Third Movement: Finding and Maintaining a Niche

Maybe the audience is better on the next block!

Achieving coordination and motivating the workforce are bedrock tasks of management. Yet superb ensemble and high motivation do not ensure organizational success. Even more basic is the requirement that the organization be doing something that people are willing to support. Without resources there will be no organization to coordinate and no workforce to motivate.

This is not to say that all organizations must produce something that is marketable in the conventional sense. Organizations support themselves in a variety of ways. A few are lucky enough to have internal resources provided to them by some act of past generosity or from surpluses accumulated over time, e.g., endowments created by year to year savings or donated by philanthropists or charitable organizations that wish to have a particular activity or program carried out in perpetuity. Some musical ensembles, such as the Cleveland Orchestra, are well endowed. In the short run, this can insulate against the need to prove one’s self constantly in the eyes of financial benefactors or customers, but it also
provides flexibility to experiment and take risks. Other ensembles are supported directly by those who do the organization's work, i.e., volunteers who carry out most of the organization's activity and who, in return, reap personal benefits or satisfaction from the contributions of their labor. Many musical groups operate in this mode: Amateur ensembles often play solely for their own satisfaction, and even professional ensembles involve a substantial element of playing at modest wages (discounted from what its players might earn elsewhere), for the love of it. However, most organizations depend primarily on financial resources derived from their external environments — either through sales of services or goods in the marketplace, maintaining a systematic flow of voluntary contributions, or through government support derived from taxation and ultimately mandated by voter-approved public policies.

Whatever their circumstances or chosen strategies, all organizations must find "niches" that can command the internal or external resources to sustain them. The closest exception is the endowed organization that may choose to live off past generosity or accumulated wealth. But even here, it is the rare endowed organization that finds it wise to stand still. Most endowed organizations tend to use their financial corpus as a base on which to build, and building requires appealing to those who can supply new resources. The alternative can be problematic: well endowed organizations can become insulated, grow flaccid and unresponsive to changes in their environments, and ultimately become targets for criticism, reform, restructuring or dissolution (e.g., see Hirschman, 1970 and Guthrie, 1996).

Achieving a viable niche is a much more serendipitous challenge than the core tasks of coordination and motivation. While coordination and motivation are essentially inward-looking management challenges subject to substantial management control, niche-finding requires looking outward into an uncertain, often changing environment. Still, there are important connections between the internal character and operations of an organization and how it finds its place in the world at large. Organizations, even fledgling groups, are not completely free to select any niche that appears, on the surface, to be attractive or remunerative. To the contrary, organizations must build on their internal strengths and capacities if they are to exploit external opportunities and be successful. It is the nexus between internal strengths and external opportunities that best defines successful niche-finding.

"Niche" is essentially an ecological concept derived from the study of natural, biological systems: organisms find their places in nature as predators and sources of nourishment in the food chain, and as competitors for limited natural resources to sustain themselves. The application of this metaphor to the social world is imperfect (Gould, 1996) and requires modification (Hannan and Freeman, 1989). In nature, biological niches are filled out through random mutations and subject to the harsh standards of Darwinian survival, while in the social world there can be more conscious planning and control, less dependence on random occurrences, and even the sustenance of inefficient forms over long periods of time by tenacious or obstinate supporters or through the protection of legal or social constraints that
immobilize resources and inhibit their transfer to more productive uses.

Still, the ecology metaphor provides important insights for organizations. A well coordinated and highly motivated organization that simply duplicates the programs of another, even if it is efficient and energetic, is liable to fail if the resource environment cannot support both, while a less polished organization that produces something unique may have greater success. For example, the Retired Men’s Chorus in Dennis, Massachusetts is far from a flawlessly performing ensemble but it has prospered for twenty years on the basis of its large repertoire of songs and its popularity among senior citizens (New York Times, 1987).

On the other hand, some have blamed the contemporary struggles of American symphony orchestras on too much duplication and narrowing of the repertoire:

We in the world of symphony orchestras are the custodians of staggering wealth; nearly 300 years’ worth of incredibly diverse music. We are not, however, doing a very good job with our stewardship. It is more than half century since Virgil Thompson noted that the active orchestral repertory was overwhelmingly dominated by “the 50 pieces.” It may be that “the 50” are really 77 or 113, but what Thompson deplored has not changed much. We lavish amazing expenditures of money, skill and spirit on nursing just a tiny part of the available repertory. (Steinberg, 1999, p.1)

Nonetheless, the specialized niche of classic works, both originals and imitations of those works, undergirds an important segment of the organizational ecology of musical ensembles. Composer Steve Reich laments:

... if I had a dime for every trace of The Rite of Spring I’ve heard in movie soundtracks, I’d be rich...I don’t think imitations will sap the power of the originals. If anything, because of familiarity with the sound, the original will come through more clearly...Ezra Pound once said that a classic is something that remains new and the best work is capable of re-creating the context of its times. (Page, 1992, p.120-121)

The choice of repertoire, and ultimately niche, reflects an ensemble’s particular resource base and market position. A well-endowed ensemble, or one which is the beneficiary of substantial, unrestricted voluntary support, has more flexibility to experiment with new works or musical genres than an ensemble that relies more heavily on box office revenues, and it must closely align itself with (or somehow shape) popular tastes. As economist Burton Weisbrod (personal communication) puts it, the latter is likely to play Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture more often (and presumably John Cage’s Concert for Piano and Orchestra less often) than the former.

The essential idea that the ecology metaphor contributes is that organizations must find their places within their environmental contexts. This may involve defining a new niche that no other organization has previously occupied. It may involve finding vacancies in the present landscape of known possibilities or competing for occupied places with other organizations by offering the same products or services in a better way. The borderline between the process of creating a new niche and searching for a viable, existing niche is very fuzzy.
Producing a known product more cheaply or at higher quality may involve a change in the production process or a new variation in the product itself. For example, the contemporary movement to play baroque or classical music on original instruments created a new niche despite the fact that the compositions being played were the same pieces by Mozart, Bach and Vivaldi. It remains to be seen whether this niche competes with or is complementary to playing early music on modern instruments (Rosenberg, 1998h).

The Elements of Niche-Finding

While some of the conventional elements of management may play a lesser and indirect role in the task of niche-finding than in the tasks of coordination and motivation, most are still important. Plans, communications, incentives and rewards, education and practicing (rehearsals) do contribute to effective niche-finding. Leadership is even more important.

Formal Plans and Procedures

As we have seen, musical scores, and songs and standard rules in jazz, while playing critical roles in the coordination of ensembles, serve only as a foundation to the final product of musical performance. Scores, for example, must not only be implemented to achieve the physical output of (hopefully well-coordinated) sound, they must be interpreted to give the music a particular flavor. Composers do much to guide ensembles with their scores, so that certain moods, rhythms, and melodic effects are achieved. But written scores go just so far in providing instructions for playing, and indeed instructions on scores can even be overruled or modified by ensembles that choose to do things differently. It is this room for interpretation of the score, or of the composer’s intent, that may allow an ensemble to achieve a special niche in the world of musical performance. Thus, two ensembles that play the same music may play it differently in ways that elicit support from alternative constituencies with different tastes. In classical music, for example, it is common to refer to the “Philadelphia sound” or the “Chicago sound” in differentiating the symphony orchestras in those cities. An ensemble’s lack of such identification may even be a signal that a problem exists, and that the ensemble has not achieved any special distinction. Indeed, some bemoan contemporary homogenization of orchestras across the board:

Thirty years ago, Russian, French and Czech orchestras still had quite special sounds, and there was a radical difference between, say, the Cleveland Orchestra and the Philadelphia, or the Concertgebouw Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic. Gradually, the characteristics are being ironed out. (Griffiths, 1999, p.32)

The process of interpretation falls largely to the leadership of musical ensembles, especially of large ensembles, or is developed through internal
discussion in smaller, more collaborative ensembles. Another strategy of niche-finding is to search for fresh scores themselves, i.e., to find essentially different projects or plans that the organization can undertake. For ensembles, this includes the uncovering of lesser known or forgotten works by recognized composers, or exploration of the works of unfamiliar composers. Some ensembles achieve unique and sustainable niches by emphasizing differing repertoire or combinations of programming than those offered by other organizations. The search for different repertoire may also fall to ensemble leadership or emanate from a deliberative process within collaborative organizations:

“\text{\textquote{I'm going to seize on the orchestra's limitations and celebrate them}},$\text{\textquote{Hugh Wolff, music director of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra}}\text{\textquote{said. \textquote{\textquote{It's a 34-player orchestra, and we're not going to play Brahms symphonies. Given that, it's incumbent upon me to search the widest possible spectrum for suitable repertory. One of my pet peeves is that the big orchestras have really narrowed their repertory. They've eliminated Bach and Handel partly out of fear of being stylistically embarrassed. But I feel at St. Paul we must go all the way back to 1600, the start of orchestral music. Sure, we have modern instruments, but it can be done in an informed way.}}}}$\text{(Schwarz, 1991, p.25)}$

\text{In jazz, of course, the song and the rules of improvisation are the linchpins of performances, but not necessarily the sources that differentiate one ensemble from another. Certainly, the Duke Ellington bands were unique in part because they specialized in the leader's compositions (his songs), played the way he wanted them to be played. However, for many if not most jazz ensembles, the real distinctions derive from their liberal interpretations of (various) songs, and the creative ways in which those improvisations reflect spontaneity and new sounds and ideas that evolve from their performances over time.}

\textbf{Communication}

Especially in smaller organizations, a sustainable niche may be found through a process of internal dialogue among key players and leaders. Organizational participants may have different ideas about what the organization can do best and what might be appealing to organizational supporters. Moreover, communication enables ensemble members both to try different interpretations in the current repertoire and to experiment with new pieces – two ways in which ensembles may grope towards finding a unique place for themselves.

Through communication, ensemble players may discuss what is meant by particular instructions in the score and how these instructions are best carried out. Or they may argue over whether they agree with the composer's instructions or have a better idea of what to do. They may also identify gaps in the score – necessary information that has been left out and needs to be filled in by the players in the process of implementing the score. The manner in which the gaps are filled or the instructions interpreted will have the effect of differentiating one ensemble's playing from another's. And those interpretations that appeal to potential organizational supporters may constitute viable niches that the organization can
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exploit for continued sustenance and development. The players in the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra spend countless hours deliberating over how to play a particular piece, often to unique effect. Members of improvisational jazz ensembles “speak” to each other in real time, as the performance proceeds, sometimes leading each other into new musical territory that they can ultimately claim for their own (Weick, 1998). On the lighter side, the players of the Johann Strauss orchestra have great fun conspiring with one another on how to play Strauss’s music as outrageously humorously as possible, carving out their special niche in the musical world in the process (Rosenberg, 1998f).

Education

We have seen that for purposes of coordination, the more technically proficient an ensemble’s players, the more easily they are able to synchronize with one another. Thus, management is well-advised not only to recruit highly trained players but also to encourage their continued development. A similar observation can be made with respect to niche finding. For this purpose, however, the breadth of education rather than its depth or emphasis on technical proficiency is of equal or perhaps greater interest. Education that exposes players to different types and styles of music will widen their awareness to a fuller set of possibilities for their own playing. Especially in areas like popular, jazz and folk music, players tend to listen to their contemporaries and often borrow ideas, techniques and even particular pieces from one another. Peter Paul and Mary borrowed songs introduced by Bob Dylan, the Kingston Trio and the Weavers, for instance. Formal education can contribute on a wider scale by exposing players to significantly different types of music, e.g. instructing classical players on how to listen to jazz or vice versa, or by presenting broad historical perspectives that allow players to put their own music into context and expand their understanding of its possible variants. The bands formed by composer Toshiko Akiyoshi are beneficiaries of such a broad perspective, combining big band bebop with elements of Japanese traditional music to produce a unique sound (Owen, 1995).

As a strategy, education will contribute to niche finding only if players are viewed as collaborators in determining the direction of the organization. If the ensemble is run by an authoritarian conductor, the players’ ideas will hardly matter. But collaborative ensembles such as the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra depend heavily on their players to explore possibilities and shape the ensemble’s particular style and repertoire. In this context, broad player education can contribute to a more robust niche-finding process.

In jazz, education enters the picture in another way. Players intensively and broadly schooled in the state of the art are better positioned to go beyond that to establish new musical niches for themselves. One must know the rules, conventions, and theory of today’s music in order to recognize the limits of, and experiment outside, the conventional boundaries. In management professor Bill Pasmore’s words:
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...if a musician only knows one song, one beat, or one style, he or she can’t be part of the emergent synergy that is jazz (Pasmore, 1998, p.563)

Rehearsals

As we have seen, practice sessions serve a variety of purposes. They enable the working out of coordination problems, and they can assist with motivation by allowing closer attention to particular players and subgroups. Rehearsals can also contribute to niche-finding because practice sessions represent opportunities for experimentation and change. In rehearsals, organizational members and leaders can say, “let’s try it like this and see how it sounds.” Major variations in style or repertoire are not likely to arise from rehearsal sessions, but small but important changes in tone, rhythm, volume, balance among instruments, and other nuances, can result which cumulatively help define an ensemble’s special sound. This can be a serendipitous process, especially in a collaborative organization where leadership is facilitative rather than directive and participants are open-minded about the outcome rather than driven by preconceived ideas. But it is the serendipity itself that may be most important to ultimate success in finding a unique niche. “Management by groping along,” a phrase introduced by political scientist Sarah Liebschutz (1992), utilizing mechanisms such as collegial rehearsal sessions, is sometimes the best way to find creative solutions to the niche problem. For more risk-taking groups, some of this experimentation may even take place in live performance. The Grateful Dead, for example were known for doing this (Pareles, 1987b). Indeed, in jazz this is as much the norm as the exception. Even in these contexts, however, rehearsals can serve the purpose of working out some ideas in advance, ultimately moving a group towards some distinctive possibilities for themselves.

Incentives and Rewards

We have seen how reward and incentive systems help management motivate an organization’s workforce. The challenge of niche-finding is not so obviously addressed by incentive structures. It is possible to provide specific rewards for individuals to come up with new ideas that may prove to be viable, but such an approach is tenuous at best. Successful niche-finding not only requires creativity; it also requires consensus and cooperation and a sense of the organization’s place in the world. If the organization’s members cannot buy into a suggested new direction, and if top management is not involved and supportive, it is unlikely that players’ suggestions will lead to defining and pursuing a successful new niche. Incentive schemes that put players into competition with one another for rewards may even undermine the possibilities for coalescing around a common approach.

Incentives and rewards do have their place in niche-finding, however. Ensembles that depend on the creativity of their members to find a successful repertoire or style must create an atmosphere in which risk-taking is encouraged and individuals are not penalized or embarrassed for suggesting ideas that may
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ultimately be found unworkable or unattractive. An authoritarian environment in which a strong leader intimidates players is not one in which creative ideas for variations in repertoire or style are likely to emerge. Even an egalitarian environment in which some players are nonetheless permitted to dominate conversation or undermine others’ efforts may be unsupportive of successful niche-finding. Rather, the organizational environment must be one of mutual respect, openness and tolerance if players are expected to be comfortable contributing their best ideas and receptive to the proposals of others. The London Symphony Orchestra suggests a possible model:

In many ways, the LSO operated like a large family: members had generally congenial relationships, they care about one another personally as well as professionally, and they freely exchanged information and opinions...Consistent with the spirit of self-governance, members looked out not only for their individual interests, but also for the well-being of the orchestra as a whole... (Lehman and Galinsky, 1994, p.8)

Leadership

The LSO is also an ensemble in which leadership is crucial to the niche-finding process. The orchestra’s artistic and marketing plan is the responsibility of the managing director, though accountability is to the players:

...As players became increasingly confident of [managing director] Gillinson’s judgment, they granted him greater autonomy to act on their behalf pursuing the orchestra’s artistic, organizational and financial goals. Most players felt that the hallmark of Gillinson’s administration was his ability to “persuade without bulldozing,” to foster agreement about objectives, and to exercise creativity in overcoming challenging financial problems. (Lehman and Galinsky, 1994, p.10)

Leaders can suggest and interpret plans, facilitate dialogue among players, provide or recommend educational experiences, administer productive rehearsal sessions, and create an atmosphere in which risk-taking is encouraged, all in the interests of supporting ways to identify, explore, experiment with, and confirm viable alternative programming. In some ways, leaders can inhibit successful niche-finding by interfering with open processes of communication and collaboration among ensemble members. In other ways, however, leadership is essential to the niche-finding process. Niche-finding requires understanding of the organizational environment, historical trends, and technical possibilities. Leaders of organizations are often expected to have command of these subjects and are looked to for ideas grounded in long experience, deep comprehension, and technical mastery. Jeannette Sorrell’s leadership of the early music group Apollo’s Fire is a good example. This group has secured a special place in the landscape of musical fare in the Northeast Ohio region and in the field of early music. Apollo’s success is due in no small part to Ms. Sorrell’s extraordinary historical and technical knowledge of early music repertory and instrumentation which guides how the group’s programs are adapted to available performance venues ranging
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from churches, to converted barns, to the splendor of Severance Hall (Salisbury, 1998c).

Certainly music directors of most symphony and chamber orchestras, and even leaders of smaller and more popular groups are expected to provide such expertise. The issue here is not only knowledge and perspective or even creativity per se. It is also what is commonly called “vision” – a mental picture of what makes the organization special, what characteristics make its style and repertoire unique, and where it fits into its overall field of activity. Sometimes, vision is inextricably linked to the style or genius of a particular (charismatic) leader. The Supremes could not survive without Diana Ross nor could the Grateful Dead without Jerry Garcia. But in many other instances, especially with larger organizations, visionary leaders do succeed not only in leaving their special imprints on the organization, but in creating viable niches that outlive their own tenures. While the styles of the Cleveland and the Philadelphia orchestras have changed under successive administrations, and while there may be a contemporary trend towards homogeneity among major symphony orchestras, there is still something defining about the Philadelphia and Cleveland “sounds” developed under the leaderships of Eugene Ormandy and George Szell, respectively, that continues to support viable places for these organizations in the ecology of great orchestras. To the contrary, other orchestras that have not succeeded in developing or retaining a distinctive sound are likely to suffer most in today’s commodified world of omnipresent technology and global competition.

The Circumstances of Niche-Finding

Organizations of varying characteristics and operating in different environmental circumstances are likely to require alternative niche-finding strategies. Moreover, the possibilities for finding a successful niche are richer in some fields of activity and in some historical periods than in others. Organizational size, internal diversity, level of professionalism, the complexity of work in the field in which the organization participates, and the stability of the organizational environment, all affect the viability and direction of niche-finding and the kinds of approaches that are likely to be succeed. Dynamic environments are more likely to feature unfilled niches that represent new opportunities for alert organizations. But they also create uncertainties for organizations wishing to hold onto their existing niches. The advent of Rock and Roll in the 1950s opened up a whole new space for popular ensembles (starting with Bill Halley and the Comets and continuing on through the Beatles and beyond) while it constricted the space available for traditional popular music groups (eventually causing the popular Hit Parade television show to go off the air, Snooky Lanson, Dorothy Collins and Giselle MacKenzie notwithstanding!)
Organization Size

The collaborative processes of niche-finding, involving effective internal communications, collaboration and experimentation in practice sessions, are more likely to be viable for smaller organizations. Larger organizations require more formal processes and more directive leadership in order to keep them focused and productively engaged in exploration of alternative styles and repertoires, and maintenance of a distinctive character. It is possible to simulate the benefits of smaller size by breaking down larger organizations into smaller working groups and bringing the results of small group processes together systematically into an overall consultative decision-making process. That is, leaders in large organizations can create structures and processes to enable small group deliberation, and they can be systematically supportive in their management approaches. But this still requires strong leadership to design and manage a facilitative, collaborative and consensual regime overall. Moreover, even in a facilitative environment, top leaders will still be valued for the ideas, information, guidance and vision they can offer. Overall, therefore, larger organizations will put greater reliance on leadership to successfully identify, articulate, implement and maintain their niches. Indeed, recruitment of leaders will often center on the question of what vision they will bring to the organization in order to secure its future:

The band in the late 1950s and early 1960s had a unique sound, one of the classic musical styles of the twentieth century. [Count] Basie maintained the integrity of this hybrid style until just weeks before his death. Since then Thad Jones, followed by Frank Foster, alumni of the 1950s band, have maintained the Basie institution with dedication. (Owens, 1995, p.231)

In a real sense, Jones and Foster had to understand and appropriate Basie's vision in order to maintain the niche of his ensemble.

Internal Diversity

Organizations composed of widely diverse members and sections, are likely to have a more difficult time defining their niche, for two reasons: The possibilities for such organizations are likely to be more numerous, and the orientations and preferences of their members are likely to be more divergent. A homogeneous ensemble such as a chorus or a brass band is necessarily more specialized in terms of repertoire and stylistic possibilities. Such groups are largely confined to the literatures and traditions associated with their particular instrumentations. Moreover, the members of such ensembles are likely to have similar musical backgrounds, interests, tastes and preferences. The search for a viable niche will thus be relatively simple if also more restricted. Such groups sometimes attempt to stretch their possibility sets by adapting other literatures to their own instrumentations. Thus, banjos and harmonicas can play classical music and
symphony orchestras can play the Beatles. Successful thrusts of this kind are relatively rare, however, since they are often distinguished only by their novelty, or they run into technical difficulties:

The Powell Quartet at Weill Recital Hall Saturday afternoon made the sound of four flutes in concert more attractive than the prospect of it. Perhaps the least comfortable moments of this program were in a transcription of the Overture to “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” — in which the prominent part Mendelssohn assigns to flutes is bloated to almost unbearable shrillness without support from below. (Holland, 1988)

Heterogeneous organizations have the advantage of being able to try many different combinations of style, emphasis and repertoire associated with their varied internal makeup. A full symphony orchestra can range in its emphasis from works that rely mainly on strings to those in which percussion or brass are the dominant features. The universe of possibilities is very wide, although literature that addresses many of the theoretical combinations may not be robust.

The wider range of niche possibilities is modulated by the greater tensions that are likely to exist in heterogeneous organizations. The parochial interests of different parts of the organization may surface when alternative possibilities, providing for more or less prominent roles for different subgroups, are proposed. Woodwind players will be unhappy with repertoires dominated by string pieces, and string players may blanch at repertoires favoring brass. Compromises may be required to balance the interests of the different sections, if agreement and commitment to a common understanding of the organization’s best niche is to be achieved. As a result, the leadership factor again looms large in heterogeneous organizations. Here, there is little substitute for leadership vision, for knowledge and understanding of the many possibilities, for guidance and facilitation of the processes for achieving a common understanding among members, and for making choices that can balance internal interests without compromising the niche that is sought for the ensemble as a whole. Indeed, for heterogeneous organizations to take advantage of the wider set of possibilities available to them, they require effective leadership that can help make the difficult choices that sometimes favor one group over another. The alternative is to rely so heavily on compromise and consensus that the benefits of wider choice are lost.

Another way in which internal diversity can be brought to bear on niche-finding is by bringing a combination of different styles of music into one ensemble. In such cases, internal diversity is created by design rather than being something that must be managed or kept under control. So-called “fusion” groups illustrate how new niches can be created by combining the elements of different kinds of ensembles in order to play music derived from a mix of different genres. An example is the Romulo Larrea Tango Ensemble which integrates tango with classical techniques and jazz by combining a classical string quartet and a traditional tango trio (Salisbury, 1999).
Professionalism

The level of competence and training of organizational members will also affect the niche-finding process, but in ways that are not entirely transparent. Professional ensembles with highly trained players are likely to have wider knowledge and greater skills to explore different styles and repertoires. At the same time, the members of such ensembles are likely to be more specialized, favoring compositions of particular composers or periods of music, and of course, particular instruments. The flexibility of highly professional ensembles can thus be limited by the attitude and orientations of their members and the large investments these individuals have made in attaining high competence in narrow areas, thus limiting the range of niches they are willing to explore. Organizations with less highly trained workforces may be more limited in terms of talent, breadth of knowledge, and basic competencies, but they can be more flexible and wide-ranging in their willingness to explore within their ranges of capability.

The paradox here is that ensembles with more highly trained members, because of their deeper and usually wider knowledge, often have greater capacity to experiment outside their traditional areas of operation. Thus, the potential for successfully achieving new and unusual niches is greater for these groups if they dare to venture, perhaps with the prodding of inspired leadership, outside their domains of comfort. Marin Alsop appeared to achieve this with her Concordia Chamber Symphony which combines classical and jazz music and found a solid core of support among audiences and financial contributors in New York City (Page, 1992).

Task Complexity

Organizations operating in fields where the work is highly complex may be more limited in exploring alternative niches than those where work is simpler. The reason for this is that changing niche in a field of complex work may requires changing whole interrelated systems of working parts, moving from one set of protocols and plans to another. Any such shift is likely to require major efforts and investments. Thus, a symphony orchestra accustomed to specializing in music of the Romantic period may have a difficult time decreasing its substantial investment in this area and adapting to a repertoire dominated by twentieth century music where tonality and rhythmic synchronization yield to unpredictable, but no less intricate, juxtapositions and sequences of familiar and unfamiliar sounds. Members of such an orchestra would have not only to learn new individual tasks and skills but also new ways of relating to one another to achieve a successful overall performance:

I once heard one of the world’s best orchestras, though not one accustomed to playing much new music, with a distinguished conductor, take on a program that included an extraordinarily difficult piece by Milton Babbitt, the Webern Symphony and three other tough 20th-century pieces, all being played by that orchestra for the first time. It was
infuriating, a waste of the talents of everyone on stage, because not one of all those interesting and worthwhile pieces was justly treated. (Steinberg, 1999, p.34)

Simpler fields of endeavor may support greater adaptability. Folk singing groups can range widely in their explorations of blue grass, traditional, country and ethnic music, because all of these paradigms are relatively straightforward in themselves, and talented musicians, grounded in the basics of melody, harmony and rhythm, can, with serious effort, mix and adapt from one to another, individually and in groups. Bela Fleck & the Flecktones is a leading example, combining pop, jazz, bluegrass, country, classical and other modes of music in their various genre-blending performances. While few ensembles may achieve the range or virtuosity of Bela Fleck’s group, the numerous potential combinations of the musical genres in which they dabble offer potentially viable niches for many other ensembles as well.

All this is not to underestimate the advantage of highly polished ensembles that have established themselves in a narrower, possibly complex, musical genre such as classical chamber music. Such ensembles may hang on tenaciously to their established niches and fight off new competitors. But they can take those niches for granted only to the extent that the complexity of the task is sufficiently intimidating to newcomers, the environment continues to support the genre, and they remain superior performers. Groups like the Guarneri Quartet have held their niches for long periods of time by force of these factors.

Instability

Organizational and environmental stability generally make a manager’s life easier. Stability allows managers to fine-tune operations, policies and relationships knowing that the organization as a whole is reasonably well-adapted to its extant conditions and that radical shifts may not be necessary. Thus, in ensembles, players can learn to work more closely together where turnover is low and they have time to learn the nuances of each others’ ways. And players can be motivated by long term reward and advancement systems where they have some reasonable expectation of staying with the organization over a long period of time and that the organization itself will not radically alter its reward system over that time.

Niche-finding is one area, however, where instability can help the astute manager because environmental instability and dynamism create new opportunities. As Hannan and Freeman (1989) observe: “Stable and certain environments almost surely generate low levels of diversity” (p.9). That is, environmental stability allows the winnowing down of organizational possibilities to a few types that are best suited to the particular stable conditions, while dynamism and uncertainty encourage experimentation with new forms and tolerance in the short-run of forms that may not survive the competition once conditions settle down.

This situation has different implications for different types of organizations. For well-established organizations, environmental instability can be threatening
because conditions under which the organization flourished may give way to new conditions for which it may be poorly suited. The history of symphony orchestras seems to reflect this experience. These ensembles developed during a period of high popularity and low cost for live symphonic music (DiMaggio, 1986), but they now exist in a period of limited demand and escalating costs (Baumol and Bowen, 1966). Indeed, modern symphony orchestras have been called “museums” of past artistic achievement, unresponsive to contemporary musical tastes or innovations. This situation has undoubtedly contributed to the serious financial jeopardy in which many symphony orchestras find themselves. Some have suggested that the contemporary crisis of symphony orchestras must be solved by revisiting their programmatic niches, finding performance offerings more responsive to contemporary tastes and interests (Wolfe, 1992).

Despite the threat that instability poses for established organizations, such organizations still have some advantages over smaller, less-well established ones. Established organizations normally have higher levels of organizational “slack” or reserves which they can call upon in periods of crisis and change (Cyert and March, 1972). An established organization that is alert enough to trends and uncertainties in its environment can use its organizational slack as a cushion for implementing change in a more controlled, deliberate, planned fashion (Hirschman, 1970). For example, the Boston Symphony is one of many established orchestras that have differentiated their programs to expand their popular appeal, through outdoor concerts and auxiliary “pops” programming. Overall, however, symphony orchestras have also tended to narrow their programming in response to competition from smaller, specialized ensembles which have usurped portions of their formerly broader repertoire:

Having largely given up years ago on regular and frequent performances of contemporary music, the Philharmonic and other orchestras are busily abandoning early music, too...This gradual breakup of the orchestral repertory among various performing groups has shifted the balance of power: If, not long ago, a handful of great symphony orchestras – Berlin, Vienna, Chicago, Philadelphia and so on – were recognized as undisputed champions of large-scale instrumental playing, attention has now spread to a wide range of orchestras of various sizes...that are competing for, and attracting, public attention and record-buying dollars...

...symphony orchestras are now caught in a bind: If they try to maintain a broad repertory, then they willingly go head to head with the specialists; but if, as appears to be happening, they narrow their purview, there is the risk of losing listeners...Perhaps the symphony orchestra will have to be...reconfigured so that it becomes several groups at once, each presenting a different part of the repertory.

In the meantime, the large orchestras are in a state of flux. The growth of the specialty ensembles and the accessibility of all kinds of music on recordings have changed the function of the symphony orchestra. While it may remain the most technically accomplished and the wealthiest musical organization in a given city...it no longer must serve up a broad repertory to sate the musical appetite of its audience...
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...If the product of a narrow repertory is a more thoroughly realized and convincing performance at the concert hall, it will be only for the good. Toward that end, symphony orchestras just may have a chance to regain some of the luster they had years ago, when these giants stood as unrivaled exponents of the entire repertory. (Kimmelman, 1987, p. 24)

Smaller, newer organizations are also threatened by environmental change, and less well insured against uncertainty than their more established counterparts. However, fledgling organizations are likely to be less set in their ways, more nimble and flexible, and hence faster to catch onto and adapt to environmental shifts. Moreover, such organizations have more to gain from environmental uncertainty than larger ones because a dynamic environment may create new opportunities that will allow them ultimately to grow into major institutions with significant resources:

When Chuck Berry appeared at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1958, breaking the jazz world’s unofficial taboo against rock-and-roll, many critics accused the festival of dumbing down in an attempt to draw bigger and younger audiences. Forty years later, an appearance by Sonic Youth at what is nominally a jazz festival hardly raises an eyebrow, because audiences for fringe rock and out jazz are increasingly the same. There is a type of rock fan who wouldn’t dream of going to hear latter-day be-bop at the Village Vanguard or Lincoln Center but who regularly shows up at alternative venues for performances by neo-screamers like David S. Ware and Sabir Mateen. More than anything, these listeners value all-out sonic assault, and they don’t care if it comes from tenor saxophones or guitars. (Davis, 1999, p.31)

The risk of environmental instability to both established and fledgling organizations, and the degree to which each is able to take advantage of uncertainty, depends on the relative strength of two competing processes under which potential niches in the organizational ecology become filled: adaptation versus selection (see Hannan and Freeman, 1989). Under adaptation, existing organizations adjust to environmental uncertainty and fill out the new niches that become available as a result of environmental change. Under selection, existing (established and fledgling) organizations which are ill-suited to new conditions change too slowly to survive and new niches are filled out by emergent organizations that come into being specifically to fill vacancies in the shifting ecology.

In biology, with the possible exception of humankind, the Darwinian selection process dominates. In the social sphere, it is a matter of controversy and empirical study as to whether adaptation or selection is the more important process (Hannan and Freeman, 1989). For social entrepreneurs promoting new ventures, the selection process may be of primary interest – how to find and exploit new niche opportunities in the face of environmental change (Young, 1983). For managers of existing organizations, however, adaptation is of primary interest – how to maintain an existing niche or find a new one quickly in order to foster organizational prosperity or avoid disaster.
The case of the Colorado Symphony Orchestra offers an illustration of both the managerial and entrepreneurial perspectives (Freeman, 1996a). Environmental pressures and internal rigidities that prevented adaptation to deteriorating economic conditions caused the demise of the Denver Symphony Orchestra. The players in this orchestra later formed a new ensemble called the Colorado Symphony Orchestra (CSO), built on the ashes of the old one, but newly adapted to extant conditions that permitted a wider variety of programming and lower costs through shared governance and financial risk-taking between community board members and the players themselves. The CSO case illustrates that the selection process is powerful in eliminating organizations that occupy niches no longer well-supported by their environments. However, the CSO case also shows that managerial strategy that is sufficiently sensitive to extant conditions can forestall and even exploit changes in that same economic and social environment.

**Strategic Issues in Niche-Finding**

The literature on strategic planning makes clear that organizational leaders and managers are expected to monitor their environments and to periodically assess how well their organizations are adapted to those environments (e.g., see Bryson, 1988). When internal strengths and weaknesses are poorly aligned with external threats and opportunities, the organization is expected to make changes, either directly in its niche (its products, services or mission) or in its internal capacities to support the activity required by its current niche. Skeptics have questioned the utility of formalized strategic planning, especially in a rapidly changing environment, but "strategic thinking" which conceptualizes the relationship of the organization to its environment is clearly an ongoing management imperative for all organizations (Mintzberg, 1994).

The experience of musical ensembles reveals that there is no single, obvious way in which these organizations successfully adapt to their environments and find their particular places in the sun. A unifying theme, however, appears to be the search for distinction or uniqueness. Economists call this "product differentiation"—finding ways to make your organization's product or service different from those of all other organizations, so that you have a degree of market power and no other organization's offering can be considered a perfect substitute. Marketers who promote "branding" have the same idea (Kotler, 1997).

**Achieving Distinction**

Distinction may be achieved in a variety of ways. Musical ensembles may specialize in the particular quality of their sounds (e.g., the Philadelphia sound or the Chicago sound), the repertoire which they select (e.g., early baroque music), the kind of technology they use (e.g., playing early music on original instruments), or indeed the particular community they serve (e.g., the Suburban Symphony in Cleveland). In each case, the selected niche builds on internal strengths and
preferences (e.g., the special inspiration of a charismatic conductor, the expertise in early music, or the interests of volunteer musicians in a particular community).

Copy-cat behavior is also well known in the musical world. When niche leaders define something new and highly popular, others may follow to exploit any excess demand that the original group generates or even surpass the innovators. For example, groups like the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul and Mary followed on the heels of the Weavers who had established a new popular niche for folk music in the 1950s. While the Weavers had “first mover advantage”, as economists would say, the newcomers could build on what the Weavers had established, to offer sounds that many considered even more exciting.

More straightforward “imitations” may also succeed in establishing themselves. Thus, Beatles imitations and Elvis rock bands persist, especially after the originals are no longer around to perform. But even in these cases, there is usually some distinctiveness to the ensembles that allow them to sustain a particular niche (if only to claim they are the best at imitation!) In music, and in most other fields, most organizations seek to avoid having their services become “commodities” in the sense that they cannot be distinguished in some substantial way from their competitors. Even bands that play for weddings and bar mitzvahs try to set themselves apart from the competition, although these may come the closest to being commodities in the musical performance arena. As in other fields, establishing a “brand name” for one’s product is a key to ensemble success:

In today’s world, a brand for an orchestra is just as important as for any other good...Such orchestras as the Vienna Philharmonic or the Berlin Philharmonic are associated with world-class quality and other attributes. The names of these orchestras have developed into brand names, even if those orchestras do not actively promote their brands...

With its surprise encores and the friendliness it exhibits towards its audiences, the Detroit Symphony is creating a certain favorable image in the mind of its audiences. It is building a brand with this image to differentiate itself from other orchestras, and from other performing arts groups in Detroit...orchestral institutions in any city have to think hard about the qualities and values they want people to think of when they hear or see the orchestra. (Kerres, 1999, p.51)

While one might argue that the Detroit Symphony has a local monopoly, clearly it competes in a much broader market – with other local arts and entertainment options, and through technology and travel with orchestras in other parts of the country and the world. Even within Detroit, therefore, the distinctiveness of the orchestra is important.

Priorities and Trade-Offs

Following the logic of previous movements, we have considered a variety of organizational circumstances affecting niche-finding: organizational size,
heterogeneity, professionalism, instability and task complexity. The matrix in Table 3.1 signals the variety of niche-finding challenges faced by a number of interesting alternative ensemble stereotypes.

**Table 3.1 Ensemble Attributes and Niche-finding**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>size</th>
<th>heterogeneity</th>
<th>professional level</th>
<th>instability</th>
<th>task complexity</th>
<th>nonmusical analog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pops orchestra</strong></td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>local accounting firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amateur rock band</strong></td>
<td>low</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>small software company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community chamber orchestra</strong></td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>YMCA, JCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fire department band</strong></td>
<td>low</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>Habitat for Humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children’s choir</strong></td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>advocacy association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The pops orchestra is similar in structure to a classical symphony but has chosen to specialize in playing a different genre of music geared more to general public tastes and audiences. In some sense, therefore, the pops orchestra is defined by the niche it has selected. Yet within this genre, particular pop orchestras will need to differentiate themselves in this already specialized market, in order to compete for audience attention. Certain pops orchestras such as the Boston Pops are known for their excellence and for a certain personality developed under charismatic leaders such as Arthur Fiedler. Other such ensembles may need to take different routes to success. As relatively large, internally diverse organizations, and ones which exhibit substantial turnover among its members, pops orchestras are unlikely to find their special niche through internal deliberations except perhaps within the top leadership of the organization. Visionary leadership, trial and error, and some risk taking are likely to be necessary in finding a special place for such an ensemble. The possibilities include developing a certain overall style, emphasizing a certain sub category of popular music, or perhaps becoming associated with a particular community that can take special pride in its accomplishments. The Cleveland Pops Orchestra, for example, is overshadowed by the reputation of its classical counterpart, and by better known pops orchestras at the national level, but it enjoys a strong following in the Cleveland community itself. A nonmusical analog to the pops orchestra is a local accounting firm that may do very good work, which may have national aspirations, but whose clientele are basically local businesses and families.

The amateur rock band has a very different problem finding its niche. This ensemble is small, encompasses only moderate internal diversity – limited to a few different types of players (perhaps just strings and percussion), may be fairly stable
over a reasonable period of time, and need not be involved with music that is highly intricate. Its problem is to find a really different sound, style or repertoire that will distinguish it from the myriad of other such aspiring groups, and endear it to some proportion of the (young) audience of rock music listeners. While its players are not necessarily highly sophisticated technically, this ensemble has the luxury of undertaking extensive experimentation and internal dialogue, drawing on the ideas of all of its members. Nonmusical analogs might be a small software firm, or a boutique consulting group, where the principals need to provide a product or service that is unusual in some way that inspires a loyal following that can grow over time.

A community chamber orchestra can be fairly large, perhaps two dozen members, and is diverse in its instrumentation. It is likely to consist of players with a mix of skill levels, some professionals and some motivated and fairly accomplished amateurs. Such an orchestra will try to play fairly challenging classical music and has the advantage of some stability, given its community base and orientation. Like the pops orchestra, the niche of the community chamber orchestra is already pre-defined to a substantial degree. Its base in the community implies that it serves as a vehicle in which local musicians can participate and from which local residents can derive listening pleasure. However, such definition does not guarantee success since both local players and local music lovers have other options. The orchestra still needs to be special in some other way. Given its relatively large size, internal diversity and mix of skill levels, this ensemble is likely to depend on visionary leadership and internal dialogue among a core group of the more skilled and highly educated players, in order to find its special niche. While its repertoire is likely to be constrained by the skill mix and the tastes and expectations of the local community, it has room to explore different areas of both classical and popular repertoire and also different characteristics of performance that might distinguish it—perhaps unusual instrument combinations, or emphasis on the works of certain popular but less frequently played composers such as George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rogers or Scott Joplin. Nonmusical analogs include YMCAs and Jewish Community Centers which are also rooted in their communities, employ diverse skills in order to provide a variety of recreational, fitness and social activities for their members, engage both professional and volunteer workers, and face the complex tasks of mobilizing and scheduling a wide variety of complex tasks and events within their facilities. Like their musical counterparts, these organizations too need to distinguish themselves within their community settings in order to assure their continued support, given the alternatives available to their members.

A fire department band serves a number of different purposes. It helps the fire department project a friendly image to the community and it boosts the morale of its own members. It is intended to offer entertainment for the community, especially at public events such as parades or on summer evenings. And it serves as a recreational vehicle for its member players. Such bands are generally fairly small, they embrace a modest variety of different instruments generally within the brass and percussion families, and they consist of players either from the
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department or the local community who are amateur musicians. These bands play relatively simple music and they are fairly stable in membership, given the sources from which they draw. Since each community has just one fire department, and hence probably just one fire department band, and since there are general expectations that this ensemble will play popular pieces for brass instruments, such as marches and polkas, the niches of these ensembles are also somewhat predefined and to some extent, assured of support. Again, however, some distinctiveness and distinction is necessary if support of the department is to be maintained, and if members are to be willing to continue to participate. Such bands may compare themselves to counterpart ensembles in order to help define their places in the musical landscapes of their communities. They should offer something different from high school marching bands and something that adds to the quality of community events. They can aspire to a higher level of achievement as well, seeking to compete for distinction among fire department bands in the state or region, in order to bring local pride to the community. To do that, the fire department band needs to find a repertoire or quality of play that makes it better in some ways than other fire department bands.

As participants in small, relatively homogeneous and relatively stable ensembles, members of fire department bands can deliberate productively among themselves, and experiment to find and improve their particular styles and repertoires. The more accomplished musicians among them may be able to provide some vision or inspired leadership, though none are likely to be professional musicians. If a professional leader can be engaged, he or she is likely to carry an inordinate proportion of the responsibility for finding the appropriate niche. Habit for Humanity is a nonmusical analog. Volunteer workers come to this organization to build (relatively simple, straightforward) housing for the poor. Workers have some construction skills but few are professionals. The organization employs professional supervisors to design, oversee and inspire the work. Interestingly, the mode of work itself helps define Habit for Humanity's niche — the very fact that it produces housing using volunteer amateurs. In the same way, the fire department band also achieves a certain uniqueness by virtue of the fact that many of its players are firefighters.

A children's choir is likely to be a large group — children of all members of a church or all children within a certain grade level of a public school. While varying in talent and socio-economic background, its members are relatively homogenous in terms of organizational parameters — they are all kids using their voices, and they obviously have not yet achieved high levels of professional skill. And to accommodate their large size the ensemble is unlikely to undertake highly complex music. In this context, niche finding is likely to depend strongly on visionary leadership of the choral director or music teacher.

As with other examples, the niche of the children's chorus is largely predefined but still needs to be secured, justified and possibly further differentiated. Schools or churches may not tolerate children's choruses that do not achieve some minimum level of performance and do not engage the attention of their listeners. Again, the niche may be quite solidly established by the character of the
participants—a chorus may be one of the few available venues in which parents can hear their children perform in a public context. But as with fire department bands, children’s choruses can aspire to more—competing against those of other schools and churches to achieve a degree of recognition that reflects well on their home institutions.

Nonmusical analogs to the children’s chorus include advocacy associations which promote the interests of their members. These may be labor unions, public interest groups, professional or trade associations, and so on. Such organizations are relatively large and stable, consisting of members with similar interests and needs, amateur in the sense that members are not specially skilled in articulating their interests in the public arena, despite the fact that their task (message) is relatively simple. Defining their niche, so that they can stand out and be taken seriously, depends strongly on visionary leadership that can frame the message and mobilize the membership so that it speaks with one strong voice.

Again, none of these stereotypes is completely characteristic of their counterparts in the real world of music, nor are the suggested nonmusical analogs exact. Still, they are useful for prioritizing niche-finding strategies best suited to organizations that resemble each stereotype. The matrix in Table 3.2 describes the relative emphases for alternative niche-finding strategies of each ensemble stereotype.

Table 3.2 Niche-finding Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>internal dialogue</th>
<th>trial and error</th>
<th>diverse, educated players</th>
<th>visionary leadership</th>
<th>encouraging risk-taking</th>
<th>interpretation and selection of scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pops orchestra</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateur rock band</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community chamber orchestra</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire department band</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s choir</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The matrix suggests that different types of ensembles will tend to rely on substantially different combinations of niche-finding strategies. The larger ensembles such as the community chamber orchestra, the children’s chorus and the pops orchestra will tend to lean more heavily on the vision of their leader (music director) to bring a distinctive style or character to the ensemble, e.g., by molding the ensemble’s repertoire in a particular way, or by offering especially compelling interpretations within that repertoire. Visionary leadership can also serve a teaching function in these groups, coaching players to shape the sounds of the ensemble in some distinctive manner.
In the case of the (professional) pops orchestra, bringing in accomplished players of diverse musical backgrounds can also contribute to niche-finding, as such players may suggest interesting new combinations of instrumentation, rhythm and other musical parameters. An atmosphere that allows risk taking would facilitate this kind of experimentation. However, since the pops orchestra is fairly large and engages busy professional players who have little spare time, it is unlikely that sustained trial and error or internal dialogue in rehearsals would be primary tactics for developing a niche strategy.

The community chamber orchestra is not as large as the pops orchestra and perhaps not as pressed for rehearsal time. Hence, internal dialogue can play a larger part in shaping niche strategy, incorporating community members’ own ideas about what they want to play or how they can otherwise distinguish themselves. Since many members are likely to be amateur players without high mastery of their instruments, risk taking and trial and error with different musical techniques and styles is unlikely to be very productive. However, listening to the ideas of some of the more accomplished players who may come from diverse musical backgrounds could lead to interesting results. If classical, jazz and popular musical backgrounds are all represented, the orchestra might develop a reputation for an eclectic repertoire or one in which techniques from one genre are incorporated into another. Beatles music for full orchestra or jazzed up Bach, for example, are not unrealistic, and even potentially popular.

The children’s choir offers fewer possibilities for cultivating the ideas of members with diverse musical backgrounds, or encouraging them to take risks. Children are naturally experimental and unregimented, but the challenge with a children’s chorus is largely to achieve discipline and coherence, not encourage diverse behaviors. Members of such choruses, depending somewhat on the particular age group, are unlikely to have already had sufficient training and education to contribute productively to shaping the character, style or repertoire of the ensemble. However, trial and error can play a part in niche-finding in this case, if the leader/music director is willing to experiment with a variety of different musical styles and repertoires to determine what combinations excite, inspire and hence might ultimately distinguish the ensemble. Children, for example, might be excited by a repertoire that features the latest theme music from popular movies or television shows.

The amateur rock band and the fire department band are more likely to favor internal dialogue, trial and error in rehearsal, and risk-taking in their niche exploration, given the smaller size of these ensembles and their probable lack of professional leadership. And given the amateur nature of these groups, they are unlikely to benefit from the contributions of members with diverse musical backgrounds or be in a position to put their particular imprimaturs on standard repertoire. Exceptions occur, of course. Rock bands are often formed by individuals with great, if often raw, musical talent and charisma as well. Fire department bands are sometimes fortunate to engage talented players from the community and accomplished volunteers willing to provide them with musical leadership. In such cases, more emphasis can be put on visionary leadership and
musical interpretation as strategies for niche-finding. Those possibilities notwithstanding, the strength of the rock band will be in its boundless energy and time to experiment, for its players to communicate intensively with one another as they play with different possibilities, listen to others’ music together, and to allow each member to express ideas without fear of being ridiculed. Similarly, the strength of the fire department band will be a relaxed atmosphere in which players can talk to one another, find the repertoires that they enjoy playing together, and put forward suggestions for new pieces. Since it is more likely to play standard pieces than the rock band, the fire department band will emphasize selection and interpretation of repertoire more than the rock band is likely to do.

The point of this discussion is not to claim in any hard sense that the forgoing combinations of strategies are necessarily the right ones for any particular rock band, community chamber orchestra, and so on, or their analogous nonmusical organizations, but rather to illustrate the fact that appropriate niche-finding strategies will vary from organization to organization. Comparing an organization to a certain kind of musical ensemble (stereotype) can help in the formulation of a niche by reasoning through the priorities of niche-finding strategy components and combinations appropriate for that ensemble. Although there is likely to be more variation between categories of organization (i.e., between ensemble stereotypes), appropriate niche-finding strategies are also likely to vary within categories, depending on the particular combinations of size, heterogeneity, professionalism, stability and task complexity manifested in a particular organization.

A Case Study

Girls Incorporated is a charitable organization that provides recreational, educational and developmental services for girls (Young, 2001). It consists of a national headquarters organization and more than 80 affiliated locally incorporated affiliates nationwide. It is an organization with a long history, originally called Girls Clubs of America, established in 1945 by nineteen local charter member girls clubs. One can think of Girls Incorporated as a large, professional chorus with each of its members (affiliates) singing the same tune and contributing in the aggregate to the volume and quality of performance at the national level.

Before 1980, Girls Clubs of America (GCA) had a clearly defined niche. It ran girls clubs, which were local facilities where girls could come to enjoy themselves, engage in a variety of recreational and social activities, and learn how to be good citizens and homemakers. The turbulent social environment of the 1960s and ‘70s challenged the relevance of these traditional services. At the same time, larger organizations such as the Girl Scouts, increasingly competed with GCA for members. In the 1980s, GCA was faced with a severe crisis that required it to immediately reexamine its place in the world. The much larger Boys Clubs of America became co-ed and changed its name to Boys and Girls Clubs of America. While Girls Club of America sued for name infringement and won a modest cash settlement, it ultimately decided to change its name and try to redefine a niche for
itself that would not be overwhelmed by the competition.

Given the large, decentralized character of the organization, and the relatively homogeneous nature of its affiliates, Girls Incorporated could not depend entirely on internal dialogue, or modest tinkering with current programs to get the job done. It needed bold new ideas that depended more on visionary leadership, risk taking and the bringing to bear of new concepts from diverse sources. That leadership came from a strong national executive director and key members of the national board of directors. One of the initiatives taken was to establish a National Resource Center that would do research on issues facing girls in contemporary society and devise new and innovative programming approaches. The programs generated by the Resource Center were field tested in affiliate organizations, and new kinds of affiliates and partnership organizations were also engaged to implement and develop the new initiatives. The new programs addressed such issues as drug abuse, career choices for women, pregnancy prevention and educational opportunities. Through a process of visionary leadership, participation of new players from diverse educational backgrounds, and a new atmosphere that encouraged significant risk taking by affiliates, Girls Incorporated devised a unique and special repertoire grounded in innovative programming addressed to the needs of underprivileged girls. In the process, it has had to give up some of its old music, despite some loyal followers who continued to value it. It has managed to survive and prosper with a new audience of stakeholders and participants, finding a place for itself outside the performance space of its larger and more conventional competitors.

Diagnosing An Organization

The niche-finding experiences of musical ensembles suggest a number of areas where managers can begin their searches for distinct, sustainable places in their own environments. The following diagnostic questions should be helpful:

- What are the various interpretations that can be given to the organization’s products and the manner in which it does business? Which alternative interpretations might add a new attractiveness and uniqueness to the organization’s repertoire?

- What kind of “brand name” can the organization devise for itself that would capture the special character of its repertoire or the particular way it carries out its business?

Successful niche-finding will require engaging the organization’s people in the search process. In this connection, managers can ask:

- How can the organization’s workers be brought more fully into the process of interpreting how the organization’s mission, procedures and product repertoires are best described and promoted?
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- How can organizational participants be more broadly educated about the field in which the organization works, and in related fields, so that they have a wider view of the possibilities for the organization’s repertoire?
- How can the diverse perspectives of the organization’s various participants be brought into collaborative interaction with the organization’s leadership so as to consider the widest possible array of options?
- How can the organization encourage risk-taking so that its workers will not be reluctant to share new ideas, even if they radically depart from current ways of doing things? How can an egalitarian setting be devised so that differences in status will not suppress open interchange?
- How can organizational leaders be encouraged to articulate a distinct “vision” for their organization which combines a full appreciation of internal talents and strengths, a deep understanding of the environment in which the organization must sustain itself, and some special measure of creative genius?
- How can professional staff be encouraged to push the boundaries of their specializations and to interact constructively with individuals from other specializations, and disciplines, and with talented amateurs?
- In a rapidly changing organizational environment, how can organizational leadership and staff be encouraged to give up old, comfortable niches and define and compete for new ones?

The manner in which the organization is structured will also affect the success of the niche-finding process. Hence managers should ask:

- In a large organization, how can divisions and working groups be utilized to capture the creative advantages of smallness?
- In a large organization, how can leadership bring the energies of diverse small groups together into a process of consultative, consensual decision making that is guided by the larger interests of the organization as a whole?
- In a diverse organization, with many specialized groups, what are the different ways in which the talents and expertise of these groups can be combined to give the organization as a whole a greater distinctiveness?