

# Symphonic Focus

## Many Hats Behind the Music: For Librarians, It's a Constant Work in Progress

They typically start their day long before the rest of their colleagues, their work involves longer hours, and they don't enjoy the same lengthy summer break. They often read orchestral scores, possess a working knowledge of most instruments, and can quickly solve complex technical and logistical problems--yet most still aren't covered under their orchestra's collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

Who are these tireless fount of expertise? Music directors? No. Orchestra managers? Hardly. Ann Argodale of Local 125 (Norfolk, VA) is one of these people. She is the Virginia Symphony Orchestra's hardworking principal librarian, and her hectic life provides ample evidence of just how crucial the job is to the basic functioning of the organization.

### No Typical Days

Actually, it's tough to follow a typical day in Argodale's life because, as she is quick to point out, "I have no typical days." The only real guarantee is that once the alarm clock goes off, her day will be a long one.

"I do have a typical work flow for each program," she explains. "A great deal of preparation goes into getting music on the stands for the orchestra. I've isolated some 22 separate steps, each charted with a specific completion date. First and foremost is a lot of research." Even before the orchestra's repertoire is set for the season, Argodale and her assistant Paula Bonds have to provide the VSO's management with relevant information on the pieces they want to program. "They need to know, among other things, the exact instrumentation to calculate labor costs, and purchase or rental costs of the music."

She points out that while the VSO has a fairly extensive library, the orchestra's music director JoAnn Falletta (also of Local 125) is a firm proponent of new music. "It's often a challenge to track down specific new composers and their works, and it's a similar quest for obscure composers. Sometimes a particular edition is difficult to find. Rental costs can range from little to exorbitant, so the management cannot make final repertoire decisions until they have all my research. I also have to examine the parts we do own, to make sure the sets are complete and in usable condition."

## **Party Time**

"Once the budget is finalized," continues Argodale, "I order music for purchase, reserve rentals, and retrieve music from our stacks." Bear in mind that all of this work has taken place before the orchestra's season has even begun. "The next step is to pass the string parts to our concertmaster, who marks his bowings. I then copy the first violin part and provide each of the other string principals with their part plus a copy of what the concertmaster did. After that, I retrieve their parts, and then the party begins."

The party, in this case, being the transfer of bowing markings to every single string part in the set--for every piece to be performed.

"It is the most tedious job there is, and it must be accurate," says Argodale. "Paula, thankfully, is the only librarian I've ever met who actually enjoys marking bowings. Sometimes there are inadequate rehearsal markings in the parts, so we'll add them also, either by making them up or taking them from another edition. Then there are the inevitable errors to correct from one edition to the next, parts that may need to be transposed into a different key on the computer, and repairs that have to be made to our own parts, since paper tends to deteriorate over time."

Making new concert suites out of old ones for Falletta's VSO programs is another common task, says Argodale. "Of course, the only practical way for the orchestra to perform them is to make completely new parts, which involves a lot of photocopying, cutting, and pasting."

Finally, Argodale reaches the point where the parts are available to the players. Even this involves work. "I publish a play sheet: a list of repertoire, movements, and concert information. On the back is a copy of the rehearsal schedule, and since we have string rotation, I'll get a seating roster from the orchestra's personnel manager, make labels reflecting the seating, and finally assemble everything into folders."

## **Finished? Not Nearly**

"After the library work is finished I take off my accounting and shipping clerk hat, put away my copyist hat, and then dust off and slap on my courier hat," she continues. "We don't own our own concert hall, so the music must be transported from the library to orchestra rehearsals."

Argodale is also required to be on hand during scheduled rehearsals, in case of problems. "If things need to be fixed, I have to be around to put out fires," she laughs. This necessitates another quick change into her fireman's hat. "Occasionally a bad page turn will need to be photocopied on the spot, or JoAnn will ask that an excerpt from the 1st violin part be played also by the 2nd violins. At least we now have a copy machine in the hall. Before, I would have had to run like heck to the nearest Kinko's."

Rehearsal over, Argodale takes a long walk in downtown Norfolk to clear her head, then sits down to drink a strong cup of coffee and to reflect on the direct correlation between the work of an orchestra librarian and the orchestra's capacity to perform to the best of its ability.

"It is very apparent to me that our preparation in the library is of vital importance to the way the orchestra functions," says Argodale. "If they receive their music at a late date, have to struggle to read their parts, or have to spend time in rehearsal making changes, it diminishes their performance abilities. Truly, an orchestra can only be as good as its librarians."

## **Yet More Hats--But Minimal Protection**

After the preparation, rehearsals, and cleanup, Argodale's work *still* isn't done. Other responsibilities of her position include maintaining the orchestra's database of music holdings, archival recordings, and performance history. She also updates the part of the calendar that lists repertoire and instrumentation, and occasionally takes on time-consuming special projects that may or may not involve remuneration. For all this, her weekly salary is far below that of the VSO players. Furthermore, like many fellow orchestra librarians, she currently doesn't receive the same union benefits even though she's been a member in good standing since 1979.

"MOLA, the Major Orchestra Librarians Association, has been fighting hard for this very issue," Argodale explains. "We've been pushing to get librarians included in orchestra CBAs. Each orchestra tackles the issue individually with their respective AFM local, but it has been an uphill battle because of the ongoing perception among management that librarians don't contribute to the orchestra in the same way that performers do."

She is nevertheless enthusiastic about the benefits of her job. "In my spare time I am a trombonist, conductor, and orchestrator, and I have learned a great deal as a result of working as an orchestra librarian," she says. "That has really kept me motivated. Moreover, JoAnn Falletta is a wonderful person to work with, and there is no better teacher than practical experience and observing a good leader."

Still, Argodale thinks even the best conductors (and orchestra managers) could learn a few things from a stint in the orchestra library.

"I think they should see just what is involved in getting the orchestra's music on the stands. They'd realize that everyone in the orchestra does a different job--the wind players do a different job from the percussionists, who do a different job from the violinists, etc. Librarians simply do yet another job, just like anyone else in the orchestra. We may not be performing with the orchestra, but if it weren't for us, the orchestra wouldn't perform. They'd definitely gain a new appreciation for what we do."