Bill Skidmore

High quality performances from “community” musical groups: the sometimes conflicting personal and musical requirements for a high level of performance combined with sustainable personal satisfaction in a long surviving musical group. The case of The London Jazz Orchestra

ABSTRACT

Sociological functionalist theory provides a suggestive array of ideas with which to conceptualize any social structure. Starting with the idea that any structure must perform certain functions in order to survive and fulfill its task, this sociological model sets any subject social structure in its “environment” of other similar social structures, regarding the whole as a “social system.” In the language of one prominent theorist of functionalism, survival of any structure in a social system requires the abstract functions of “adaptation,” “goal attainment,” “integration,“ and “pattern maintenance” all to be continually performed successfully. These structural level requirements provide the definitions of abstract roles which must operate throughout the lifetime of the subject social structure. Functional models work well for task group structures, military units, and the like, although close examination of such groups usually exposes important instances of group sustainability requiring contradictory or even non-functional roles to be performed. A community musical organization, members of which want to perform at their highest possible musical level, while obtaining for themselves substantial reward in both musical and personal terms, can easily develop contradictory role demands. Over its twenty-two years of existence, The London Jazz Orchestra has developed methods of handling these conflicting demands which may be analyzed from the point of view of the general functionalist model. Some practical conclusions may be drawn from this analysis.

The London Jazz Orchestra is a group of like-minded musicians living in, or near, London, Ontario. Most, but not all, of these players have university degrees in music and most of these teach music in local schools. Those who do not fit this description are either yet too young, being in university currently, or in some cases high school, or they are older players who have considerable musical experience gained in the military, as leaders or sidemen in

bands and jazz groups, either professional or amateur, over many years. The age range of the players is quite wide, ranging from late teens to well into the 70's, and occasionally even older. Over the years the players have been mostly men, but there have been notably brilliant female players in the band from time to time. Historically, jazz playing has been a male pursuit, the main exception to this being female jazz vocalists. This is worth noting in connection with The London jazz Orchestra because while the band is, and has been, mostly men, there is no male exclusiveness about this, and when a woman musician turns up who has the inclination to play the kind of material the band plays, she is welcomed as a musician. The music and the players' attitudes toward it have emerged as the unstated controlling factors in band membership.

The London Jazz Orchestra is a "rehearsal band." Like many community orchestras, choirs, chamber groups, concert bands or rock groups, the band essentially exists to please its members. It has no particular functions as a public entertainment unit which require it to make itself available for commercial functions or to play material conforming to any strain of public taste. Since no one in the band is ever paid for their services (indeed, there is almost no source of income for the band), the members' satisfaction has remained the controlling motivating factor for continued membership. Although sources of public funding exist, these usually come with conditions or requirements which have seemed too remote from the reasons the band exists, or too annoying, to have been pursued thus far. This independent attitude, perhaps more characteristic of jazz musicians than other kinds, has emerged as a defining factor in the development of the band's identity and the various roles that have emerged inside the band among its members.

The band was started in 1988 as an outgrowth of a previous band which collapsed when its leader retired. In the beginning there was no particular encompassing vision of what the band would become or how it would progress. The intention was simply to keep on playing the book, add new material as this became possible and to hold enough local musicians sufficiently interested to keep the band alive.

Fairly soon after 1988 an attitude emerged among the musicians in the band which was unrecognized as significant at the time, but which turned out to be a defining factor in the band's development and endurance over the years. This was the boredom that comes from playing undemanding entertainment music repeatedly. The departure of musicians from time to time, and the need to replace them with competent players, combined with the lack of a commercial reason to exist and a lack of funding set the overall conditions for the emergence of an identity by which the band has become known and has defined the emerging roles performed by the various band members. The restlessness about playing older established jazz material, together with the band's desire to attract and hold better musicians combined to define The London Jazz Orchestra as a band that would seek to play more complicated and demanding jazz repertoire and attract players able and willing to do this. These factors tended to mean that the band would have younger players in it than the

typical “swing band” community group, and that it would play material written or arranged by contemporary musicians, while not abandoning the material, and the ideals, of the bands that defined band jazz styles after World War II. This does not make The London Jazz Orchestra a “lab band” exactly. But the band does have material that was written for it, and it plays the occasional composition or arrangement produced by its own members. The London Jazz Orchestra lies somewhere in the nexus defined by “community jazz band,” “concert jazz ensemble,” “rehearsal band” and “night club big band.”

In the more formal terms of social science, a group ‘structure’ emerged naturally, in the processes involving the member’s continued activity in, and satisfaction with, The London Jazz Orchestra. The band developed into an entity in its own right, apart from the identities of its members. In so doing it created for itself a collection of requirements necessary for its continued existence. This development is very much in line with the expectations about social groups developed over many years of anthropological and sociological observation in many settings. Some of these general propositions about social groups came to be called “structuralism,” or later “structural-functionalism” in the sociology of the mid- twentieth century.

To the extent that these general proposals about social groups describe something real and concrete, they may be useful as guidelines for developing community groups and they may be suggestive about how to organize groups, or what to expect to happen in them. Musicians probably constitute a special category of people, and music probably places special demands on the social organization of those who participate in it. Thus, the emergence of special social functions in the band that may be formally designated as “roles” and understood as aspects of some general principles of social organization may be interesting or useful.

As briefly and clearly put as humanly possible, the standard model of sociological functionalism as a general theory of social organization says the following: Enduring social arrangements which become recognizable as “social structures” experience requirements for their continued existence and healthy functioning, just like biological organisms do. They place demands on those who participate in them which come not from the conscious minds of any authorities or particular individuals of any kind---or at least not directly. These demands exist as facets of the organization itself. An analogy from the biological world would be the need of an animal to feed itself. Obviously, animals do not eat because they take a free decision to eat, or because they are told to eat by some authority animal. They eat because their continuing functioning requires it. In this they do not have “free will.” They are under the irresistible direction of their whole biological being to perform several actions to ensure their continued existence---one of which is feeding.

The theories of human social organization that follow this particular model all explain the “roles,” or routinized activities the organization itself requires of at least some members of

the organization to ensure its continued existence. That is to say, there are “functions” that need to be performed, and these functions are not a matter of preference or necessarily even conscious definition. In The London Jazz Orchestra these role prescriptions arise out of the music itself. Thus, the structure of The London Jazz Orchestra was “discovered” rather than planned. The various intentions and needs of the members of the group became impersonally organized into a “role structure,” all of which, taken together constitute the “structure” of the group. (See end note 1)

In a nutshell, this is functionalism. The diverse and individually held conscious needs and intentions of members of a group become organized into understandable and routinized expectations called “roles” which develop because of the nature of the organization itself, and not because any particular dictator says they must develop, or that they should develop the particular way they do. More formal role definitions may, or may not, come along later. Bureaucracies approximate a polar case of social structures which have formalized rules. Entities such as The London Jazz Orchestra represent the opposite polar case of structured organizations that remain very informally organized, and in which roles remain fluid, but the demands of the organization do not.

Practical experience shows, or course, that simple sociological models applied to real world social groups often do not fare well. In the case of the London Jazz Orchestra, roles have emerged which seem required, but which compete and can be inimical to each other. This arises out of the fact that the band has what may be regarded as two sets of competing goals.

Broadly speaking, one set of goals has to do with the areas of personal satisfaction and enjoyment of a night out playing music. Social activities such as playing music might involve personality conflict among the band members, varying self-perceptions, uneven musical abilities, personal knowledge of essentially irrelevant facts about each other and the fact that most of the band members work in the local schools, and thus have known identities in a wider context that includes them, as well as mere personal preferences about people. Any factors of this kind, in addition to all the positive reasons for which individuals gather, affect the group’s likelihood of success and endurance.

For The London Jazz Orchestra, a musical group with moderately serious intentions, a much more problematic set of goals have entirely to do with music. All the band members have, or want to acquire and extend, experience playing a subtle and nuanced form of art music that almost entirely defies description in formal terms, and which forever remains an aspect of musical artistic taste. Broad preferences in jazz style and artistic period (swing, bebop, jazz fusion, Latin jazz, New Orleans blues, Chicago blues, New York blues, jazz-rock, through composed jazz oriented compositions designed consciously as art music, period style

arrangements mimicking the sounds of various jazz ensembles, such as “Basie style” or “Kenton style,”…the list goes on)… and playing abilities are bound up in each player’s suitability to the band and its suitability to them. Developing recognizable and understandable roles in a band where the music is so subtle and diverse, and where the satisfaction of the band members may be quite individually unique, is a complicated business.

In addition to the sorts of incipient conflict implied by the broadly varying preferences and qualities of the band members, the more common aspects of jazz ensemble playing (indeed making music in any kind of ensemble), must somehow be managed, directed and drawn from band members in order to produce a quality performance. These include all those aspects of playing that involve precision, following a lead player, dynamic balance and control, interpretation of complicated syncopated phrases, matching articulation and so on. Not all good players are equal in these talents. And although they are all good players, they do not all see these aspects of music in the same way, nor do they all pay similar attention to them.

The above brief discussion gives a flavor of the conflict in role emergence (to use sociological language) that is always possible with The London jazz Orchestra. In fact, the band has evolved a quite pleasant social feel and does not suffer unduly from conflict or tension arising from personality or musical differences. Over the years this situation has developed because the band has always regarded the requirements placed on the group by the music itself to be of paramount importance. Functionalist theory suggests that the roles emerging in a social group are defined by attitude toward role requirements rather than by specific prescriptions of activity. The fact that The London Jazz Orchestra has come to define itself as a musical unit, and not necessarily a “social group,” emphasizes the predominance of musical demands, rather than social ones, on the role structure developed in the band.

This situation has lead, over time, to a division in leadership roles and the leadership demands implied by them have emerged in the band more or less unconsciously, and certainly not by specific design. In The London Jazz Orchestra, this divides “leader’ into two. These roles are filled by two different people, who do not conflict with each other in their own individual areas of authority or experience, but who must compliment each other musically. These roles are called Music Director and Leader. Some community musical groups attempt to mix musical authority with organizational and personal authority in one role. This seems to be a dangerous way to proceed.

In the London Jazz Orchestra the musical authority, without which the band would fail in its main objective of attracting and holding fine players, is located in its Music Director. The Music Director’s authority, from a formal point of view, is confined to matters of music choice, performance, style, and the development of these in rehearsal. These role demands closely approach the “informal” pole of sociological organization of the band. The Music

Director carries considerable musical authority with the band members, which has been built up and demonstrated through his considerable performance ability, both in the usual aspects of performance, and in improvisation and special jazz-playing talents. Through his skill as a musical colleague and friend, he must lead by example and demonstration, as well as by respect and recognition of the musical qualities of the other band members. But perhaps curiously, he may not demand respect. It must be freely given, as it mostly is in The London Jazz Orchestra. He has no fund of rewards or incentives he can draw on to entice band members to see the music his way, or play it according to his preferences. His authority comes entirely from his musical qualities and his ability to generate understanding and attract respect for this from his musical colleagues. Leadership of this kind is very subtle, but it is the overall prime functional need placed on his role by the band as a musical unit.

The role The London Jazz Orchestra calls Leader very much more approximates the formal polar case of sociological organization. This role encompasses almost all the utility functions of formal authority faced by any group. Arranging for band rehearsals when necessary, transporting materials, communications among band members, arranging for band substitutes, making and following up on band engagements, and negotiating most aspects of the band's interface with the public, and most other things that crop up that do not have directly to do with the music director's role fall to the Leader.

There are some aspects of the division of leadership in the band that highlight its complexity and suggest the simple sociological model's inadequacy to describe these. The Leader's role often includes personnel selection and criticism. A person who does not "fit in" by ignoring the music director's authority, or failing to communicate, or worst of all, who has musical proclivities which do not mesh with the band members' collective understanding and preferences about jazz has to be "moved out," and similar people who might succeed him have to be avoided. This sort of thing would undercut the Music Director's authority and disrupt the good relations he requires to make good music. The functions of Leader in cases like this have to be kept entirely separate from those of Music Director.

Similarly, the Music Director must be seen to rely on the Leader for practical functions and must generally agree with his activities and decisions. If the musical authority in the band came to cut across its organizational authority, or vice versa, both functions would suffer and the band would very likely lose valued members.

Further complicating the relationship between the two leadership roles is that the Music Director must be regarded and recognized for his supreme musical value and qualities, but the Leader must also be a credible musician. He must be recognized in the band as being in

basic sympathy with the Music Director in all his musical decisions, and as capable of following his directions. If this were not so, the Leader could not lead. He would become an incredible band member and his authority in his own field would disappear.

The London Jazz Orchestra has smoothed over the sometimes incompatible demands of leadership by unconsciously evolving a division between the Music Director and the Leader that serves to accentuate their differences, while bridging their strengths. The Music Director has a quality education in music, has held the respect of his peers for many years, and has considerable professional experience in the music business. The Leader has less of this, certainly less than the Music Director, but he does have longer experience and has enough background in jazz as a performer, jazz journalist, broadcaster, musical training, knowledge and taste to be seriously regarded as a jazz musician.

In this respect, the age difference between these two individuals is significant. Jazz is a living art form. It is fairly short lived, as these things go. Post-war modern jazz (being still less that seventy years old) is an art form young enough for a person's experience in jazz before, say 1970, to be interesting to jazz musicians born then, or not much before. It is possible for the Leader to hold some credibility in The London Jazz Orchestra merely for having been on the scene before 1960. In this he does not conflict with the Music Director's authority, which has been gained more formally and through more professional playing, but which came later in the life of the art form. This situation is a historical accident and something that the evolution of the band has capitalized upon.

This division of authority by age and experience has also had the effect of keeping the band fresh. Often community bands attract people who are so similar in age, taste and ability that they remain within these confines musically. Inevitably this is a stale, self-referential situation that is eventually fatal to musical life.

Other interesting roles have developed in the band that may be understood through the sociological lens. Each section of the band (reeds, trombone, trumpet and rhythm) has produced its own role structure that seems uniquely appropriate to the musical demands of the section. For instance, the trombones quite often play supporting roles in the kind of jazz arrangements the band performs. Strong playing ability combined with quiet competence and the willingness to take direction characterize the requirements of good ensemble playing in this section. The players in the trombone section who have been attracted to the band tend to have these qualities. The trombones also have, over the years, nurtured fine young players who initially joined the band as a relatively weaker player, but whose personalities have allowed them to take direction from the strong players.

Trumpet playing is never easy, and in a jazz ensemble, the musical demands are extreme. A typical trumpet part in a jazz arrangement requires a high level of rhythmic accuracy especially from lead player. Brass "shots," which often come on some awkwardly syncopated part of a beat, must be placed with accuracy and confidence. This sort of material requires a disciplined player who does not become restive playing his kind of part, and who does not require a showy prominence. Just such an individual has been attracted to the London Jazz Orchestra's lead trumpet chair. He is a strong musical leader, fully at home with whole-arrangement leadership, and also firm in his supporting role.

Rhythm sections can be a problem in jazz, particularly in today's bands where the influence of rock music can never be ignored. The typical rock band sound places drums and bass quite far forward and balances them above, or equal with, the lead lines. This is just the inverse of the typical use of these instruments in a jazz ensemble. Drums and bass, played by two individuals, should sound like they are being played by a single person. The tasty jazz drummer emphasizes "shots" and syncopation in the horn parts, provides appropriate unwritten fills and set-ups, controls and leads dynamic changes for the whole ensemble. This drummer must, above all, listen to the whole band and support it while not dominating it. The bass player who works with such a drummer is often the master time keeper. He must have an excellent time sense, as well as full competence on his instrument. Over the years, The London jazz Orchestra has had several bass and drum players come and go, but the ones who have been successful and stayed with the group are those who regard their musical roles as being imbedded in the whole musical organization.

The London Jazz Orchestra fits into the larger community in a way that is consistent with the attitudes toward music and the musical intentions of its members. In just the same way that the structure and identity of the band has emerged from the musical objectives shared by the band members, the nature of the fit between The London Jazz Orchestra and its "public" is conditioned by the value and sustained meaning of the music to its players. The band has for several years followed a schedule of three more or less formal concerts which are performed in a medium sized concert hall. This hall is part of the London Public Library and is used by it for a full schedule of musical programs, public lectures, meetings, and similar activities. When the hall was opened, the band was already performing concerts in the library's old hall, and an arrangement was worked out with the library to provide the new hall for The London Jazz Orchestra for free, as long as no admission fee was charged by the band for its concerts. This is the arrangement that has remained until the present day.

This may seem at first to be a community spirited, generous thing for the band to do, and indeed it is. But underlying this decision to perform occasionally in public for free is the freedom the band claims for itself to ignore public taste, the rhythm of seasonal offerings, and so on. Since the band members wish to rehearse and perform technically and artistically challenging material as a matter of the members' musical sensibilities, the feeling has grown

among the band's members that it ought not to charge the public to hear the band, since the band is fundamentally not seeking to please the public. At every concert part of the spoken introduction to the audience includes that the band is a group of like-minded musicians who get together to play jazz, and that while the band enjoys playing in public occasionally, it does this mainly for the music. Additional commentary in a typical concert normally includes something about arrangers, composers, musical traditions, historical influences. This sort of discussion with the audience invites it to enter into the band members' way of viewing the music and its reason for making it.

In a similar spirit, the band does almost no advertising. It has no budget for such things, and it relies upon the notices placed in promotional material by the Public Library, the free music listings of the local newspaper, and word of mouth. This relative lack of publicity, added to its concert format, has produced a moderate size, but loyal, following for the band which can be relied upon to inform itself about the band's performances and come to hear them.

It seems worth noting that the methods by which the London Jazz Orchestra presents itself to the public implies a certain identifiable belief about the relationship between "art" and "the public." When art is driven by an effort to attract public acceptance or acclaim, it is reasonable to expect that the public's desires be respected. This implies a particular attitude on the part of the artist(s) toward their art and acceptance of a hierarchy of values in which the artist is influenced, or even directed, by the artists' public. In rejecting this viewpoint, and in many ways inverting it, the London Jazz Orchestra is presenting its art to the public, to be influential if this be so, but not in an effort to direct or lead public appreciation of its music, or to be influenced in its music by the public's view. In this the London Jazz Orchestra shares some aspects of community relationship with specialty arts organizations such as period performance orchestras and choirs, chamber groups devoted to new music, various "alternative" groups that maintain an allegiance to an artistic ideal while hoping that the community in which these activates are imbedded takes note, appreciates, and is perhaps lead by such creative efforts.

Such an attitude toward the public sphere may attract the criticism that The London Jazz Orchestra is an "elitist" group, disdainful of public taste or holding itself superior to it. This would perhaps arise from a misunderstanding and failure to appreciate the fact that broad community acceptance or approval is essentially irrelevant to the creative process. The band members are thrilled when audiences like concerts and respond enthusiastically. Such response from the public is nourishing and gratifying. This kind of acceptance or public presence is not consciously required as a reason the band exists. Nevertheless, public performance provides the band a seasonal schedule and an outward orientation that is important to its players. The band is indeed imbedded in the community, though perhaps not truly conscious of this fact.

The place in the modern world of music and musicians is rapidly changing. The expansion in the use of electronic media and the proliferation of formats by which music is delivered to the wider public has made live art music, and perhaps particularly big band jazz, very much a minority activity for musicians minded to follow their art, and it is now almost impossible for such people to make jazz their living. Even in ordinary medium size cities like London, Ontario, not noted as entertainment or show business capitals by any means, previous generations of musicians could carve out a living in clubs, at the weekend dance halls, backing travelling acts, or playing music to accompany the animal acts and acrobats in the circus. This sort of thing usually attracted highly talented players and singers who could and did practice their skills, even if many of them held supplementary "day jobs." Even opportunities to work in jazz like these are now disappearing rapidly, or have completely gone.

This state of affairs has produced a need for what one of the London Jazz Orchestra's members calls "non-working professional bands." These bands, of which there are many spread over most of North America and Europe, are finding that their supply of well trained and musically motivated players is growing. Musicians who would have previously hardly noticed "community" organizations like The London Jazz Orchestra are increasingly playing in such groups and creating new ones. The acceptance of jazz in university faculties of music has meant that where jazz would have been banned a few decades ago it is now encouraged. This has lead to the production of vast quantities of challenging, technically demanding music for such bands to play. It is perhaps ironic that at the same time that big band jazz is becoming rare or extinct in public, the amount of well crafted and artistically significant repertoire for them is expanding. Bands like The London Jazz Orchestra take advantage of this. The fact that much of this material is available at nominal cost has meant that ordinary community jazz ensembles can accumulate larger and more varied band books than the highest ranking professional bands possessed during the heyday of the band business.

There is an educational value to The London jazz Orchestra that gathers its force from the same general principles that have formed the band and lead the members to develop their roles in it. The positive educational value of the band might be divided into two related areas. These are further instances of how the band has become sociologically imbedded in its surroundings. For individual members of the band, the London jazz Orchestra provides a professionalized venue for performance which hones musical skills and emphasizes taking music seriously in an adult context. The band does not exist to "teach" anybody anything, either its own members or the public. Nevertheless, the band members can, and emphatically do, learn from each other. They mostly become better musicians for being in the band. The attitudes toward music they must carry into the band to be successful in it inevitably appear in the approaches they take to music teaching in their jobs in schools or at university. Much of teaching music in schools has to do with developing attitude, instilling the appreciation for abstract rules and the acceptance of individual responsibility.

Enthusiasm and genuine interest and passion for a subject, be it music or any other, carries much weight in a classroom. One teacher put the point: "Getting kids' interest is a piece of cake. Just go in there and show that you are interested in something and that it excites your passions and you've got 'em." The London Jazz Orchestra, while not setting out formally to accentuate the band members' love of music seems certainly to have done so, to have deepened their grasp of the subtleties of the jazz art, and to have provided many practical bits of knowledge that would never be taught in a classroom otherwise.

The other area where educational value might be found is more broad. When the band performs its concerts there is always some talking from the bandstand to the audience. Every occasion for this includes the simple message that The London Jazz Orchestra merely consists of a group of talented local musicians who have a love of their art and who work on perfecting it. Then the music starts. Nothing else need be said. The value of good quality workmanship and a meaningful passion for the art based on it comes through in the music. I leave the calibration of exactly how this benefits the community to someone else, but I am convinced there is a benefit. The audience response and the band's growing community acceptance seems to point only in this direction.

(1) End note: The most influential reasonably modern statement of a sociological theory of role structures developing naturally to ensure the existence of a functioning social group was made by Talcott Parsons. His four generalized descriptions of necessary social roles in any functioning group are those devoted to: adaptation, integration, goal attainment and pattern maintenance, which Parsons imagined as more or less constant challenges to social structure. Roles arising out of these challenges he defined, not as concrete behaviours, but as attitudes appropriate to successful confrontation of these challenges. Parsons built a generalized description of these role demands which he named the "pattern variables." Detailing this conceptual model is not necessary in this paper. But it is worth noting that such a detailed model could be built.

Anyone wishing to follow this up to find the theory described and illustrated should see:

Talcott Parsons, Essays in Sociological Theory (New York: Free Press, 1949); "The Pattern Variables Revisited: A Response to Robert Dubin," in Talcott Parsons (ed.) Sociological Theory and Modern Society (New York: Free Press, 1967); Talcott Parsons, "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory," International Journal of Ethics, XLV (1934-5), pp 282-316; "The Point of View of The Author," in Max Black (ed.), The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), pp. 311-63;

Talcott Parsons, Social Structure and Personality, (New York: Free Press, 1964)… to list a few sources.

Good quality sociological theory text books may also be helpful.