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Managing & conducting: maestros on the management of choral organizations

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Managing & conducting: maestros on the management of choral organizations

Abstract

Based on the description of the managerial competence of maestros, the paper analyses data collected with 142 choral singers and 8 (eight) conductors of 10 (ten) countries of America and Europe (Argentina, Canada, England, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, Peru, Portugal, Switzerland, and USA).

Keywords: Musical organizations; choral management; maestros as managers; abilities and competences.

1. Introduction

Many authors (Drucker, 1988; 2002; 2007; Mintzberg, 1988; Christensen; Marx; Stevenson, 2006) of the administrative theory have detached the maestro as the preeminent symbol of leadership in a teamwork paradigm for groups and organizations. For example, Drucker (2002: 76) points out:



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There are enough knowledge-based organizations around to show what that means. What makes a university a great university is that it attracts and develops outstanding teachers and scholars, making it possible for them to do outstanding teaching and research. The same is true of an opera house. But the knowledge-based institution that most nearly resembles a knowledge-based business is the symphony orchestra, in which some 30 different instrumentalists play the same score together as a team. A great orchestra is not composed of great musicians but of adequate ones who produce at their peak. When a new conductor is hired to turn around an orchestra that has suffered years of drift and neglect, he cannot, as a rule, fire any but a few of the sloppiest or most superannuated players. He also cannot hire many new orchestra members. He has to make productive what he has inherited. The successful conductors do this by working closely with individual orchestra members and groups of instrumentalists. The conductor's employee relations are given; the players are nearly unchangeable. So it is the conductor's people skills that make the difference.

However, we notice that (professional) orchestras are the example highlighted by these authors. This paper intent to detach another vision on maestros' managerial skills: that one concerning choral organizations, *i.e.*, professional, semi-professional and amateur choirs. Beyond its 'knowledge organization' character, choirs – mainly the



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amateur ones – consist in a very powerful example of learning organizations.

Focusing on these organizations, the research was conducted through totally structured questionnaires (with blankets for additional observations) applied to 10 (ten) choir of 8 (eight) different countries: Argentina, Canada, England, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Portugal and USA. Nine choirs were selected through the website of *American Choral Directors Association* (<http://www.choralnet.org/>); one choir was studied as a special case, with a different questionnaire. The next tables detach information about the researched choral organizations.

The following table points out the researched choirs and the number of questionnaires answered by its members.

	Choir	Place	Number of singers that answered the questionnaire	Conductor who answered the questionnaire
1	Coro Sinfónico Lisboa Cantat	Lisbon, Portugal	24	Jorge Carvalho Alves
2	The Columbine Chorale	Denver, Colorado, Estados Unidos	11	No
3	Coro Universitário de Tucumán	Tucumán, Argentina	19	No
4	Coro de Cámara Monteverdi	Arequipa, Peru	08	No
5	Bath Camerata	Bath, Inglaterra	07	No
6	Southern Arizona Women's Chorus	Tucson, Arizona, Estados Unidos	09	Terrie Ashbaugh
7	Coro Vivo Ottawa	Ottawa, Ontario, Canadá	09	Antonio Llaca
8	Coro Alpha Nova del Instituto Politécnico Nacional	Ciudad de México, México	20	Michell Uribe e Armando Gómez Castillo
9	Coro de Cámara Adroque	Buenos Aires, Argentina	12	Marcelo Ortiz Rocca
10	Coro Cantosospeso	Milan, Italy	23	No

Table 1.1. Researched choirs



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As detached in the next table, the researched choirs are amateur or semi-professional groups, independent ones or groups linked to educational institutions.

Choir	Type (according to the predominant answers of its signers and conductors)	
1	Amateur/ Semi-professional	Independent
2	Amateur	Independent
3	Amateur	Linked to educative institution
4	Semi-professional	Independent
5	Amateur	Independent
6	Amateur	Independent
7	Amateur	Independent
8	Amateur	Linked to educative institution
9	Amateur	Independent
10	Amateur	Independent

Table 1.2. Kinds of researched choirs

Beyond these ten amateur or semi-professional groups, whose questionnaires were answered by its singers and, sometimes, also by its conductors – totalizing 119 singers and 6 (six) conductors –, we also studied the cases of two professional choirs. The approach of these groups were made through an interview with its conductors. They were: maestro Celso Antunes, chief conductor of *Netherlands Radio Choir* 'Groot Omroepkoor', one of the few totally professionalized European choirs, and also professor of choral conducting at *Haute École de Musique de Genève*, Switzerland; and maestro Jon Washburn, chief conductor and artistic director of *Vancouver Chamber Choir*, from Canada.

Therefore, concerning data collection methods, this research can be classified as:



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- a multiple case study, as defined by Yin (2009), *i.e.*, the study of different cases in which each case is analyzed itself, in multiple analytical units, what can provide a global view on the studied cases and also a comparative approach;
- as a field research, as it aimed to go to the locus of its subject of study (the choral activity) and to collect, among its agents, the relevant data;
- as a survey, which intended to register the vision of conductors and singers about the organizational environment in which they are inserted.

2. Conductor's managerial skills in the amateur and semi-professional choirs (nine cases)

In the next two charts, we considered as predominant evaluation (of the conductor, by its choristers) that one that pointed an index superior to 60% (among three options: 'optimum', 'good/ reasonable'; 'defective'); when one option do not obtained a mark of 60%, we pointed also the option with the second high score. The (self-)evaluation of the conductors comes between '[]' and is referred by the letter 'm', of maestro.



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Skill / Predominant evaluation	Choir 1	Choir 2	Choir 3	Choir 4	Choir 5	Choir 6	Choir 7	Choir 8	Choir 9
Conductor's creativity and ability to make innovation inside the group	Optimum [m: good/ reasonable]	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Optimum	Good/ reasonable	Optimum	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m1 and m2: optimum]	Optimum [m: optimum]
Conductor's flexibility	Good/ reasonable [m: good/ reasonable]	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Good/ reasonable	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Optimum [m: optimum]	Between optimum and good/ reasonable [m: optimum]	Ótima [m1: ótima; m2: boa/ razoável]	Good/ reasonable [m: good/ reasonable]
Conductor's ability to create a good atmosphere and to solve interpersonal problems	Good/ reasonable [m: good/ reasonable]	Optimum	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Optimum	Good/ reasonable	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m1 and m2: optimum]	Optimum [m: optimum]
Conductor's strategic vision (understanding opportunities for improvement and knowing how make the most of them)	Between optimum and good/ reasonable [m: optimum]	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Optimum	Optimum	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m1 and m2: optimum]	Between optimum and good/ reasonable [m: optimum]
Conductor's responsibility, commitment and dedication to the group	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum	Optimum	Optimum	Optimum	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m1 and m2: optimum]	Optimum [m: optimum]
Conductor's ability to improve himself / herself	Optimum [m: good/ reasonable]	Optimum	Optimum	Optimum	Good/ reasonable	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m1: optimum; m2: good/ reasonable]	Optimum [m: optimum]
Conductor's ability to look for funding for the choir, speak in the name of the group, create a network of contacts	Optimum [m: good/ reasonable]	Good/ reasonable	Optimum	Good/ reasonable	Good/ reasonable	Optimum [m: optimum]	Between optimum and good/ reasonable [m: good/ reasonable]	Ótima [m1: ótima; m2: boa/ razoável]	Between optimum and good/ reasonable [m: optimum]
Conductor's emotional balance	Between optimum and good/ reasonable [m: good/ reasonable]	Optimum	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Good/ reasonable	Good/ reasonable	Optimum [m: good/ reasonable]	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m1: optimum; m2: good/ reasonable]	Good/ reasonable [m: good/ reasonable]
Conductor's ability to manage the group's stress load and to give emotional support, as well as imparting confidence	Good/ reasonable [m: good/ reasonable]	Optimum	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Between optimum and good/ reasonable	Good/ reasonable	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m: optimum]	Optimum [m1 and m2: optimum]	Optimum [m: good/ reasonable]

Table 2.1. Maestros' managerial skills



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There is not even one managerial skill, among the researched one, in which conductors obtained a predominantly negative evaluation.

Detaching the choristers evaluation and attributing to them the following indexes

- 'optimum' = 3; 'between optimum and good/ reasonable' = 2; 'good/ reasonable' = 1
- we have the next table.

Skill	Choir 1	Choir 2	Choir 3	Choir 4	Choir 5	Choir 6	Choir 7	Choir 8	Choir 9
Predominant evaluation									
Creativity	3	2	3	1	3	3	3	3	3
Flexibility	1	2	2	1	2	3	2	3	1
Good human climate	1	3	2	3	1	3	3	3	3
Strategic vision	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	2
Responsibility	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Self-improvement	3	3	3	3	1	3	3	3	3
Funding	3	1	3	1	1	3	2	3	2
Emotional balance	2	3	2	1	1	3	3	3	1
Stress management	1	3	2	2	1	3	3	3	3

Table 2.2. Indexes of conductors' managerial skills, according to choristers' evaluation

This table has a correspondence in the next graphic.



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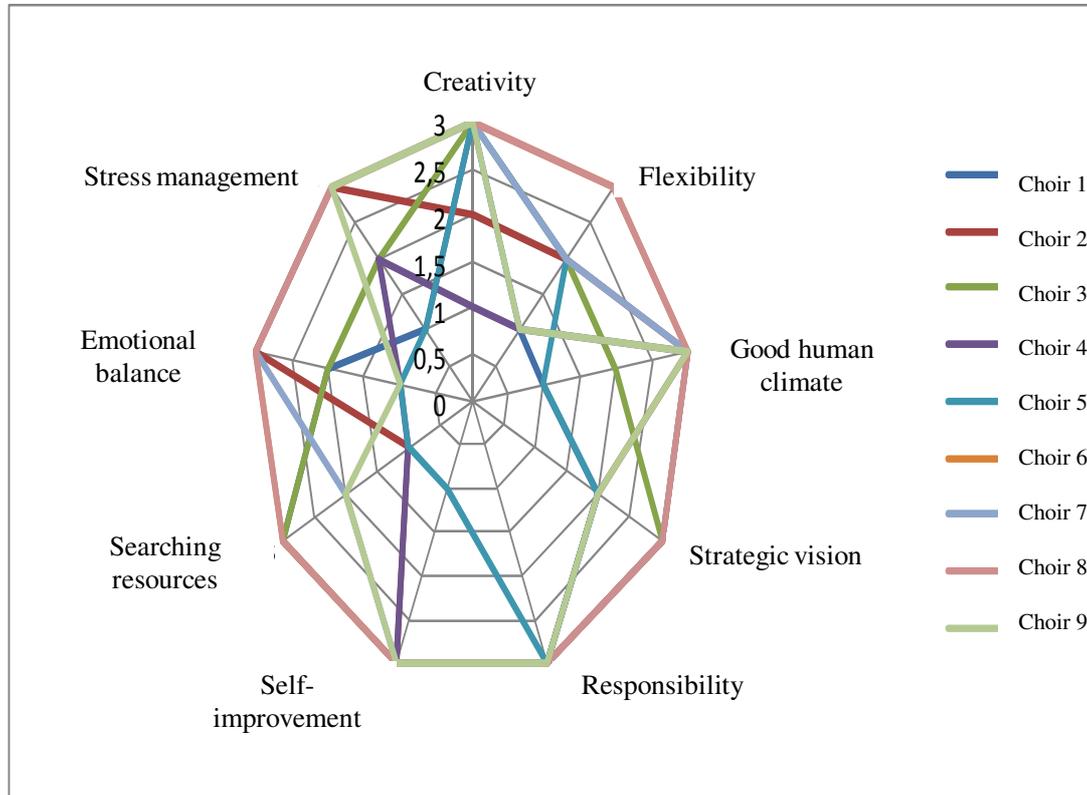


Figure 2.3. Indexes of conductors' managerial skills, according to choristers' evaluation

The conductor '8' is the best evaluated on his managerial skills by his choristers. Responsibility and ability to self-improvement are the higher evaluated skills on choristers view.

We can also detach the following division:



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- *Skills related to human relations:*
 - Conductor's flexibility;
 - Conductor's ability to create a good atmosphere and to solve interpersonal problems;
 - Conductor's responsibility, commitment and dedication to the group
 - Conductor's emotional balance;
 - Conductor's ability to manage the group's stress load and to give emotional support, as well as imparting confidence;
- *Other managerial skills:*
 - Conductor's creativity and ability to make innovation inside the group;
 - Conductor's strategic vision (understanding opportunities for improvement and knowing how make the most of them);
 - Conductor's ability to improve himself / herself;
 - Conductor's ability to look for funding for the choir, speak in the name of the group, create a network of contacts.

Under this analytical division, we obtain the following graphics.



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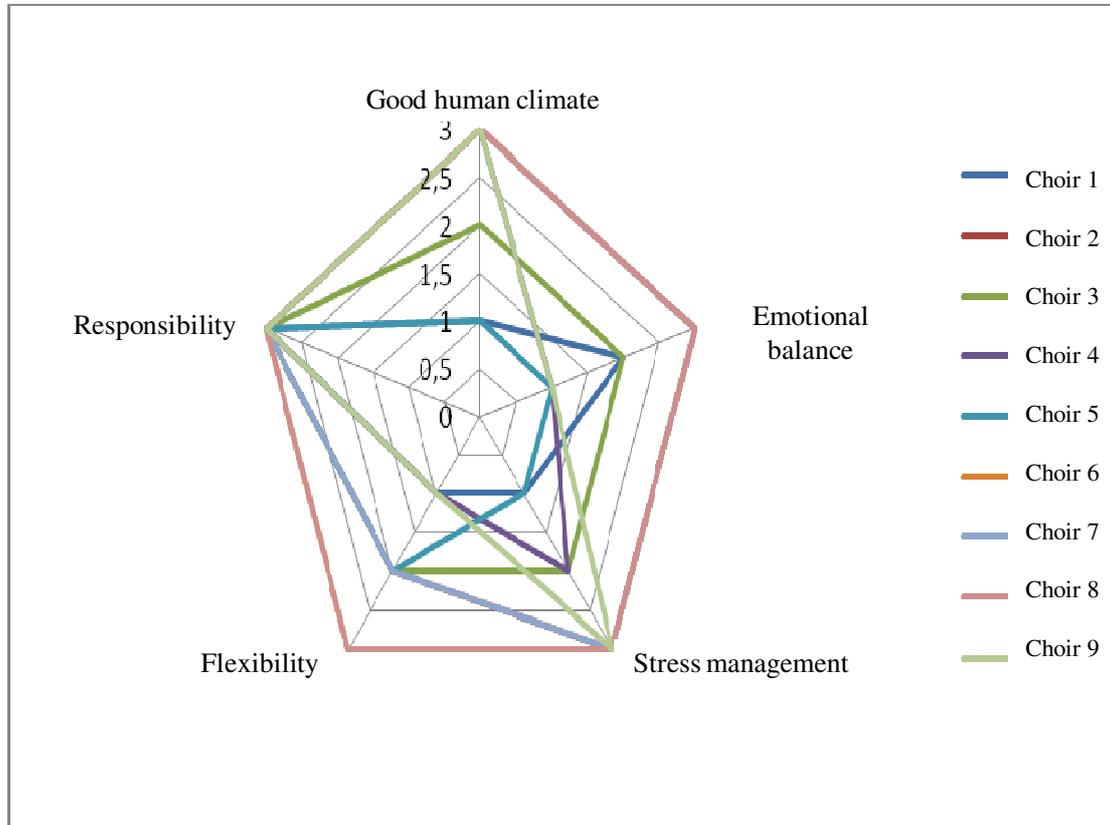


Figure 2.4. Indexes of conductors' administrative skills (skills related to human relations), according to choristers' evaluation

Responsibility and ability to create and manage a good human climate are the better evaluated conductor's managerial skills related to human relations.



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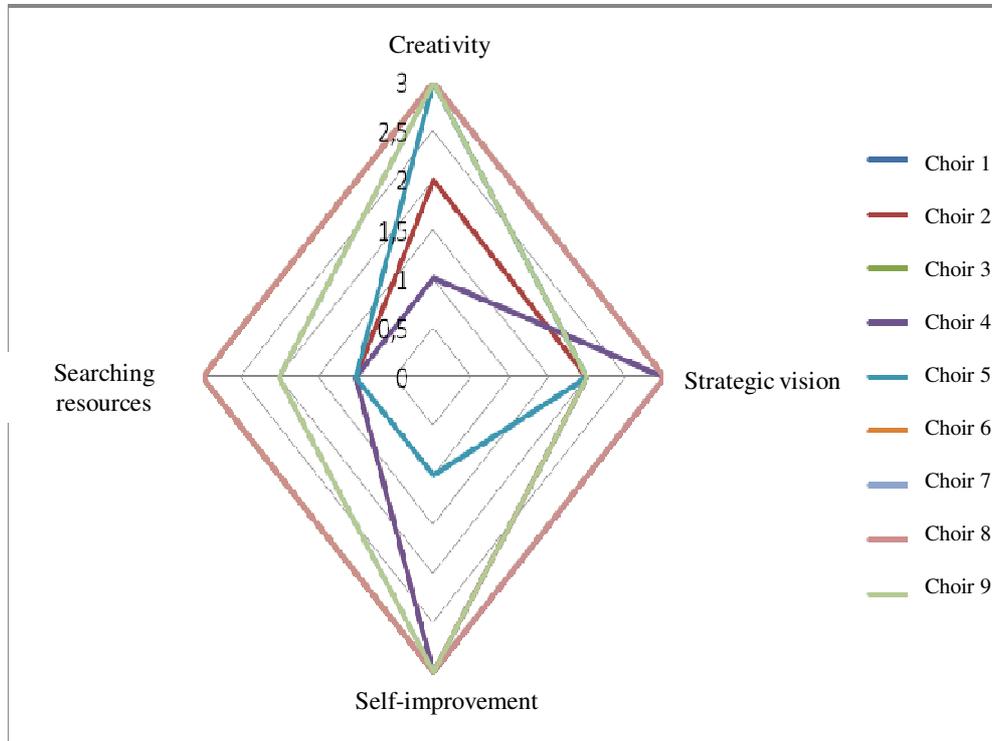


Figure 2.5. Indexes of conductors' administrative skills (other managerial skills), according to choristers' evaluation

To know how to improve his/herself, to know how to look for funding for the choir and to speak in the name of the group, and strategic vision as the better detached skills in this group.

Concerning conductors' self-evaluation (six conductors of five choirs), we find the next table.



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Skill	Choir 1	Choir 6	Choir 7	Choir 8 [maestro 1]	Choir 8 [maestro 2]	Choir 9
Predominant evaluation						
Creativity	1	3	3	3	3	3
Flexibility	1	3	3	3	1	1
Good human climate	1	3	3	3	3	3
Strategic vision	3	3	3	3	3	3
Responsibility	3	3	3	3	3	3
Self-improvement	1	3	3	3	1	3
Funding	1	3	1	3	1	3
Emotional balance	1	3	3	3	1	1
Stress management	1	3	3	3	3	1

Figure 2.6. Indexes of conductors' managerial skills: self-evaluation

According to the table above, we obtain the next graphic.

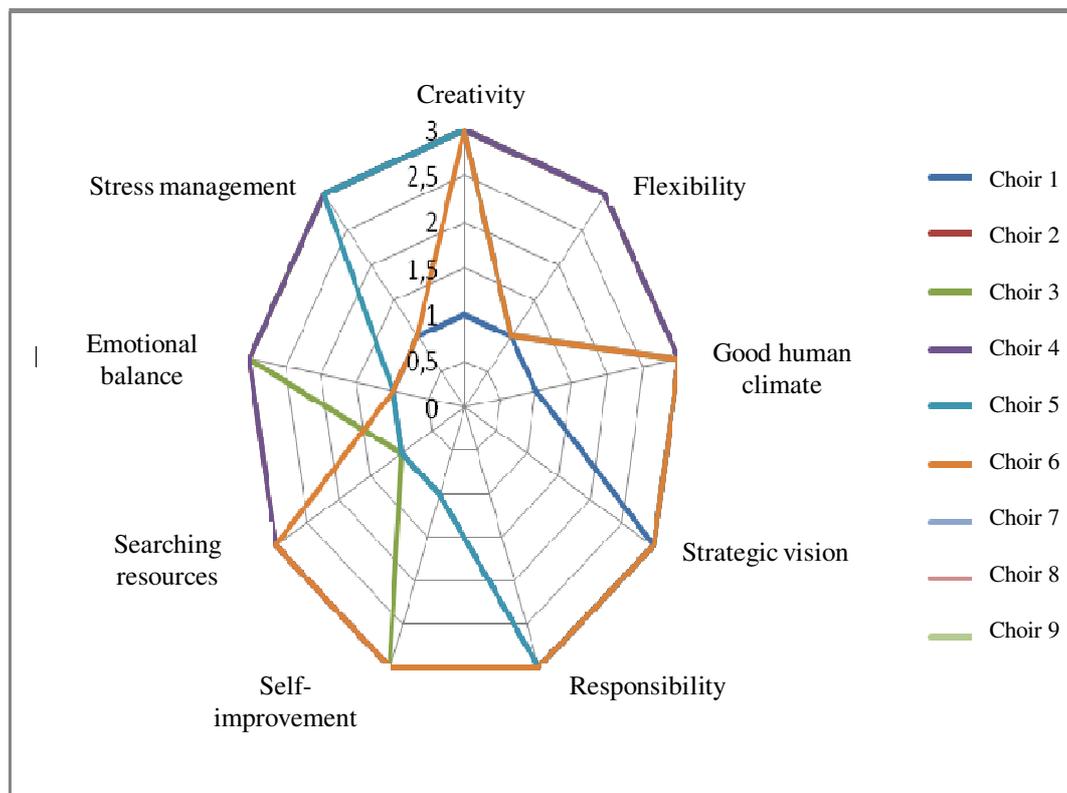


Figure 2.7. Indexes of conductors' managerial skills: self-evaluation



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The main managerial skills detached by the conductors in their self-evaluation were: in a first group, strategic vision and responsibility; next, the creativity and the ability to create and manage a good human climate.

3. Special case study (Choir 10)

Concerning choir 10, there were repeated the results obtained in the other cases. Notably, the better evaluated conductor's managerial skills were to know how to act, know how to compromise himself and know how to assume responsibilities. Strategic vision, leadership and searching for opportunities also were detached and assume the perspective of a development of this responsibility: the maestro, as a manager and as a leader of an independent organization, actualizes his dedication to the group in the intern dimension and also in the environmental (strategic) one.

4. Professional choirs

Concerning Professional choirs, we could visualize two distinct realities: one of a professional institutional choir (linked to Netherlands Radio) and one of an independent professional choir (from Vancouver). The institutional choir is inserted in a highly formal and complex structure, and has to strictly meet the demands of its institution. It is a subordination structure, as pointed out by Mintzberg (1998) in his analysis of orchestras. This can be illustrated fundamentally by the following elements:



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1) the chief conductor divides group's conducting with invited maestros; 2) the chief conductor does not have the function of artistic management; 3) there are many bodies that intermediate the choir's structure, both internally and externally: the Radio direction, the choir general direction (from which the conductor is one of the members) and the committee of choristers, all of them unionized. The conductor's power is, therefore, a bounded one and decisions depend upon an wide coordination of interests. Also internally the activity of conducting professional choruses implies collaboration, not imposition.

Diverse is the reality of the independent professional choir researched. Its chief conductor was its founder four decades ago. He has more power in decisions and is also the artistic director. In this conductor's view, however, there is an equilibrium between centralization and decentralization. His power also obeys to subordination structures or, at the minimum, to coordination ones: the conductor reports his work not only to funding agencies but also to the directive body and to the choir's executive committee. Despite not being a choir inserted as an organ of a complex organization, its structure implies the necessity of professional staff with managerial functions, as communication, finance and general management of the choir.

Confidence to conduct equally professional musicians and focus on performance (on artistic quality, on results) are deep and strong axis of the work in professional musical organizations – in different and higher levels in comparison to amateur ones. The dictator maestro, with all power in all spheres and concerning the smallest



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decisions, is also a mythological figure in this kind of professional musical organization.

5. Conclusion

As subordination structures (see Mintzberg, 1998; and Drucker, 2007), choirs face different demands and constraints, internal and environmental ones. If, in the case of amateur choirs, the musical qualification of singers is a notable example of constraint, the financial resources and the group's stability (the degree of turnover of singers) also are illustrative points. The demands, by the opposite side of the constraints, come from permanent and occasional sponsoring and funding institutions and also from the singers themselves (in relation to the conductor) and from the conductor his/herself (in direction to singers). The orientation to results came associated to its internal and external demands. In amateur choirs, the internal demands are linked to results as a motive to the dedication and liability of all one involved in the choral project, *i.e.*, as a motivational factor of singers and as an influence factor for the conductor – inside and outside the group: *e.g.*, in renewing funding, in searching for new sponsorships and places for presentation.

In professional choirs, internal and external leadership is highly dependent on results, according to intern evaluation of the group and of the conductor, by the lead singers, and according to the external evaluation by sponsors, funders, and also by the public, by the 'musical scene' and by the critics. In all senses, in different ways



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concerning professional or amateur groups, every musical organization is a team and an organization performance-directed and performance-based.

Concerning internal demands, the conductor is required in its abilities and competences, not only the musical ones, but also in the managerial skills. In amateur choirs, the managerial abilities closest to people management, as the ability to create a good human climate, are traditionally focused, by the choristers and also, as a consequence, by the sponsor institutions. Today, the tendency also of musical professional organizations is that the demands extern to the musical group – for example, of its maintainer institution – detach more and more not only the musical competence of the conductor, but also the virtues of the good leader and of the good manager that maestros are expected to be.

In the researched cases, the leadership dimension is emphasized not only concerning charisma, which is one factor, among others. The high evaluation of conductors' skills related to strategy and searching for opportunities reinforce the expectations of singers for maestros-leaders that more and more can be entrepreneurial managers focusing the team development. This shows a deeper and much more concrete understanding of conducting as leading and of leading as conducting. It densifies the inspiration and emotion which are the resume of conductors' job according to some caricatured descriptions.



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