management certification, proving its proficiency in organizational procedures. Innovative quality management might soon be used as the preferred assessment criteria for political representatives to decide who will receive sufficient funds. In addition, matching grants, crowd-funding and hopefully private foundations will increasingly become relevant for future funding of Austrian arts institutions. In a nutshell: after a period of emphasizing “audiencing”, all kinds of community programs or digital marketing, we will also have to tackle issues like different forms of funding, quality management and cultural branding.

That leads me to the third topic, the situation of the Orchestra of Vereinigte Bühnen Wien, which I am a member of. This cultural institution consists of 3 historical theatres and receives the main part of Vienna's municipal culture funds (Vienna State Opera being subsidized by the Austrian Federal Government!).

Nevertheless, Theater an der Wien -- Vienna's third opera house (which alone needs more than half of VBW's \$ 55 Mio subsidies) has no permanently employed orchestra. There are just varying co-operations with the Vienna Symphony as well the Radio Symphony Orchestra, among others, to play in the pit.

But: two other theatres – both historical venues - the Ronacher theatre and the Raimund theatre, mainly offer German-language performances of successful international musical theatre productions. The orchestra of the Vereinigte Bühnen Wien, whose roots date back to 1965, has made a significant contribution to Vienna's continually growing importance as a musical metropolis in the German-speaking world. It consists of 75 musicians (the full-time equivalent is 56) and is a compilation of rock, pop, jazz and classical musicians from 15 different countries.

It has also made a name for itself in film music, operettas and modern chamber operas, as well as in concert series both at home and abroad, featuring vocalists like Thomas Hampson or Dawn Upshaw or performing with jazz stars like Joe Zawinul or Dave Brubeck. The orchestra is permanently employed and has been granted 2 year-labor agreements, which are usually renewed every 2 years unless they are terminated within the standard period of notice.

Finally, due to municipal budget cuts, the Vereinigten Bühnen Wien, along with its orchestra, is currently facing a cut of up to 10% of its subsidies for 2016 and beyond. Moreover the orchestra has been hit by negative impacts of the digital revolution and the development of synthesized theatrical sound design. While in the past, instrumentalists like harpists, bassoonists, and, some percussionists were permanently employed, they have been laid off and replaced with synthesizers.

But most painfully, the orchestra itself now lacks the vision of a prosperous future based on diversification in programming (outside the pit), audiencing and being relevant for the community. Thus the artistic crisis may soon meet its financial sibling.

To briefly summarize: if the budget cuts become true this fall, one of the two musical theatres might be shut down and the orchestra might become decimated and reduced to a 20-piece pit band.

This is why I recently have joined the orchestra's works council again to try to contribute my part to a better future!
Finally, I hope that I was able to give you a rough impression of the Austrian orchestra / musical theatre scene.

Thank you for your attention !