The danger chiefly lies in acting well;  
No crime's so great as daring to excel.  

Dangers notwithstanding, outstanding organizations seek to excel. But how is excellence achieved?:

On Friday afternoon, the most celebrated conductor in America's history led the New York Philharmonic in works by America's greatest composer. It's as simple – and complicated – as that. (Tim Page referring to a 1989 concert of Aaron Copeland's work by Leonard Bernstein, Page, 1992, p.187)

Perhaps music doesn't get any better than in the situation Tim Page describes. But excellence is indeed enigmatic; simply having all the proper ingredients in place doesn't guarantee success. There seems to be more to it.

So far we have identified four key management challenges affecting organizational success: Operations must be coordinated to run smoothly, people must be highly motivated, and the organization must offer a distinguishable product or service (have a niche) that is well supported by its resource providers.
In addition, an organization must accommodate change, which in part requires managing innovation. But what accounts for an organization’s successful performance overall? Must all of these requirements be fulfilled to an equal extent? And if all are fulfilled, will the organization necessarily become and remain outstanding? Does it achieve “excellence”? Or, is there a missing ingredient that differentiates between an organization that does all the right things—coordinates, motivates, innovates and finds its niche—and one that truly excels in some greater sense?

There is a large, somewhat inconclusive, literature on the meaning of “organizational effectiveness” (e.g., see Cameron, 1986; Herman and Renz, 1999). Effectiveness can simply be considered the ability of an organization to survive or to grow over some reasonable period of time, or its ability to meet stipulated or expressed goals. But these are questionable standards. Poor organizations can linger for long periods of time because of fortunate economic supports that are slow to dissipate. If they are lucky and encounter favorable circumstances, mediocre organizations can survive and even grow over reasonably long periods of time. Such organizations may do good work, meet goals and serve useful purposes—but are they necessarily outstanding? Organizational “excellence” appears to call for a higher standard. Organizational excellence is the ability of an organization not only to survive or meet goals but to distinguish itself from the general population of organizations by achieving some manner of special recognition. Our interest, therefore, is in what makes the Cleveland Orchestra one of the “best” symphony orchestras in the world, and what makes the Chieftains perhaps the most revered Irish music group? What distinguishes the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Guarneri Quartet, or the Robert Shaw Chorale from their peer ensembles? What allows such ensembles to maintain their excellence over long periods of time?

The Ingredients of Excellence

Organizational excellence undoubtedly requires outstanding performance along our four management dimensions—coordination, motivation, niche-finding and innovation—but perhaps not along all of them simultaneously. After all, there is a variety of ways in which an organization can excel, and an excellent organization need not excel in all ways. Additionally, the four dimensions are interactive, so that excellence in one dimension is likely to influence (complement or compensate for) excellence in another.

Some organizations excel by being exquisitely coordinated, even if they are not especially distinguished in other respects. The ensemble that plays its renditions of Vivaldi, Handel and Pachabel standards technically more perfectly than any other ensemble may be recognized as outstanding, even if its repertoire is undistinguished, even if its players are not always the most passionate, and even if the organization fails to experiment with its repertoire or style from time to time. Some combination of autocratic leadership, heavy rehearsals and short term player
rewards might even achieve such distinction, though it might not sustain itself or be the most enjoyable organization to work for very long. The Jazz Messengers under Art Blakely had a reputation for inspired leadership that achieved great distinction for the ensemble’s music but was oppressive to its players:

His sidemen played *his* way or suffered the consequences....Musicians who have played in his groups often compare the experience with going to school. (Owens, 1995, pp.219-220)

Similarly, an organization could be outstanding by virtue of its ability to inspire extraordinary worker dedication. Good intentions, strong morale and high energy can compensate for technical imperfections and even for falling short of a first rate product. People come to hear their community orchestras, fire department marching bands, and student orchestras not because these groups have achieved exquisite levels of musical ensemble playing or because they are innovative or play some special repertoire or in some unique style, but because they are admired for their efforts, for their enthusiasm, and for the pride and spirit their members bring to their families, friends and neighbors. Referring to reviews of “little events in a church basement”, critic Tim Page observes:

It is a genuinely good thing that such concerts exist: they are unpretentious, they are usually reasonably well played and they bring happiness to people in the neighborhood. (Page, 1992, p.xv)

It is also possible for an organization to be outstanding by choosing the right niche, even if its offerings are not particularly innovative or played with the greatest mastery or its workers overwrought with enthusiasm. For example, community orchestras are simply not in the same category as major symphony orchestras, but they can excel within their own league and become a source of pride and recognition as a result of that. So it is reasonable for violin soloist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg to say about the Canton Symphony Orchestra that:

Actually, this is a damned good orchestra...Canton is right up there with Pasadena on my list of the best community groups. (Page, 1992, p.123)

To be outstanding, therefore, is a relative concept which needs to be put into the specific context in which it is applied. Consider Peter Schickele and his ensemble which performs the music of the fictive P.D.Q. Bach. Although Schickele is himself a superb musician, when people come to hear his orchestra, they don’t expect to experience a perfect or extremely dedicated ensemble, although its members are highly skilled and energized by the fun of the experience. Audiences do expect the unusual and the innovative, however, and they expect to laugh. Schickele’s ensemble is one whose unique niche is humor mixed with novelty, and this is the field against which its performance is judged to be outstanding:
For many fans of classical music... the cleverest and most consistently inventive parodist is Peter Schickele... Mr. Schickele has been presenting these faux-musicological explorations of the life and music of the fictional P.D.Q. Bach, purportedly the last and least of J.S. Bach's offspring and the supposed composer of consummately inept works.

After more than 30 years, one might expect a comedian's creative well to run dry. But Mr. Schickele's ability to spot peculiarities in today's musical world and represent them as if they were a part of P.D.Q.'s universe has kept his shows lively, surprising and up to date. (Kozinn, 1997 p.32)

Finally, it is conceivable for an organization to be outstanding by virtue of its innovativeness, originality or propensity to experiment, regardless of whether it is run with great precision, highly motivated, or offers an especially unique style or repertoire. In the sense that Schickele plays with unusual (surprising and humorous) combinations of instruments and musical pieces, his P.D.Q. Bach ensemble illustrates this case. Schickele, or other musician/comedians such as Victor Borge, have established their own niche by creating odd new combinations of known musical products that evoke humor as they turn conventional musical practices on their heads (sometimes literally!) The excellence comes from doing this so well, and constantly producing surprising results. Many other ensembles, especially in jazz, draw interest and support because people know that the presentations will be unusual, even unique, and experience-expanding. Performances may be uneven, possibly even unpleasant, but reliably provocative in exploring new musical territory. When the Cleveland Orchestra played "Light", a new atonal work by Phillip Glass, it was greeted by a mix of boos and cheers (Page, 1992, p.51), but part of the Cleveland Orchestra's greatness is connected with its willingness to explore new possibilities, stretch the repertoire and master new work.

It seems reasonable to assume that the very best in any field will not be terribly deficient along any of the important dimensions of management performance. However, being proficient on all four dimensions does not assure organizational excellence if there is no one dimension on which achievement is really exceptional. Moreover, the "best of the best" may be those organizations which are outstanding in multiple ways. Perhaps the Cleveland Orchestra is "so good" because it is simultaneously exquisitely coordinated, has a style of its own among high-end professional symphony orchestras, and tries to remain fresh by integrating new compositions into its repertoire on a regular basis. Holland attributes this combination for excellence to a chemistry that was achieved when the ensemble took on its new music director:

Christoph von Dohnanyi was the missing ingredient when he took over a brilliant band of Cleveland players in 1984. Extraordinary ensemble virtuosity met deep and implacable seriousness, setting off some of the most significant orchestra playing of the generation. Mr. Dohnanyi may not be the best conductor in the world, nor Cleveland the best orchestra, but together they are hard to beat. (Holland, 1999b, p.21)
But there seems to be even more to excellence than achieving proficiency on key facets of organizational management and excelling on one or more of those dimensions. An ensemble only seems to achieve excellence when its members share a special sense of identity. "A great orchestra must have a unique personality..." in the words of music critic Tim Page (1992, p. 141). For the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, for example, that identity appears to be connected with commitment to excellence itself:

Because Orpheus players share a commitment to perform at the highest possible level, each of their concerts and recordings is for them highly consequential. (Hackman, 2002, p.71)

Theorists define "organizational identity" as that which is essential and enduring about an organization (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998). In the musical world, an organization's identity is what distinguishes an ensemble, in the eyes of its own members, from other such groups. The Cleveland Orchestra's players see themselves as part of a world class ensemble that performs serious music. The players of the Cleveland Suburban Orchestra may see their ensemble essentially as a venue for local musicians to congregate for the mutual pleasure of playing together. Peter Schickele's orchestra may see itself as a vehicle for light entertainment and poking fun at the pretentiousness of the "serious music" field. Apollo's Fire may see itself as a pioneering group, leading the charge to establish early music on period instruments as a staple of musical performance in Northern Ohio, or perhaps beyond. The common element is that excellence seems to require both clarity and consensus about identity on the part of those who do the organizations work, and commitment to that identity.

The concept of organizational identity connects with each of the dimensions of management performance. For example, towards what particular end are members of an ensemble precisely coordinated? As explained in the first movement, the whole idea of having an organization in the first place is to better achieve a common result through more efficient coordination. So the articulation of that common purpose, stemming from identity, serves as a guide-star for how coordination is to be carried out.

Similarly for motivation. While we have argued (in the second movement) that members of the ensemble must be recognized and rewarded as individuals, it remains the case that motivation of ensemble members is also substantially derived from participating in a joint endeavor, inspired by a common sense of identity and purpose. Indeed, given an adequate foundation of an individualized reward system, it may be the satisfaction derived from pursuing a common mission that attracts and truly engages ensemble members and distinguishes motivation in a great ensemble from that in a merely good one. Recall that for amateur ensembles this satisfaction of participating in a common musical experience can be the dominant source of motivation!

Success in niche-finding is obviously related to a sense of identity and common purpose. A niche can only be defined in purposeful terms (this is what we do; this
is what business we are in), and a niche can only be supported by consensus among those that provide an ensemble’s resource base. Without an identity and a common purpose for which enthusiasm is demonstrated, adequate resource support is unlikely to be forthcoming.

Finally, successful management of innovation depends on a sense of identity in a number of important ways that affect the achievement of excellence. If innovativeness per se is the source of an ensemble’s excellence then this will be reflected in its sense of identity directly. If proposed innovations promise to change or improve what the organization does or how it does it, a sense of mission and common purpose will be needed to assess if the innovation is indeed appropriate for doing that, or to the contrary, whether it might be diversionary or even destructive to the organization. A common understanding and identity will also help an organization to undertake possibly painful innovations that in the long run promise to allow it to more fully achieve its purpose. Alternatively, change in the environment (e.g., new technologies or product concepts entering the field in which the organization works) may signal to an organization that its current sense of purpose is outdated, or that its identity needs to be reinterpreted or revisited in light of new conditions. This in turn will require soul-searching among organization members to determine if they can innovate by coalescing around a new or adjusted mission. For example, if many members of a community orchestra or chorus have died or moved away, the ensemble may need to rethink what it means by “community” in order to achieve or maintain a sense of excellence.

In short, a clear sense of identity and enthusiasm for organizational purpose is a common factor that underlies success along each of the four dimensions of management challenge discussed in the previous movements. Overall, this sense of identity requires members of an ensemble to have a clear idea of what they are about as an organization, and to draw inspiration and direction from that concept. It is, in short, what the members of the organization feel, believe and take pride in as a group. Possibilities for that identity are as numerous as the number of organizations themselves. The group Harmonia identifies itself as the very best in playing and preserving ethnic central European music because they have a special “feel” for that music (Drexler, 1997). Alternatively, the Scottish folk band, the Tannahill Weavers, sees itself as bringing alive Celtic music through its special expertise with traditional tunes and instruments (Sangiacomo, 1997). The St. Petersburg String Quartet sees itself as a precision ensemble specializing in the clarity and crispness of its classical performances (Rosenberg, 1997b).

What one hears in the testimonials of excellent music groups is both a sense of identity and clarity of purpose and a joint enthusiasm borne of excitement with that purpose. Obviously this may be easier to achieve in smaller groups which often define themselves around singular concepts at the outset, but the same principle applies to larger ensembles: a common identity, dedication and enthusiasm for that identity, appears to drive the ensemble to be outstanding on those dimensions of management that matter most in achieving the aspirations implicit in that identity.
Maintaining Excellence Over Time

It is one thing to achieve a fleeting level of excellence and quite another to maintain excellence and improve upon it over long periods of time. It is notable, for example, that the original business corporations identified by Peters and Waterman (1982) in their book *In Search of Excellence* did not all maintain their positions of excellence over more than a decade. The same occurs in music. For example, Holland observed that somehow the Cleveland Orchestra was able to maintain the excellence built in the era of George Szell over a long period of time, while the New York Philharmonic was not able to sustain its earlier success (Holland, 1999b). To understand how organizations maintain their excellence requires the consideration of some additional ideas.

Maintaining excellence requires that the organization engage in an ongoing process by which it evaluates itself, makes adjustments to correct problems, and makes improvements over time. This is a simple but powerful idea that has been put forth in various forms by organizational scholars. It lies at the heart of Albert Hirschman’s (1970) “exit and voice” theory which stipulates that successful organizations correct themselves from slackening or errant behavior by having to respond to direct and indirect feedback from its constituencies. It is reflected in Nelson’s and Winter’s (1982) idea of “problem-solving” through which organizations are prompted by symptoms of distress to invoke, implement and sometimes modify their internal diagnostic routines. It is incorporated in the idea of continuous improvement in the quality management literature (see Early, 1994) and in the concept of “learning organizations” (see Senge, 1990) wherein organizations continually examine their experiences in order to find improved ways of carrying out their work. There are basically two reasons why an organization which may be excellent at one point in time may retreat from that level as time goes on. First, as Hirschman argues, organizations have a natural tendency to lose their edge if there are no compensating forces to keep them sharp. Systems theorists (drawing on physics) call this “entropy”. Vigilance is required to guard against this tendency even in stable circumstances. Second, organizations exist in a changing environment. What might have been best at one point in time, may no longer be best later on. For both reasons, organizations whose excellence endures constantly ask and respond to the question which former New York City Mayor Ed Koch made famous: “How’m I doing?” Indeed, even with such feedback, the best organizations probably go further – maintaining a degree of skepticism for excessive praise:

Otto Klemperer was not known to be overly generous with praise. About the most exuberant he ever got was the time he shouted, “Good!” at the end of one difficult piece. The happy orchestra burst into applause. Klemperer scowled. “Not that good,” he sneered. (Carlinsky and Goodgold, 1991, p.29)

Generically, the “evaluation and adjustment” process has two parts: First, organizations must continually generate or receive relevant information about their
operations and performance. Second, they must be poised to respond to that information in timely and constructive ways. This process applies whether the organization exists in a stable or in a changing environment. If the environment is dynamic, as it usually is, an organization must monitor its position within the context of its field of activity and keep tabs on relevant trends that may affect its performance. It must also react to this information by considering what innovations may best enable it to respond to, or anticipate, new conditions. As noted earlier, this “evaluation and adjustment” process complements the management of innovation per se, in a comprehensive approach to the successful management of change.

The evaluation and adjustment process centers on information. Without good information, the intent to correct problems and make improvements will be aimless and haphazard. But even the best information is worthless if not taken seriously. Without that attention, the achievement of currently outstanding organizations may be fleeting, especially if success has come suddenly:

...something was seriously amiss at Alice Tully Hall on Saturday night. Much of the playing was sloppy and thoughtless. Most crucially, instead of meeting different aesthetics on their own terms, the Kronos musicians tended to streamline and homogenize whatever they played into an all-purpose modernism. It may be that the group is simply trying to do too much – too many composers, too many styles, too many performances throughout the country, throughout the world. Success came suddenly, with furious intensity, to the Kronos Quartet, and I suspect that the players may be in a period of transition. (Page, 1992, p.183)

This is a particularly interesting example because the Kronos seemed temporarily to have lost its keen sense of identity, and needed to both to recapture and to monitor itself relative to that identity over time.

The Elements of Evaluation and Adjustment

Many of the basic tools at management’s disposal – including plans, communication, education, practice, incentives and rewards, and leadership in articulating a vision built on identity and common purpose – all come into play in addressing the dynamic challenge of maintaining excellence over the long term.

Plans

Gauging performance requires reference to standards. In formal music-making, much of the basis for gauging the nature and quality of performance is contained in the musical score. The score is the basic referent for how the music is to be played. Are the trumpets playing too loudly or is the ensemble speeding up too much? Is the intent to be serious and foreboding or should the projected atmosphere be more sarcastic and contemptuous? The answers to such questions may or may not be found in the score. Where the composer has indicated his or
her intent, current playing can be compared to that intention, though the interpretation may be arguable. Pitch and tempo can be precisely specified in writing (though also subject to modification), but mood and feeling are more illusory:

The authority of the score...knows various levels, and there is a whole rainbow of shades between fidelity and alteration. We would be surprised if a conductor were to change the harmony of a Beethoven passage; we are not too shocked to find a diversity of opinions about speed, accentuation or dynamic shape. The instructions in a score are not all equally dogmatic. (Griffiths, 1997, p.11)

Whatever ambiguity remains between the composer's instructions and implementation will require discussion and interpretation by the musicians and the conductor, implicit comparison with previous performances and those of other ensembles, and perhaps even with other pieces by the same composer. The important point, however, is not that a precise solution be found, but that the score be consulted as a plan, so that evaluations are made, deviations detected between the current performance and that which is intended, and appropriate adjustments implemented.

Scores can also serve the purpose of establishing the standard from which a performance is intended to deviate. If the score describes the standard way of performing a piece but the ensemble seeks to enhance the standard version or provide some new variation of it, then it can signal its intent to change by utilizing the original score as the baseline from which systematic departures are to be made. Hence, the score is not necessarily the holy grail from which excellence derives directly. Rather it is a referent from which unintended deviations are identified and corrected, as well as a baseline from which desired variations in performance can be systematically specified:

...The conductor Sir Colin Davis relates a story about performing Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex" for an audience including the composer. After the concert, Stravinsky asked Sir Colin, "Young man, why did you take Jocasta's aria so slow?" Sir Colin answered that he was following the metronome mark. The composer replied, "My boy, the metronome mark is just a beginning." (Tommasini, 1999a, p.26)

Communication

In musical ensembles, several different channels of communication can be important to the evaluation and adjustment process. The channel between musicians and their leaders, e.g., the conductor, is often of primary importance. One major responsibility of the conductor is to detect and correct deficient aspects of the ensemble's operations. Part of the conductor's job is to listen carefully to each of the players, perhaps especially to the section leaders, to identify notes or phrases that need improvement, and to offer instructions on how the corrections can be best accomplished. The most talented conductors know the music so well, and have such keen hearing and discernment of pitch and rhythm, that they can
pick out small individual nuances even in a large ensemble. And what they cannot
pick up themselves will hopefully be detected by section leaders and corrected
directly or relayed to the conductor for attention:

Mr. Maazel, who is said to have perfect pitch and a photographic memory, had an earlier
experience with a resentful orchestra – at the age of 11. Asked by Toscanini to conduct
two summer concerts of the NBC Symphony Orchestra, the child prodigy arrived at a
rehearsal to find the players sucking lollipops. His quick detection of a wrong note is
said to have dispelled their disdain. Mr. Maazel...usually conducts without a score and
is known for precision with his baton and an attention to details. (Blau, 1982, p.50)

However, perhaps the best, most enduring ensembles are those which feature
not only clear communication from leaders to individual musicians, but also
effective communication in the reverse direction, and laterally among musicians as
well. Indeed, mutual patterns of communication may even offset the need to rely
heavily on central leadership by assuring that unsatisfactory playing is detected and
adjustments made through mutual, collaborative deliberations at the subgroup
level. Section leaders, especially the concertmaster, are important in this process:

“I try to make the job easier for the musicians and the conductor,” said Ms. Ingraham.
“As concertmaster you are in a sense, the assistant conductor. You have to know what
the rest of the orchestra is doing. And if you hear something within the section that you
feel the conductor is not asking for, you must say something.” (Kraus, 1982, p.17)

Leonard Slatkin’s experience with the St. Louis Symphony reveals a pattern of
mutual understanding (around a common purpose) and good communication
between players and conductor during rehearsal:

Orchestra and conductor seem fellow pilgrims on a quest for the Sibelius Second...The
orchestra responds reflexively to Slatkin’s demands – the tympani right on time for a
clap of Sibelian thunder, the flutes wild as Northern birds. A perfectly contoured
crescendo sweeps from near inaudibility to an explosion of sound that fills the entire
hall. As the last chord dies away, so clean and unanimous that it seems to have been
produced by a seraphic organ, the musicians break into startled laughter. Are they really
playing this well?

They are indeed. Slatkin, red in the face and drenched with sweat looks out at his spent
forces and grins. “O.K.,” he says, with calculated understatement. “I think I can live
with that.” (Page, 1992, p. 133-134)

In many famous ensembles, a one-way pattern of communications from
conductor to players is legendary. Arturo Toscanini serves as one example:

Many tales are told about his explosiveness. Indeed, his treatment of the players – who
nonetheless rarely questioned his musical genius – was so abusive that when his young
granddaughter visited a rehearsal one day she asked, logically: “Why don’t the
musicians yell back at Grandfather?” (Carlinsky and Goodgold, 1991, p.69)
In the long run such oppressive behavior may be dysfunctional. Brilliant conductors with inspired concepts and plans for playing the music, the ability to communicate those intentions to talented players, and to detect and scold those making errors, is certainly one way of creating at least temporary improvement in an ensemble. Examples of this are not uncommon, but it is not a formula for continued greatness because it relies unduly on the talents of one individual leader and it contains the potential for deterioration if talented players are alienated or strong central direction cannot be sustained, as the experience of the Cleveland Orchestra after George Szell appears to reflect (Page, 1992, p.48).

A more stable approach is to cultivate two-way communications between leaders and players. The strategy of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, for example, is to deliberate as a group over needed changes and corrections, and to rotate leadership for different pieces. In other more conventional but successful ensembles, the authority of the conductor is preserved, but the players can also voice their judgements so that conductors may hear their constructive feedback or new ideas and maintain some range of flexibility to act on their own:

For Dohnanyi, the ideal conductor is one who doesn’t conduct at all. “The question is, how do you get to that point where you can lay down your baton, where the orchestra becomes a large chamber group?” he asked. “You have to give them a little help, especially in the transitions from one tempo to another. I think music-making is more important than any baton technique. When I was studying one summer in Tanglewood, it was Lenny Bernstein who told me, ‘As long as it works, do whatever you want.’ If you overconduct, you risk losing the spirit.” (Rockwell, 1988, pp.64, 66)

Ensembles obviously also receive important feedback from external sources including audiences and critics. These sources provide different kinds of information. The critic or reviewer is sometimes like a shadow conductor, usually with some capacity to make expert judgments on the quality of play, the appropriateness of program selections, and various individual and collective lapses in the performance of the ensemble. Seiji Ozawa’s experiences with critics during his tenure with the Boston Symphony Orchestra are illustrative:

The 1998-99 season-long celebration of Mr. Ozawa’s 25th anniversary with the symphony drew varying critical assessments. Writing in The New York Times in November, James R. Oestreich praised his conducting of the biting, driving “Miraculous Mandarin” by Bartok... But in February at Carnegie Hall, another Times critic, Bernard Holland, detected “a certain weariness” and said that Mr. Ozawa made the Beethoven Violin Concerto “sound almost vulgar.”

In an article in the Wall Street Journal last December, Greg Sandow likened the Boston Symphony under Mr. Ozawa to “a painting that badly needs to be restored.” (Blumenthal, 1999, pp.A1, A15)

Critic qualifications vary widely and their evaluations can be off base, but ensembles do well to consider their views seriously. Although they have some
incentive to be provocative in order to sell newspapers or make names for themselves, reviewers offer a relatively objective, knowledgeable source of evaluative information mostly devoid of the personal agendas or political factors that can affect judgments inside the organization. On the other hand, the actual content of the review may not always matter that much. As composer Philip Glass argues, it may be better to be reviewed than not reviewed, no matter what the review itself says (Page, 1992, p. 77).

Indeed, filling the seats by bringing attention to performances is perhaps a principal contribution of reviewers. After that, audience reactions become another source of feedback, albeit more diffuse in character and harder to interpret than reviewer assessments. If attendance wanes the ensemble knows something is wrong, but precisely what is wrong may be difficult to discern. It could be the quality of the playing, the repertoire, the cost of attending, the convenience or comfort of the venue, or other factors. If there is a change in attendance, the ensemble needs to ask itself what else has changed that may account for the loss. If there is an increase in popularity it should try to understand that too. For example, in San Francisco, recent success has been attributed to the new music director Michael Tilson Thomas whose vitality, compared to the previous director, attracted the attention of a younger generation of music lovers (Tommasini, 1999b).

The reactions of audiences during performances also provides relevant feedback information. Cool or hostile receptions signal either that the performance was not done well or that the selected piece was unappealing. The latter in turn may raise questions about what the appropriate repertoire should be, or whether the ensemble should try to appeal to a different audience segment. Enthusiastic receptions can reinforce confidence in, and encourage maintenance of, current repertoire, but they can also be misleading. Standing ovations by diminishing, narrowly constituted or aging audiences can deceive ensembles into thinking they are on the path to continued success. Ensembles must seek to ask, through surveys or other means, what kinds of people are attending and why they are satisfied or dissatisfied, and they must question other groups who represent potential future audience segments or may have already dropped from attendance. And sometimes ensembles may simply be stretching their audiences too far and may have to wait for them to catch up if their objective is to plow new ground by educating to new musical ideas. Composer Steve Reich recalls a concert that included his modern piece “Four Organs”:

I remember when Michael Tilson Thomas and I played “Four Organs” on an otherwise typical Boston Symphony Orchestra program at Carnegie Hall in 1973. The subscribers came to hear the other music — C.P.E. Bach, Mozart, the Bartok “Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta” and the Liszt “Hexameron”. There was a pretty full house and, at times during my piece, I would say that well over three-quarters of the people were not just booing but really enraged — shaking umbrellas, you know, so loudly during that piece that, on stage, we began to lose count... There was so much active feedback from the audience that we got lost, and Michael had to shout out the numbers so that we could know what bar we were in. When the piece was over, a small crowd was bravoing and a
much larger crowd booing just as strongly as possible. And the reactions of the press! “Primitive” was one of the kinder epithets. (Page, 1992, p.70)

Such experiences notwithstanding, multiple communications channels are needed for effective evaluation and adjustment in musical ensembles, both for the purpose of monitoring short term performance and for ensuring continuing adjustment and improvement in the long run. And information through these multiple channels must be carefully interpreted. Even musicians hear only what they want to hear if they are not careful to structure and analyze their communications channels appropriately. On the other hand, sometimes good performance is acknowledged only by the professionals who are sensitive and schooled enough to recognize it. Speaking of his father’s Hollywood String Quartet, Leonard Slatkin relates:

This was a West Coast group and, as such, had to deal with Eastern chauvinism throughout its lifespan...I mean, after all, how could a New Yorker possibly take something called the Hollywood String Quartet seriously? But the group had quite a reputation among musicians. (Page, 1992, p.136)

Education

Education and training play important roles in supporting effective feedback within an organization. The higher the level of sophistication attained by players in an ensemble, the greater the potential for careful monitoring relative to complex standards and procedures, the more effective communications can be, and the more capacity there is for self-correction. The first two of these points are fairly obvious. Better musicians are more discerning in interpreting scores and more capable of implementing instructions given to them, either orally or in writing. Moreover, the level of player sophistication affects the extent of constructive discourse that can take place among players and leaders in efforts to diagnose problems and devise and implement effective solutions. Just as importantly, education and training gives ensemble players an enhanced ability to monitor and measure themselves. A professional musician is likely to have achieved an inner sense of quality, both in his or her own playing and in how well the ensemble plays together. At this level, individuals can make numerous small mutually accommodating adjustments, which cumulatively may lead to higher levels of ensemble performance. Interestingly, swing bands and modern jazz bands have taken different approaches to such adjustments in search of excellence, the former emphasizing coordination and the latter innovation:

Where swing bands had made virtues of punch and precision, restricting solos in favor of orchestral unity, the small bands of modern jazz didn’t mind an occasional misfire as they pushed towards frontiers. At times, the big bands had come within Lindyng distance of the classical-music ideal of analyzing and practicing and rethinking and polishing a performance – perfecting it for a concert-hall recital.
But with modern jazz the notion of a perfect performance, always a dicey one in music that prizes improvisation, receded once again. Jazz musicians aren’t searching for timeless perfection (although the best small groups, like the World Saxophone Quartet, deliver their ensemble arrangements with gorgeous unanimity) – they’re acting and reacting in the moment of performance. Within a composition, innumerable details are the result of on-the-spot choices. (Pareles, 1987a, p.H22)

Practice

Rehearsals are a key means for ensembles to perfect their play in many respects – in coordinating their efforts, in detecting and correcting individual performance problems, in shaping their overall style of play, in testing new ideas for repertoire and experimenting with innovations of various kinds. In evaluation and adjustment terms, rehearsals represent a major opportunity for ensembles to take stock of where they are, to facilitate constructive dialogue between leaders and players in order to work out issues, and to indulge in group thinking about selections for the repertoire and the image and style the ensemble wants to project.

Especially for highly skilled ensembles, the value of the rehearsal is not so much as a drill to ensure by repetition that everyone knows their parts or cues, but rather to provide the opportunity, in a relaxed atmosphere prior to the tension of the performance itself, to reflect on their performance as whole, and to detect and adjust for unanticipated problems associated with the current program. Often, highly skilled musicians can get by with minimal rehearsal or even none at all. However, this is usually a short term proposition at best. Long term excellence requires the feedback and adjustment that rehearsals can facilitate, even for professionals. A contrast in approaches to rehearsal is found among jazz ensembles:

Horace Silver’s quintets, the Modern Jazz Quartet, and other great ensembles usually play well-rehearsed pieces and refine their ensemble playing over months or years of performances. But Miles Davis preferred to put together performances and recordings in the most casual way possible, letting things fall into place spontaneously. (Owens, 1995, p.224)

What Davis may have lost in preparation appears to have been gained in the excitement born of spontaneity that he sought. Nonetheless, the excellence achieved through spontaneity is still based on substantial prior preparation and improvement over time:

A typical case is his 1956 recording of the old popular song, Bye, Bye, Blackbird...The preparation for this recording could have been no more than Davis announcing the title and key, and counting off the tempo. Yet because each player knew the piece, knew from previous experience what kinds of rhythms and textures to play, and knew each others’ musical habits, the performance came together brilliantly. (Owens, 1995, p.225)
Incentives

Evaluate information and correctional advice will have little effect if the recipients of that information have no reason to heed it. Fortunately musicians, especially highly accomplished ones, normally have pride of craftsmanship, are concerned about their individual reputations, and usually wish to achieve what is expected of them. If they have a strong sense of common purpose, so much the better. Moreover, ensembles offer multiple incentives to respond constructively to feedback. For example, musicians play in peer groups in which there is substantial social pressure and where they are counting on one another to maintain quality and meet mutual expectations. Second, professional players are engaged in an employment relationship with their ensembles. They are therefore concerned with maintaining both the viability of their own positions and the prosperity of the ensemble from which they derive income.

But there are also situations in which incentives to ignore feedback can predominate. Itinerant ensemble leadership may offer advice but never be present to acknowledge its implementation. Indeed, such advice may even conflict with that provided by the next leader. Orchestras with a plethora of guest conductors may experience such problems. So too, itinerant players who go from one ensemble to another are unlikely to pay close attention to feedback intended to improve ensemble playing unless they plan to settle in for a while. Christoph von Dohnanyi provides an example:

"I had tremendous difficulty in Hamburg....The thing I hate is when opera orchestras say: 'Today you'll have these players, tomorrow you'll have those, and we don't even know who is playing for the third rehearsal'. I had to fight. For one thing, intonation suffers. A first oboist who does not know his partner is always thinking: Is he high on that G or is he flat?" (Page, 1992, p.49)

Perhaps the best incentive that ensembles can provide for effectively implementing evaluative feedback is to ensure that follow-up behavior receives proper credit. Indiscriminate criticism or the issuing of commands to make this or that change will be ineffective if follow-up behavior is not monitored or acknowledged. Mutual acknowledgment of adjustments made and improvements resulting from those adjustments are the most elementary, but also among the most effective incentives that can be provided to ensure continuous improvement. Here is how Mark Stringer, an assistant conductor to Leonard Bernstein, describes Bernstein’s approach to this process:

"He was terribly supportive of his students’ early progress...Just like a parent, you known – what a nice crayon drawing you made for me! Later on, if he thought you could handle it, he’d tell you ways that your performance might have been improved. But, at the time, he just gave you a kick in the pants to get you out there and then wrapped you in his arms when it was all over and you were safely backstage again." (Page, 1992, p. 252)
Leadership

Clearly leadership plays a key role in virtually all elements of the process of evaluation and adjustment. In musical ensembles, the conductor is usually the individual who chooses the score and then monitors performance according to that score. The ensemble leader also sets the protocol for communications. He or she provides evaluative and corrective information to the musicians, and also (hopefully) takes suggestive feedback from the players themselves. In addition, the leader is the “boundary spanner,” translating the feedback received from audiences and reviewers into programmatic and operational adjustments intended to improve audience reactions. Musical directors play key roles in musician education as well, either engaging directly in teaching through a formal player development program, or otherwise ensuring that continuing education is a part of their musicians’ regimen. Certainly the conductor controls the rehearsal process where a great deal of the coaching and correction in ensembles takes place, and he or she also dispenses at least some of the incentives and rewards associated with playing in the ensemble. Such leader-dispensed rewards may range from verbal compliments or chastisement to changes in role assignments within the ensemble, and even to the material terms of employment. Within institutional constraints (such as collective bargaining agreements), the ensemble leader can make the connections between the quality of performance and the dispensation of these rewards. Even verbal compliments can make a big difference:

One of the most plaintively expressed sorrows of orchestra life is lack of individual recognition. “We did Stravinsky’s ‘Le Sacre du Printemps’ not long ago,” says Joseph Robinson, the [New York Philharmonic] orchestra’s principal oboe. “We have a wonderful new bassoonist, Judith LeClair, and she played solos brilliantly. Not a word in the reviews about her. We feel our anonymity. When we play well, they write about the conductor but not about us.” (Holland, 1981, p.36)

Perhaps the most important role of leadership in the evaluation and adjustment process comes in envisioning the ensemble’s potential, setting expectations for the quality of its play, articulating its identity and common purpose, and guiding the ensemble towards achieving that vision. The standards to which an ensemble is held derive not only from composers’ instructions in written scores, but more importantly from the guidance and expectations of its leadership. Leadership is instrumental in setting out a vision and set of standards, including choosing the repertoire, interpreting the scores, communicating expectations to ensemble members and holding them accountable for these expectations. Whether the leadership is singular or collective, it is what is in the head of the leaders that ultimately frames what the ensemble can achieve. Like Beethoven, who composed many of his greatest works even after he lost his hearing, leadership must imagine what the ensemble should sound like, so that comparisons may be made with the actual performances and then coached, nurtured and corrected accordingly. Christoph Von Dohnanyi’s leadership of a Cleveland Orchestra performance of
Schubert's C major symphony illustrates the process:

Much has been written about the expansive nature of this work, which indeed can seem interminable if the conductor is in the mood for a leisurely stroll through a Viennese park. Not Dohnanyi. From the opening theme, he sent Schubert on a vigorous walk, avoiding the traps of ponderousness and invigorating every phrase...Orchestrally, it was a dumbfounding experience. The Cleveland musicians were so immersed in the narrative, aware of one another's place in the scheme of things and quick to heed Dohnanyi in terms of balance and energy that the score evinced the pristine, gleaming character it should possess, but only rarely does. (Rosenberg, 1999, p.7-B)

The Circumstances for Achieving and Maintaining Excellence

The challenges for attaining and maintaining excellence vary considerably with the character of the organization and the environment in which it operates. The size, complexity and professional sophistication of the organization all affect its quest for excellence, as do the stability of the organization's environment and the complexity of the work in which it is engaged.

Size

The larger the ensemble, the more difficult it will be for leadership to diagnose problems and pinpoint sources of difficulty. More reliance must be put on a reporting system through which section leaders monitor their own subgroups and either make corrections themselves or pass along relevant information to the ensemble's director. In smaller ensembles, deviations from desired performance parameters by individual players or by small clusters of players are easier to discern. Moreover, there are stronger incentives in small groups, because of social pressure, to maintain satisfactory performance levels and to respond to evaluative feedback. In large organizations, even after problems are diagnosed, change may be resisted more strongly and take longer to achieve.

Certainly, it is easier to achieve a common sense of identity and purpose in a smaller ensemble. The challenges of building and maintaining a large orchestra around a common purpose are substantial. As Rockwell notes, it requires imposing discipline and clear direction, as well as a gentle willingness to "prod underachievers and root out incompetents" (1988, p.56). Even the best music directors have trouble in this area. For example, Leonard Bernstein was noted for his vision, enthusiasm and vitality but an indifference to the hard, sometimes distasteful work of orchestra building (Rockwell, 1982).

There are also advantages to size in achieving and maintaining long term excellence. In a larger organization, there is more opportunity for individual advancement. Hence, the larger organization supports stronger incentives for individuals to excel in order to move up to higher status positions or into leadership roles. In addition, larger organizations can create special niches for achieving excellence which are unattainable by smaller organizations. There is
really no substitute, for example, for the robust sound of a full symphony orchestra, a big jazz band, or a full chorus. Given its complexity, the simple achievement of a flawless performance by a large ensemble is remarkable in itself, and an avenue to a particular version of excellence:

Otto Klemperer made a famous recording of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* about twenty-five years ago. From a musicological point of view, we know his reading to be problematical — it is massive, heavy and semi-operatic, realized with a huge orchestra and chorus. But the terror, the pity, the grave power of this drama come across with unforgettable intensity. Compared to this monolith, most of the recordings for smaller, more stylistically appropriate ensembles seem cautious and scholastic, almost trivial. (Page, 1992, p.224)

**Heterogeneity**

For a given size, heterogeneous ensembles present different challenges to achieving excellence than homogeneous ensembles. In one sense, heterogeneity makes achieving excellence more difficult. Many different specialties must be mastered at once, and these must be coordinated successfully with one another. Leadership must be capable of evaluating many different types of contributions (inputs) to the ensemble’s production, uniting different instrumental interests around a common idea, and providing feedback both on the individual efforts of ensemble players as well as their mutual adjustment to one another. A choral director must know the human voice in its various registers, but the orchestra conductor must understand strings, brass, woodwinds, and percussion playing of all types.

In another sense, however, the process of evaluation and adjustment is easier in heterogeneous ensembles. Organizing the ensemble into different instrument sections makes it simpler to pinpoint performance problems and to utilize local expertise (section leaders) and mutual feedback among section players to detect errors and make appropriate adjustments:

The first clue that Dohnanyi’s Beethoven wouldn’t be stale came as the musicians took their places on-stage. In the style of orchestras of the classical period, the second violins sat at Dohnanyi’s right, which heightened the separation of duties between first and second violins. (Rosenberg, 1993, p.30)

Sectioning logically falls along the lines of instrumentation — like instruments with like instruments — strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion, etc. However, there is no reason why such departmentalization cannot be implemented within more homogenous organizations as well. Within a chorus, for example, basses, tenors and soprano voices can be separated, and even within completely homogenous large ensembles such as a hundred tubas, sections can be set up either arbitrarily or according to different skill levels or part assignments (first tubas, second tubas, etc.) Going even further, even if all tubas are playing the same musical lines, one can still organize them into sections spatially, for purposes of evaluation and
adjustment. Such sectioning is more natural in heterogeneous ensembles but this approach may also be applied to homogeneous ensembles. Indeed, this strategy even offers an advantage to homogeneous ensembles not available to heterogeneous ones – the ability to compare the performance of similar sections within the ensemble. If two or more homogenous sections play the same part then they can serve as benchmarks for one another, and to a certain extent the ensemble can take advantage of the implicit competition among these sections to improve the playing of each. Comparing violins with violins is certainly more effective than comparing violins and trumpets, if one is trying to offer one or another section an example of how it should be playing.

Finally, just as size offers a path towards uniqueness and hence a special way for an ensemble to excel, heterogeneity can do the same. Special excellence can be found not in being more or less homogeneous or heterogeneous per se, but rather in working with unusual combinations of instruments or using certain instruments in unusual ways. For example, reversing the roles of strings and low brass in playing melody versus harmony might provide a way for a heterogeneous ensemble to achieve unusual effects or a special style. Mixing conventional orchestra instruments with band instruments is potentially another way to exploit heterogeneity for achieving excellence. To this day, for example, it is still the rare orchestral piece or classical ensemble that includes saxophones or saxophone pieces in its instrumentation. Sir Thomas Beecham seemed to have something like this in mind in his performance of Handel’s Messiah though it is unclear if he achieved excellence in this effort or could build a whole ensemble identity around this vision:

...he spiced up Handel’s chaste Baroque instrumentation with a battery of tubas, trombones, cymbals, xylophones and other sore thumbs, engaged a giant chorus and equally sumptuous orchestra, and produced an exuberant, idiosyncratic (and loud) Messiah – a joyful noise, indeed! (Page, 1992, p.222)

Professionalism

Almost by definition, organizations whose work forces include professional employees can achieve higher levels of performance quality. They employ people with the training that prepares them for taking on more difficult tasks and performing those tasks more capably. Moreover, professionals are indoctrinated to standards of excellence as part of their educational and work experiences, and the best professionals routinely apply their own high standards to themselves in the course of their work. In addition, professionals often demonstrate by their career choice an intrinsic, long term dedication to their field of endeavor and an internal motivation to continually achieve higher levels of performance quality no matter what the organizational setting.

But there is an underside to professionalism as well, and lessons to be learned from the examples of amateurs. Professional musicians must depend on their playing to make a living and they can become dispirited by the circumstances they
must sometimes endure in order to ensure an adequate income. They may burn themselves out and lose the original fervor they brought to their art, or the common sense of purpose with which they may have joined an ensemble. Some professionals find solace and renewal in freelancing careers that provide a stream of fresh experiences to balance against the too frequent drudgery of professional ensemble playing:

By its very nature, freelancing appears to prevent the burnout from which many members of permanent orchestras complain. "In St. Luke's and most of the groups that I play with," continues Mr. Lutzke [a cellist], "people still have a real sense of enjoyment in what they're doing, and it surfaces in the performances. Very often we're playing a piece for the first time. A permanent orchestra will play the same concert four times in a series and generally performs the same repertory over and over...For us, every concert is absolutely new and fresh, and we're on the edges of our chairs to make it right. It breeds vitality and freshness. It's what makes it exciting." (Elliot, 1988, pp.27, 30)

Amateurs are different. They play only for the love of playing. They may not have the same level of skill or understanding of the music that professionals may have, or the single-minded dedication that drives many professionals to reach their full potential or achieve distinction for their ensemble, but they often bring a fresh love to their musical work that can compensate for whatever they may lack in formal training and experience:

"The insistence upon remaining by and of the community is not a bad thing", asserts Mark Arton, musical director of the Bay Area orchestra, which in its 14th year plays three concerts on its $12,000 budget. "Sure, we can't give a performance as polished as the New York Philharmonic....But I believe our audiences, even without the polish, get out of the music what the composer intended."

"It takes careful programming, doing pieces we're capable of doing and also keeping away from well-known works so that if it isn't absolutely right the audience won't know it. But you know, we bring something to the music that the professionals who take their playing for granted can't. The struggle to excel creates a kind of excitement in the hall that's missing with routine perfection." (Delatiner, 1982, pp.9)

Amateurs and professionals also differ in the way they may react to evaluation of their work and guidance to change or improve it. Amateurs, in their enthusiasm, may embrace opportunities to learn more about the art and to become better players. They may also consider themselves privileged simply to be playing in an ensemble that gives them the opportunity to contribute to a musical performance and work with other musicians. But they are also volunteers, and if the demands on their playing become too severe they can become discouraged or even resentful.

All this is to say that the challenges to seeking excellence differ for ensembles that are primarily professional versus primarily amateur. Leaders of professional ensembles have more skill capacity with which to achieve a high quality of play or to undertake more challenging pieces. However, they must also be prepared to
face resistance to their guidance from professionals who may they think they know better, or to deal with the indifference of professionals who are burned out, have become cynical or discouraged, or have reached plateaus in their careers.

There are also obviously different paths to excellence for professional versus amateur groups. Professional ensembles achieve excellence by playing at the top of their art or by pushing out the boundaries of standard repertoire. Amateur ensembles achieve excellence by the exuberance and the enthusiasm they excite among themselves and their fans. Amateurs can also prod professionals by reminding them of why they became musicians in the first place – love of the music. One of the challenges to professional ensembles is to constantly renew the spirit on which amateur ensembles regularly rely:

“This sounds corny,” said [Marlene] Krause 48 [flutist with the Suburban Symphony Orchestra], “but I think it’s a privilege to be able to play some of this music. You sit in the middle of all these people making Beethoven’s Fifth and you feel really lucky.” (Sowd, 1990, p.31)

**Task Complexity**

One obvious way in which organizations excel is to take on tasks that are extremely difficult, perhaps never before accomplished, and carry them out successfully or better than others have previously achieved. Just as in physical exploration, there are mountains that can be climbed in music and other fields. The organization that gets to the top of the highest mountain, or most difficult mountain to climb, or the next frontier, achieves a certain kind of excellence.

Certain composers have been known to accommodate ensembles’ appetites for difficult conquests! Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* provides but one example:

At last Thursday’s performance of the *Missa Solemnis* at Avery Fisher Hall, Kurt Masur had all the virtuosity he needed. The New York Philharmonic gleamed; the New York Choral Artists and the American Boy-choir knocked down one scary passage after another. It was impressive and almost too easy. This is not easy music.

Why did Beethoven make things so hard for the rest of us? Mozart and Liszt wrote music that likes to be played, though both are difficult in their separate ways. One explanation says that Beethoven was mad (which he must have been). Another is that he didn’t care (he said as much, famously to a complaining violinist about another piece): Beethoven wanted an effect, and it was up to the performer to realize it. (Holland, 1999a, pp. B1,3)

While taking on challenging tasks (difficult music) is not the only path to excellence it is certainly a well recognized one in many fields. The risks associated with this route can be daunting. There is an obvious risk of failure. A poor performance of the *Missa Solemnis* achieves nothing but scorn. Audiences or critics, particularly for professional ensembles, are unlikely to applaud a “nice try”. Another risk is that the mission will be achieved but not appreciated. A successful
performance of the Missa Solemnis achieves an exquisite effect that audiences appreciate. A technically perfect performance of a piece by Schoenberg or Ives which might be equally as difficult, might still leave audiences cold and unappreciative. Excellence may require not only a wise choice of task difficulty but also selection of a task that is satisfying in other ways. Ensembles can indeed achieve excellence as players of Schoenberg or Ives but they must find a receptive context for such performances if they are to do so. Excellence requires that the difficulty of the task match external expectations as well as internal organizational capacity. Sometimes, as in a 1990 concert of the Los Angeles Philharmonic led by Andre Previn, these forces are not easy to reconcile:

Andre Previn and the Los Angeles Philharmonic brought the best program I've heard from either of them to Avery Fisher Hall Friday night...The Shostakovich (Fourth Symphony) is not an easy work but amply repays any concentration that a listener may bring to it. After the long first movement, however, there was the usual noisy exodus by disgruntled patrons, apparently upset by the introduction of dread dissonance into their digestive meanderings.

What followed was an aesthetic Boston Tea Party of sorts. As the escapees clacked righteously up the aisle, Previn, gently, effectively fought back. He turned and regarded the disruption with a gaze of weary amazement, shaking his head. The rest of the audience caught on and began to clap and stomp — at first facetiously, in honor of the departing guests (who wisely quickened their step) and then with genuine appreciation for Previn, the orchestra, and especially, Shostakovich. When the symphony ended...the listeners who stuck it out — about 90 percent of the hall....rose and provided an ovation of unusual intensity. (Page, 1992, p.200)

Environmental Instability

A dynamic environment creates special opportunities as well as risks for achieving organizational excellence. Organizations that can catch the wave and take advantage of changing conditions can carve out new niches for themselves and be the first and (at least temporarily) the best at what they do. Without Rock and Roll there would have been no Billy Halley and the Comets and ultimately no Beatles. In music, sea changes in popular taste (e.g., the advent of Rock and Roll), professional thinking (e.g., minimalism) or technological breakthroughs (e.g., electronic instruments) create new arenas of competition. But such changes also restrict opportunities for excellence when certain fields shrink at the expense of others. As exciting as Dixieland Jazz can be, the quest to be best in this arena will necessarily be confined to a handful of serious rivals. This constriction has an uncertain effect on the quality of performance achieved by the competitors that remain. The reduced set of opportunities will necessarily weed out all but the best among contemporary competitors. However, the best will ultimately be selected from a thinner field over the long run. A strategic decision for any organization is whether to try to excel in a smaller or contracting arena or to be relatively less outstanding in a larger or growing arena. Since alternative arenas are likely to be
so different from one another when major environmental shifts take place, any particular ensemble may have little choice but to stick with what it knows how to do best. Lawrence Welk had his following among polka lovers, but he would no doubt have failed if he had tried to appeal to a wider audience by playing a more general selection of popular music. It is the rare organization that maintains its position of excellence in the face of major environmental changes by shifting genres. While not undertaken for reasons of environmental change, Duke Ellington’s foray into orchestral music illustrates the dangers of entering new territory which may not match one’s particular talents and which stray from the identity associated with success:

In his symphonic works, Duke Ellington, one of the natural masters of jazz, writes like a tourist. It is as if he had somehow bought the old lie that American music should emulate European classical tradition, rather than striking out on its own path...It’s a pity. A great popular song is much more useful, and “artistic,” thing to have around than an uninteresting symphony, and a composition for jazz band is not necessarily improved by arranging it for orchestra. (Page, 1992, p.182)

Finally and paradoxically, stability itself may be a formula for excellence in a changing environment. Organizations that can provide safe harbors for people seeking to escape the whirlwind of change, can excel in that stability. There will always be some market for classics, in whatever genre they occur. Count on the Preservation Hall Jazz Band to be there forever, keeping the flame of Dixieland Jazz alive as long as people have any interest in it at all. And, there may always be a Guy Lombardo’s band for New Year’s Eve, as well.

Priorities and Trade-offs

Echoing the theme of previous movements, the matrix of Table 5.1 signals a variety challenges faced by different ensemble stereotypes in seeking excellence by evaluating and adjusting their operations and performance over time.

Both the professional symphony and the high school orchestra are relatively large organizations that require more formal approaches to the seeking of excellence. Both are also internally diverse in their instrumentation, further challenging their capacities for communication and achieving a common understanding and approach to issues. However, the symphony enjoys the advantages of greater professional training of its members, and lower turnover – suggesting a stronger role for players in developing and maintaining a strategy for achieving and maintaining excellence.

By contrast, the jazz combo and rock groups, though also internally diverse, are small and informal, giving them potentially greater flexibility in communication, reaching common understandings and coordinating responses to problems and evaluative judgments. Again the jazz combo may have certain advantages of advanced musical training although the amateur rock band, with its
weaker orientation to convention, might have a more sensitive collective ear to the preferences of its audiences.

Table 5.1 Ensemble Attributes and Seeking Excellence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ensemble</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Professional Level</th>
<th>Heterogeneity</th>
<th>Task Complexity</th>
<th>Instability</th>
<th>Nonmusical Analog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symphony orchestra</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school orchestra</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz combo</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>boutique retailer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock band</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>small software company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church choir</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>government license bureau</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The church choir represents a middle ground, smaller and more homogeneous than the orchestras, and larger but also more homogenous than the rock group or jazz combo. Internal communications, common understandings and coordinated response are aided by this homogeneity but challenged by the size of this ensemble and the relatively low musical sophistication of its members.

The professional symphony orchestra can be compared to a hospital with many departments or specialties, each requiring high skill levels and professional training, all contributing to the complex overall task of healing patients with different kinds of illnesses. Like the hospital, the professional symphony takes on tasks (musical pieces/patient illnesses) at the highest level commensurate with its capacity. The high school orchestra, by contrast, is more like a hotel, responsible for carrying out in coordinated fashion the diverse tasks (housekeeping, check-in, food services, etc.) that make for a comfortable overnight stay. The overall challenge is not as severe or critical as it is for a hospital, and the skills required of the players not as technically complex. Still, achievement of excellence is certainly meaningful within the context of expectations for hotel performance.

The jazz combo may be compared to a boutique retailer, as noted in an earlier movement. Members of the combo are highly skilled in their moderately diverse instrumentation and they may seek to “push the envelope” of their music, both collectively and individually. Their products will therefore be unique and specialized, even one of a kind, hopefully appealing to audiences of like interests. In comparison, the amateur rock band may be compared to a small software company seeking to break into a large market with the best specialized product of its kind. This group also pushes the envelope, largely through collective experimentation, in the hope of finding a style or product that is new and widely appealing.

Finally, the church choir, as earlier noted, can be compared to a government
license bureau, albeit one that hopefully takes great pride in its work. The skill set of its participants is relatively undemanding, most participants perform similar parts, and turnover is relatively low. Seeking of excellence requires guidance from experienced leaders and the creation of a supportive work environment that encourages willing and enthusiastic participation.

Again, none of these stereotypes is completely characteristic of their counterparts in the musical world, nor are the suggested nonmusical analogs exact. Still, they are useful for prioritizing excellence-seeking strategies best suited to organizations that resemble each stereotype. The matrix in Table 5.2 describes nominal priorities for innovation strategies for each ensemble stereotype. In a real sense each of the strategies across the top of the matrix may be thought of as mechanisms of evaluation and adjustment. However, some are better suited than others for different kinds of ensembles or organizations. For the professional symphony orchestra, for example, the score (plan) is a very important referent, because it represents the intent of the composer – hence the standard to which the ensemble as a whole aspires. And, since the orchestra conductor is the primary interpreter of that score, leadership represents a key ingredient in the evaluation and adjustment process. It is the responsibility of the leader to listen and correct, in rehearsal and in reviewing performances, so that the orchestra can come as close as possible to the standard of composer intent.

Incentives play a role in this context as well, since the ensemble is large enough so that players who excel can be rewarded with more prestigious positions and more prominent parts. This too is usually under the control of the music director. Communications obviously plays a role in evaluation and adjustment in this kind of ensemble, but the size of the group largely limits such communication to leader-player directives and responses as well as some within-section discussion. Practice is also likely to be a limited strategy for seeking excellence in this kind of ensemble. While desirable and potentially effective, rehearsal time is constrained by resource budgets, labor union requirements and the demanding schedules of professional players. So too, promoting further education and training is probably not a productive option for already proficient players, whose own standards and motivations can usually be relied upon for self-improvement.

The high school orchestra requires a different strategic combination for evaluation and adjustment towards seeking excellence. Its players can benefit from all the additional education and practice that they can get. Investments in these areas are likely to yield substantial pay-offs, especially if designed within the context of improving weaknesses heard in ensemble play. Here, the role of the orchestra leader (conductor/teacher) is critical in leading the practices and providing advice and counsel as a teacher. The score remains a relatively important referent, not so much for achieving composer intent, as in providing concrete guideposts for the student musicians to check if they are playing the right notes in the right way at the right time. Incentives also play a part. Even players at the amateur level (and their parents!) appreciate recognition for achievement; hence incorporating opportunities for advancement within the ensemble in the evaluation and adjustment process can effectively contribute to seeking overall
excellence. Finally, communications will also play an important role, again mostly between music director and players (and mostly from the former to the latter). For this type of ensemble, players are less likely to effectively evaluate one another or to contribute substantially to the thinking of the leader.

### Table 5.2 Strategies for Seeking Excellence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>plans</th>
<th>communication</th>
<th>education</th>
<th>incentives</th>
<th>practice</th>
<th>leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symphony orchestra</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school orchestra</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz combo</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock band</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church choir</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The jazz combo and the rock band, by contrast, depend heavily on internal communications and practice sessions (or just playing together over long periods of time) as primary mechanisms of evaluation and adjustment. These ensembles are small enough to support intense, egalitarian, internal player discussions focusing on continual experimentation, and review and adjustment of their individual and collective performances. Leadership plays a role in both groups if there are within them distinguished individual players ("equals among equals") who are mutually recognized as visionaries for their ensembles and can help guide the evaluation and adjustment process and provide a sense of direction and aspiration.

For the rock group, education is likely to be a relatively productive means for amateur players to hone their individual skills and understanding of music in order to elevate the playing of the ensemble as a whole, whereas the professional jazz combo, with its accomplished players, is less likely to emphasize this means to seeking excellence. Finally, these ensembles are too small for incentives to be effective and neither are sufficiently formal to use plans (scores) for basic guidance on how to improve themselves, although the jazz combo may be more likely to reflect on its performance relative to state of the art improvisational techniques.

The church choir depends more strongly than the other ensembles on central leadership to evaluate, adjust and improve its performance over time. Practice, teaching, and learning to follow the scores, as facilitated by the music director, are likely to be key strategies for seeking excellence. Internal communications among players are less likely to be productive in this way, and the ensemble embodies limited opportunities for internal advancement, although outstanding individual work can be rewarded with soloing opportunities.
**Strategies for Excellence**

Overall, excellence is a continuing quest – a process more than an outcome or a specific level of achievement. It is a relative phenomenon as well. There must be some reference criterion or peer group compared to which an organization is considered to be excellent or wanting. As such, managers seeking excellence must engage in evaluative processes that allow their organizations to understand how well they are doing, relative to some standard or benchmark, or other appropriate criterion, and then to make adjustments to improve their performance relative to that referent. In this discussion we have identified at least three such processes.

First, managers can make use of *design specifications* as standards. What is it that the creators of the music had in mind for performance? Operationalizing those design standards for the tempo, pitch, volume dynamics, and feelings to be transmitted by the music, and gauging actual performance by those standards, is one way that long term excellence can be sought through a process of evaluation and adjustment. Conductors can ask “From all the evidence we have, is this what Beethoven had in mind?” Better yet, when the opportunity presents itself, a conductor can ask a living composer to compare a performance to the intent represented by the composer’s instructions and determine what adjustments are needed to meet that intent more closely.

Second, managers can make use of *environmental signals* to drive the quest for excellence. What are paying customers, donors and volunteers saying when they respond, or fail to respond well, to the programming that is offered? What are the audiences saying by their reactions to the ensemble’s performances? What are the critics saying and what adjustments can be made in response to these various signals?

Third, managers can make use of *competition*, both within the organization and with other organizations, to promote excellence. How well are some groups within the ensemble or some individuals within particular groups, doing relative to others? What adjustments can be made in the performance of particular sections in order to improve overall playing? And how well is the ensemble doing relative to other ensembles? Is the ensemble’s market share increasing or decreasing and what are critics and others saying about who is best at performing various pieces of the relevant repertoire? While there is no simple, singular standard by which ensembles can be rated against one another, the concept of standing relative to the competition, if properly taken in context, can serve as an incentive and guide for continual seeking of excellence:

The Cleveland Orchestra has received a rather nice New Year’s present. In the Jan.10 issue of *Time Magazine*....Michael Walsh writes that under music director Christoph von Dohnanyi the orchestra “has become the best band in the land.”...If the Times pronouncement increases the health of the Cleveland Orchestra at home and abroad by generating more financial support and sending more listeners to Severance Hall and record stores, the splash will serve a worthy purpose.

But...can we really pit orchestra against orchestra, like sports teams, and then rank
them?...If Clevelanders want to indulge in the nutsy business of ranking orchestras along the lines of a Symphonic Superbowl, they need to hear lots of orchestras...before they begin waving the pompons. Severance Hall could help out by booking the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics and the major orchestras of Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Amsterdam, Prague, London, St. Petersburg, Oslo, Stockholm, Paris, etc., etc.

Only after our ears become familiar with the artistic products from those cities will it be possible to make substantial statements about quality. For the time being, let's bask in our good fortune, thank the Cleveland Orchestra for its contribution to our artistic well being – and make a beeline for Severance Hall. (Rosenberg, 1994a, p.6-F)

Excellence can be fleeting and it does not take place in a vacuum. It is a relative concept, a moving target, but its quest is nonetheless a driving force in human achievement, both individually and collectively for organizations.

Case Studies

Citing organizations that are "excellent" in any absolute sense is a tenuous exercise, fraught with controversy about subjective judgments and appropriate criteria with which to measure performance. However, identifying organizations that aspire to excellence, and examining how they go about their quest to improve, is less difficult. The following cases offer alternative perspectives – each one best analyzed by comparing the organization to a different kind of musical ensemble.

The Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA)

ARNOVA is an association of researchers from various scholarly disciplines who share a common interest in studying voluntary and philanthropic activity, the behavior and performance of not-for-profit organizations, and policy issues affecting civil society and the not-for-profit sector of the economy. It was established in 1971 as the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars (AVAS) by a group of sociologists and political scientists who were primarily interested in voluntary behavior by individuals and groups. Until the late 1980s, ARNOVA (then known as AVAS) remained small and informal, publishing a low cost journal, holding its annual conference in inexpensive places, and attracting between a hundred and two hundred members. Over time, AVAS struggled to hold itself together with minimal resources and a part-time administrator to help its volunteer board of directors. However, as national interest in the nonprofit sector grew, beginning in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, AVAS began to attract a broader spectrum of scholars many of whom focused on economic, legal and policy issues of nonprofit organizations. While AVAS was the closest match they could find, these new members were really looking for a stronger organization that could bring together scholars from all of the various disciplines that were
beginning to contribute to an understanding of the nonprofit sector, and they also wanted a stronger focus on sectoral, policy and organizational issues relative to voluntary action.

By the end of the 1980s one could think of AVAS as a large chorus of individuals singing somewhat different tunes but most of whom wanted to sing in unison. There were differences over whether the organization should become much larger or more formal, but there was also a general feeling that AVAS ought to become a more effective organization for serving its members needs and contributing to a wider understanding of voluntary activity and nonprofit organizations. Given its character as a large, loosely organized and undisciplined chorus, AVAS required strong leadership and a plan (a score) to move it forward towards excellence. That leadership came first from a small group of leaders from both the old and new guards who met in retreats to find a compelling common identity for the association, and a new structure and set of goals with which the organization could realize that identity. These leaders opted for a name change that would signal special emphasis on the nonprofit sector as well as voluntary action, and broad inclusion of all contributing disciplines. This was a slightly new niche for ARNOVA that would ensure a broader base of support into the future. The leaders recommended changing the name of the association’s journal as well, from the *Journal of Voluntary Action Research* to the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, and perhaps most importantly of all, they decided that ARNOVA would need a full time staff, a permanent central office, and a substantial budget with which to conduct its business. These changes in turn required that ARNOVA seek substantial foundation funding.

The plan was accepted by the membership in 1990 and new board leadership was elected that was committed to writing a strategic plan and grant proposals to implement that plan. Again, strong central leadership, in the form of co-presidents of the board during the transition, stepped in to point the way and to help bring the membership along. Within the next few years, a rigorous strategic plan was formulated and adopted, substantial external funding was secured, and the first full-time permanent executive director and supporting staff were hired. From that point forward, strong leadership was exercised by the executive director working in close partnership with successive board presidents (who served two year terms), and effective processes of evaluation and adjustment were manifested primarily by continual referral to goals set forth in the score (strategic plan and associated grant proposals). The goals focused on the quality of the organization’s services, the diversity of its membership and the contribution of the association to society’s understanding of the nonprofit sector.

The results were dramatic and self-reinforcing. Membership grew over the decade of the 1990s from approximately 100 to over 1000, and ARNOVA became known as the leading scholarly association in nonprofit studies worldwide. In the year 2000, a successful transition was achieved to a new executive director who has initiated another strategic planning effort to review and update the original goals and to continue the process of measuring progress towards those goals. ARNOVA is now a stable and well functioning chorus, still with a modest level of
internal dissonance among its voices as is appropriate to that of a scholarly association, but with overall harmony relative to its general purpose and direction. Leadership and referencing of the score (plans), as well as internal dialogue (more in keeping with a professional than an amateur chorus) continue to be the mainstays of successful evaluation and adjustment in the quest for excellence.

Florida Sheriff Youth Fund

The Florida Sheriff Youth Fund (FSYF) was founded by the Florida Sheriffs Association in 1957 in the form of a Boys Ranch to help troubled boys before they got seriously involved with law breaking (Young, 1985). To a certain extent, this was a effort by the sheriffs to project a benevolent side to their public image as tough law enforcers. The Boys Ranch struggled in its early years, having only a small budget, serving just a few dozen boys, going through four different resident directors in four years, and floundering financially. Organizationally, it was like an amateur rock band, with a small cast of business leaders, local land owners, and leaders in the Sheriff’s Association, who were generous with their resources and time commitments, united in their aspirations to make the organization work, but who were improvising as they went along without any real leadership, vision, basic procedures, or sense of direction.

Things changed in 1961 with the hiring of a professional administrator by the name of Harry Weaver. Weaver brought strong leadership and managerial skills to the organization and also a larger and more coherent vision. He helped the sheriffs and their associates see that the organization could become a much more substantial, visible and efficient operation, and indeed a show case for their cause, by drawing on the good name of the sheriffs to generate resources from contributions of major donors and ordinary citizens who believed in law and order and helping kids. Ultimately, the sheriffs bought into Weaver’s vision, and the organization acquired a new identity and modus operandi. It was no longer a flailing rock band, but became more like a chamber orchestra, with Weaver conducting the ensemble so that the different parts worked in harmony according to his plan. Weaver’s plan included expansion and upgrading of the physical plant, and the addition of new facilities including a Girls Villa, and a Youth Ranch for sibling groups. Weaver also had a plan to consolidate the administration of these separate programs under a single organizational structure, an option that was previously precluded by provisions in the legal documents that established the original Boys Ranch. Weaver’s strategy was to build the organization through the awkward structure of separately incorporated organizations with distinct, though overlapping boards of directors and staffs, and then convince a court that it would be in the public’s best interest to consolidate these organizations into a single administrative entity. It was as if FSYF was transformed from an opera with semi-autonomous musical and theatrical companies struggling to work together, into a single orchestra with distinct instrument sections under a unified command and support structure. Weaver conducted his orchestra in flawless fashion, growing FSYF into a multimillion dollar, multi-campus program under his unified
administration by 1977. Strong leadership, which included boundary-spanning to ensure that support from the donor community was forthcoming, and reference to a plan were his primary instruments for evaluation and adjustment along the way and they continued to be so for sometime thereafter.

There is also a dimension in which the excellence of FSYF was limited by strategies that Weaver put into place. For all of the money that it raised and the marvelous facilities it constructed, FSYF really wasn't serving that many more children, nor was it serving a group of children with particularly challenging profiles. Weaver's evaluation and adjustment mechanisms were focused on his audience of donors who supported the sheriffs and who received recognition for their contributions to the organization. Partially because it avoided state funding, FSYF was not well attuned to outside voices more concerned with the problems of children. Until evaluation and adjustment was focused on this area as well, FSYF's quest for excellence would be limited in its scope. Just as orchestras need to constantly reassess their audience base in order to plan for the future, FSYF needed to expand its evaluation and adjustment process beyond the success it was having in the donor community.

**Diagnosing An Organization**

Given the ideas of organizational identity and the paradigm of evaluation and adjustment that lie at the heart of a search for excellence, it is especially appropriate to end here with a series of diagnostic questions that managers can ask themselves as they aspire for excellence in their organizations. First, and perhaps most fundamentally, managers may ask what is enduring and special about their organizations, and in what ways might their organizations potentially become excellent:

- How can my organization's identity be articulated in a manner that captures the consensus of its participants and illuminates the ways in which it seeks to excel?
- What is the common sense of purpose that can excite and inspire the organization's members to work together in achieving excellence?
- Can my organization distinguish itself through flawless (exquisitely coordinated) operations?
- Can my organization distinguish itself by virtue of an especially highly motivated work force?
- Can my organization distinguish itself by its ability to innovate and push the boundaries of conventional practice?
- How can the organization's products and services be selected to exploit the unique advantages associated with the organization's size and particular combination of skills and assets?
- What opportunities for excellence have been created by recent changes in the organization's environment? What opportunities have been restricted by
these changes? Are there new niches that the organization is well-positioned to exploit?
- When all is said and done, what makes my organization truly different and potentially better than others?

Next, managers may ask themselves questions about how they will gauge the level of performance of their organizations and make adjustments to improve performance:

- What criteria capture the organization's special sense of purpose and whether that purpose is being achieved?
- How well does my organization meet the standards set forth in its score (plans)? What corrections need to be made to improve performance relative to those specifications? Can the original planners and designers be consulted for their evaluative feedback?
- How can the organization constructively deviate from its score (existing plans) in order to improve its performance?
- How can two-way communications between organizational leaders and members (workers) be improved in order to facilitate constructive feedback?
- How can external evaluators (critics) be engaged to provide helpful feedback on organizational performance?
- How should changes in demand for the organization's services, and in customer evaluations of these services, be interpreted and translated into helpful adjustments of products and services?
- What information can be collected from current, former and potential consumers to guide the organization towards improving its products?
- With what other organizations can we compare ourselves? How well do we perform relative to those organizations?

Next, the manager can inquire about the various ways in which the organization's capacity for evaluation and adjustment can be increased:

- How can education and training be used to improve the ability of workers to discern and correct problems on their own and to communicate effectively with leaders?
- How can practice and simulated work sessions (rehearsals) be designed to effectively evaluate performance, ferret out problems, and make necessary adjustments in a relaxed and constructive atmosphere?
- How can turnover in the work force and in organizational leadership be minimized so that organizational participants maintain their incentives to take evaluative feedback seriously?
- How can changes made in response to constructive feedback be appropriately acknowledged and rewarded?
- How can the organization's size be exploited to create incentives for advancement connected to performance excellence?
- How can the organization be subdivided into sections that exploit the evaluation and adjustment flexibility of small groups, and the potential to compare one group with another?
- How can competition within the organization be used to promote evaluation and adjustment in pursuit of excellence?

Finally, the manager can ask questions about how the organization can invigorate itself with a renewed spirit for achieving excellence:

- How can the identity and common purpose of the organization be renewed or re-enforced and communicated in a way that inspires its members?
- How can inspired leadership be engaged to frame and articulate a vision and expectations for future excellence?
- What can be done to retain the spirit of amateurs in a professional work setting?
- What is the next logical challenge (task of greater difficulty) for the organization to address, one that will stretch its capacities but still be within reach?