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### Symphonic metamorphoses

*Variations on vulnerability: orchestral musicians' employment in times of crisis*

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## 7. *Intermezzo: of competitions, horse races and orchestral auditions*

One of the precious few violin soloists and chamber musicians at the pinnacle of a major international career, Janine Jansen is highly critical of the competitive system inherent to ‘making it’ in all levels within the musical arena, from the solo stage to the orchestral complement. “Musicians should focus on what they love and live for, music. Neither solo competitions nor orchestral auditions have anything to do with real music-making, in fact, they often destroy the musician that lies within because players are forced into a technical mold that has little to do with artistic expression.”<sup>437</sup> The great Hungarian 20<sup>th</sup> century pianist and composer, Béla Bartók and other luminaries in the profession concur with Jansen. “Competitions are for horses, not artists,” yet increasingly the competitive arena is an important means to gain international publicity, fill coffers,<sup>438</sup> and attempt to breakthrough as a soloist. Traditionally, music competitions are organized for specific instruments: piano, violin, and within the past several decades, cello and viola, which means musicians who play other orchestral instruments do not generally compete for solo careers. This *intermezzo* probes the classical music competition scene before revealing parallels to competitive orchestral auditions.

Competition age limits are strict,<sup>439</sup> and the performance requirements in terms of the amount of repertoire and expected level of perfection are demanding. One of the most successful performers on the competitive circuit, the young violinist, Bomsori Kim has won prizes at a staggering number of violin competitions worldwide.<sup>440</sup> Standing out amongst a growing number of top competitors from her homeland (South Korea), she took on the challenge of entering the two most difficult competitions within two months. The imperturbable violinist revealed, “difficult, maybe, but don’t forget,

<sup>437</sup> Author’s interview with Janine Jansen June 25, 2015.

<sup>438</sup> The most recent addition to the violin competition constellation, the Shanghai Isaac Stern International Violin Competition attracts competitors with a first prize purse of \$100,000, see, <http://www.shcompetition.com/en/index.html>

<sup>439</sup> See the website of the International Federation of Music Competitions for detailed information concerning general requirements. The leading international contests adhere to a strict age-limit, most often 26-29 as the upper limit for participation. For more information: <http://www.wfmc.org/>

<sup>440</sup> A partial list: Second Prize, 2016 Montreal International Musical Competition.

Second Prize 15th International Henryk Wieniawski Violin Competition, which as well as nine additional special prizes. 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize ARD Competition 2013 Other prize wins of note include the 15th Tchaikovsky International Competition, the Queen Elisabeth Competition, the 10th International Jean Sibelius Violin Competition, the 3rd China International Violin Competition, and the 8th Joseph Joachim International Violin Competition Hannover, and the Juilliard School’s annual Concerto Competition. See <https://www.bomsorikim.com/biography>

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contests take me to audiences all over the world. While it is really difficult to jump on a plane to Russia just after competing for a month in Belgium, this is my chance to present myself, to reach the top once again.”<sup>441</sup> Yet for most prizewinners, a solo career is something of an impossible dream. “There are no guarantees, winning a prize does not make a career in music either happen or for that matter, last. There are so many components that turn a prizewinner into a performer. Most importantly, the market has to be ready for the performer. When there are less opportunities to go around, fewer orchestras to perform with and the audience base is shrinking due to aging and of course competition on the part of streaming options, the going gets really tough.”<sup>442</sup>

Nevertheless, according to Glen Kwok, former President of the Board at the World Federation of International Music Competition and Executive Director of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, more ‘top of the pinnacle’ musicians enter the competitive arena than ever before and competitions are valid means to surprising ends.<sup>443</sup> “The level of young classical musicians has risen exponentially just at a time in which the chances to make it in the classical music career world are decreasing. Many of the brilliant young artists who win prizes these days will follow a diversified musical career post-competition. Competitions encourage excellence and the great orchestras seek great players: there is no contradiction between these observations as nowadays, success on one stage leads to success at another.”<sup>444</sup> Mr. Kwok’s remarks find substantiation in comments made by an international competition semi-finalist whose pragmatism is evident. “To be honest, what are the chances for a solo career these days for a top prize-winner at a competition? With luck, a serious violinist might get and hopefully keep a good orchestra job if that high competition level is maintained.”<sup>445</sup> In the rarefied competitive arena, instrumentalists such as Ms. Kim are young, focused and trained for a particular type of success: performance under pressure at an early age. Like athletes, musicians’ training programs take into consideration the fact that ‘to make it, the soloists will have to make their mark in competitions well before the age of thirty. As the stories of a new generation of young violinists in the world’s leading

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<sup>441</sup> Author’s interview with Bomsori Kim for [www.violinist.com](http://www.violinist.com) at the Queen Elisabeth Competition, May 2015.

<sup>442</sup> *De Winnaars* (The Winners) a documentary by Paul Cohen/David van Tijn (1996) provides an unusually forthright and heartbreaking view from behind the scenes at the renowned Queen Elisabeth Competition. Quote taken from a series of the author’s interviews with Marco Riascoff, impresario, Amsterdam 2015.

<sup>443</sup> Glen Kwok held the Board position from 2008-2015 and has served concurrently as Executive Director of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis since 2000.

<sup>444</sup> Author’s interview with Glen Kwok, August 2016.

<sup>445</sup> Author’s interview with a semifinalist at the Joseph Joachim International Competition who was soon to win top positions in two major U.S. symphony orchestras., anonymity assured.

orchestras shows, success at competitions is a good predictor of success behind the orchestral screen as more and more competition winners move into the orchestral field attracted by solid salaries at the top-tier. Yet, as information presented in the *FAQs* stressed, while leading U.S. orchestras offer excellent salaries starting at approximately \$95,000 in the top 10 orchestras the number of vacancies are few and far between, and the vast majority of remainder orchestras offer much lower salaries.<sup>446</sup>

## 7.1 Auditions revisited

For prospective orchestral musicians, replace the term “competition” with the word “audition” to gain an understanding of the competitive selection process that opens the door for the select few who secure a place within the orchestral profession. In the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, auditions were often solitary exercises in which an aspiring performer would come face to face with the orchestra’s music director. The great maestros of the 20<sup>th</sup> century handpicked their musicians often ‘trading’ or even poaching solo players from other fine orchestras.<sup>447</sup> Cronyism and protectionism often played a role in determining who would win an audition or even be given a chance to play: family dynasties of musicians, and the favored students of pedagogues who played in the orchestra were commonly chosen above ‘unknown talents.’<sup>448</sup> “Old time maestros maintained total control of the hiring and firing processes and we musicians had to fight long and hard in a real uphill battle to change both the entrance and exit requirements in our orchestras. The artistic and audition committees that hold so much power in orchestras nowadays were unthinkable a few decades ago.”<sup>449</sup>

Present-day orchestras show some variance in audition procedures with regard to the composition and number of audition committee members and voting procedures. In many major orchestras, an audition committee (AC) holds the majority of the votes. Variance as to the composition of the AC is marked: some orchestras require

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<sup>446</sup> For the latest updates on orchestral remuneration in the United States see: <https://adaptistration.com/category/compensation-reports/>

<sup>447</sup> The archives of the New York Philharmonic are replete with reports of principal player ‘poaching’ in the 1940s-50s. Consult <http://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/search?>

<sup>448</sup> Information paraphrased from conversations with Szymon Goldberg, a former concertmaster at the Berlin Philharmonic and famed pedagogue at leading U.S. conservatories: the Curtis Institute, the Juilliard School of Music and the Yale School of Music.

<sup>449</sup> Author’s interviews with two late members of the Cleveland Orchestra, Maurice Wolfson and Gino Raffaelli who gained positions in that premiere ensemble in the late 1950s. Mr. Raffaelli was at the forefront for equal rights between musicians and music directors and rallied support to change many unfair orchestral labor practices from dismissals to union activity starting in the early 1960s. The archives of ICSOM’s publication *Senza Sordino* are replete with articles paying testimony to Mr. Raffaelli’s contributions to improved employment conditions for orchestral musicians.

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all members to cast a vote,<sup>450</sup> some orchestras require a smaller complement of AC members including principal players, and yet others require the entire 'section' to vote. The way in which an orchestra goes about selecting a new member tells volumes about the orchestra as it discloses information on how the orchestra operates and reveals aspects of the orchestra's internal culture and traditions.

The selection process also is telling with regard to the extent of the music director's (MD) power. "After all, unless the conductor has encountered the player at work in another orchestra or at an earlier point in their career, the audition is often the first meeting point, the first hearing point to listen to a future member of the club."<sup>451</sup> In some orchestras, the MD holds veto power, in others the MD has a 'vague veto power'<sup>452</sup> and in many orchestras, the MD has one vote just like the other orchestral members who serve on the AC.

Aside from the venerated Berlin Philharmonic,<sup>453</sup> the majority of 21<sup>st</sup> century orchestras apply a 'blind audition' procedure for preliminary rounds. Turning to the two countries researched, an increasing number of orchestras in both the U.S. and the Netherlands require applicants to submit a pre-recorded sample of specific orchestral excerpts to gain admission to the first round as a matter of efficiency in response to the considerable numbers of musicians who apply for openings.<sup>454</sup> As the previous footnote indicates, live auditions usually consist of a minimum of two official rounds in which candidates play selections from the orchestral repertoire and solo pieces behind a screen: the term blind audition refers to the screened audition, which masks the candidates' gender and of course identity from the jury members who listen to the audition. "The stress level is almost inconceivable, unlike preparing for a concert performance, audition preparation and execution takes you into a sort of lion's den.

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<sup>450</sup> The Vienna Philharmonic and Berlin Philharmonic voting model, all members of the orchestra are entitled to one vote. The audition process is described by a member of the Berlin Philharmonic at: <http://www.instantcore.com/buzz/item.aspx?FeedEntryId=143393>

<sup>451</sup> Author's interview with maestro Michael Schönwandt, July 2013.

<sup>452</sup> As reported to the author about the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra auditions.

<sup>453</sup> Information gleaned from comments by the Berlin Philharmonic's legendary low horn player, Fergus McWilliam. Reprinted from a *Polyphonic* panel discussion, excerpts at: <https://www.hornmatters.com/2010/06/auditioning-berlin-philharmonic/>

<sup>454</sup> Orchestras in the U.S. and the Netherlands hold prescreening auditions, websites announce: "The Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra is one of Europe's top orchestras. At the audition the starting time of the pre rounds will be announced." In the U.S., the San Francisco Symphony announces a multiple-tiered audition, "**Preliminary and Semi-Final Rounds:** Anyone not initially invited to this audition will have the option of submitting a recording in order to be considered. The recording repertoire list can be downloaded. Candidates will be invited based on their submitted resume to participate in this audition. All applicants will be notified of their invitation status following the deadline above."

Usually, before you walk out for your screened ordeal, you are assigned to warm up in a communal room full of peers who can intimidate with their ‘loud and fast’ playing. You know you are going to run a sort of gauntlet, perform like an Olympic athlete in a ‘do or die’ situation so anything you can do to make yourself mentally comfortable is a plus.”<sup>455</sup>

According to audition conventions dating back to the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in most orchestral jurisdictions, the screen that blocks visual contact between the candidate and the committee is removed for the final round for which a select few are selected to perform. A discussion of ‘what an orchestra looks for, or more aptly, listens for at an audition?’ goes beyond the boundaries of this inquiry. In short, aside from an impeccable technical performance level, sound quality, rhythmical integrity, and the notion that the player will adapt to the orchestra’s ‘sound’ are a few of the ingredients that make for a successful audition. And, although it is the musician-colleagues who will spend many hours each week with a ‘future’ orchestra member, sharing in the ups and downs of a life on stage, the music director often holds a key card in the audition process. “If the maestro isn’t satisfied with a player, even if he/she is only in town for a few weeks a year, the atmosphere in the orchestra moves quickly from uncomfortable to downright hostile. Here in the States we say, ‘you can’t sue city hall.’ Orchestral musicians know that even if you can sue city hall, you sure can’t sue the conductor. So, for your sanity and the good of the entire orchestra, it is important, really important to make sure that you your discipline and musicianship carries you through from your audition to your last day in the orchestra.”<sup>456</sup>

Most orchestras maintain a right to dismiss candidates who do not make the mark of high expectations in terms of level issuing disclaimers in posted vacancy announcements.<sup>457</sup> “At the Philharmonic, we have been known to dismiss candidates after one line of music. This is certainly no reflection of arrogance, but simply a matter of self-protection. How long should you let a candidate play if you know that they are in no way suitable? One phrase speaks volumes, an insider in the orchestra can hear immediately if the candidate is on the level of the section and if their sound will complement that of their (future) colleagues. The audition system is not inherently

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<sup>455</sup> Author’s interview with a wind player who auditioned for seventeen orchestras before winning a position.

<sup>456</sup> Conversations with Jonathan Sherwin.

<sup>457</sup> For example: “The Audition Committee reserves the right to dismiss immediately any candidate not meeting the highest professional standards of The Cleveland Orchestra.” <https://www.clevelandorchestra.com/About/Auditions-and-Careers/Musician-Auditions/>

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pleasant, nonetheless, it should be fair, and it should be effective.”<sup>458</sup> The matter as to ‘who’ will fit in not only the section but also the orchestra is fraught with musical as well as psychological issues. “An orchestra is a living organism that lives and breathes music: we have to make sure that a new member is on one page with us not only musically but emotionally. Maybe those old days when the great conductors would handpick their players based on the sounds, they produced were unfair in terms of the ‘law’ and ‘equal opportunity’, but those maestros really did know what they were listening for and who would match with whom. I am not sure if our audition committees with their many safeguards, rules and regulations do any better.”<sup>459</sup>

## **7.2 The empty chair phenomenon: high standards or another economic repercussion post crisis?**

Another problem that contributes to increased instability within the orchestral profession post crisis is the ‘unfilled vacancy’ otherwise referred to as the ‘empty chair’ phenomenon. To avoid taking a decision that might be disappointing down the line, many orchestras simply do not fill positions and prefer to hire qualified substitute players instead of offering regular employment to a new member. While British orchestras lead the way with a tradition to offer trial positions to several players *in seriatim* without offering any single player a full-time position, the trend is very much in evidence in both the Netherlands and the United States as orchestral websites ‘re-announcing’ open positions prove. “Let’s face it. Do the math and you will discover that it costs the orchestral organization less money, to take the example from our orchestra, to hire a substitute player instead of hiring a principal violist. Apply the same logic to the section and you can see that cost-efficiency while not explicitly stated in the run-up to the audition process does play a role in keeping positions open. This situation can go on for months, sometimes even years. . . and once an orchestra sets a precedent, others follow suit.”<sup>460</sup> Keeping a vacancy unfilled could actually serve as a maneuver to open the playing field to the widest number of highly qualified candidates regardless of nationality. Musicians vying for orchestral positions in the U.S. do not face the same nationality barriers as auditions are open to all applicants who pass preliminary screening<sup>461</sup> however application statistics show that at least for the major

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<sup>458</sup> Conversations with Judy Nelson, violist New York Philharmonic Orchestra 1983-2019.

<sup>459</sup> Daniel Majeske former Concertmaster Cleveland Orchestra in discussion with the author.

<sup>460</sup> Conversations with ICSOM member and National Symphony Orchestra violist, Jennifer Mondie.

<sup>461</sup> Depending on the orchestra, according to information gleaned from 32 U.S. orchestral websites, a preliminary can consist of a dvd/downloaded performance round and/or resumé application with details of past employment and relevant education.

U.S. orchestras, the numbers of applicants are significantly higher than auditions for major will not be filled following two auditions in which EU/EEA nationals have participated, the orchestra will be permitted to organize an ‘international’ audition where participants can compete regardless of nationality.<sup>462</sup>

### 7.3 The ideal candidate

The Amsterdam-based Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra has added a new dimension to their audition procedure that takes factors above and beyond candidates’ musical abilities as a factor for acceptance. The audition announcement posted in November 2017 presents a profile of the ideal candidate:

*“NedPhO/NKO musicians have a driven and flexible work ethic...They ensure excellent performances on concert stages. . . Members of the orchestra sometimes perform in unusual locations. . . and make an active contribution to further enhancing social support. . .NedPhO seeks new colleagues who...do not object to receiving visitors during rehearsals at times.*

*Selection: the selection consists of two parts. The artistic selection takes place through the audition. Secondly, an interview takes place regarding the candidate’s affinity with the orchestra to establish whether knowledge, skills and personality match the demands of the job.”<sup>463</sup>*

From recent conservatory graduates to established freelancers concern has been expressed with regard to the ‘interview’ as part of a selection process. One concern is that this is ‘an excuse to keep foreign players who might not yet have a good command of Dutch out of the orchestra’ while others thought that it is ludicrous to expect an affinity with an organization that has not yet admitted the candidate. As all orchestras set strict requirements for pre-tenure trial periods, the purpose of a pre-trial interview is questionable: the candidate should be judged on specific performance on the job not on interview skills.<sup>464</sup> The former artistic director of the Hague Philharmonic observed that the two-part selection was created out of necessity taking into consideration the fact that there was some resistance on the part of seasoned orchestral members to new flexible requirements built in to their jobs post-crisis exemplified by ‘portfolio’ activities including school concerts.<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>463</sup> See, <https://www.orkest.nl/english-summary/orchestral-musicians--profile>

<sup>464</sup> Comments gleaned from conversations with freelance musicians at rehearsals in Rotterdam, The Hague, and Amsterdam 2017.

<sup>465</sup> Conversations with Roland Kieft, former Artistic Director The Hague Philharmonic (2013-2016) presently Director (SOM).



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## 7.4 The fair audition: to screen or not to screen?

While many orchestral musicians find that audition practices even in their own ensembles are in need of renewal, there is no consensus registered in interviews in the orchestras in the Netherlands.<sup>466</sup> Statistics from the U.K. show that an astonishing 10,188 orchestral musicians were engaged as deputy, or substitute players while 1,163 musicians held full-time employment contracts in U.K. orchestras underlining the fact that a significant number of orchestral vacancies are not filled. A total of 1,248 musicians were registered as playing in non-permanent project-based orchestras under a variety of ‘gig’ contracts.<sup>467</sup> “It’s safe to say that we (referring to U.K. orchestras) wrote the book when it comes to ‘not’ filling positions in orchestras.”<sup>468</sup> Key issues related to gender bias and racial discrimination will be discussed in detail in the *Of Rowe and race movement*.

## 7.5 Trial periods: the road to a permanent contract

All musicians accepted by an orchestra through the audition process undergo a trial period, or for some orchestras, a series of trial periods<sup>469</sup> before the final contract is signed. “Trial periods notwithstanding, we still have this feeling that once we say ‘yes,’ the chosen player will be a part of our orchestra for decades.”<sup>470</sup> The reason ‘not to fill’ a position through an audition in the Netherlands might be tied to EU and national employment regulations. To quote the text taken from the announcement of a 2019 vacancy advertised on the Rotterdam Philharmonic’s website, “to this audition we can only invite musicians from an EU or EEA country or musicians who are in possession of a permanent residence and work permit for the Netherlands.”

Most professional orchestral musicians speak of certain traditions peculiar to ‘their’ orchestra, customs that might not translate to other orchestras. “Fairness of course is the best policy across the board, however should an orchestra that counts the music directors’ vote as a double vote set the standard for an orchestra where the music director holds equal power with all other voting members of the orchestra? And, if a

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<sup>466</sup> A comparison of statistics Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra and Radio Philharmonic Orchestras versus the Boston Symphony, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, and the New York Philharmonic 2014-2016.

<sup>467</sup> [http://www.abo.org.uk/media/105071/ABO-The-State-of-Britains-Orchestras-in-2016\\_email.pdf](http://www.abo.org.uk/media/105071/ABO-The-State-of-Britains-Orchestras-in-2016_email.pdf)

<sup>468</sup> Conversations with The Musicians’ Union U.K. national organizer, Bill Kerr.

<sup>469</sup> Both the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (RCO) and several top five U.S. orchestras have reported the ‘extended trial year’ phenomenon in recent years, “to make sure we hire the right person for the job.”

<sup>470</sup> Author’s discussion with Mindy Kaufman flute/piccolo New York Philharmonic Orchestra since 1979.

European orchestra finds that screens are not appropriate, should U.S. players judge their process as unfair?<sup>471</sup> As mentioned earlier, the renowned Berlin Philharmonic auditions do not favor the ‘blind audition’:

*“We, the members, know pretty well what we are looking/listening for: we know our collective sound, our musical language, our collective artistic personality. The audition is not therefore primarily a contest between competitors for a gold medal. Much more importantly, we search for the “right” musician, not necessarily only the “best” player.... No screens are used. We want to learn as much as we possibly can about the candidate in the short time they are on stage. One can “see” a lot by observing body language and stage presence.”<sup>472</sup>*

From inside another world-famed symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, another variation on the ‘screened auditions’ resounds:

*“The fairest way would be to have all rounds played behind a screen, and all voting done via electronic counter, where no committee member is allowed to visually or orally indicate which candidate they prefer. We do this, except for the screening of ALL rounds. Each committee member holds a “clicker” that is tied into a central monitoring device. Two members of the standing audition and reviews committee watch that counter, and when a pre-determined number is hit, the candidate is excused. We are not allowed to discuss any candidate prior to voting (which is done via secret ballot) until the very final round.”<sup>473</sup>*

Discussing the blind audition issue with orchestral colleagues who have not only passed the audition tests but also have served on audition committees, the consensus feels that while the screen can be theoretically helpful, there are major drawbacks to screened auditions, and although the blind audition process led to more gender equality in orchestras, it is by no means perfect.

*“The screened process tends to forget that we are musicians, flesh and blood players who audition. Musicians feed off of their audiences for inspiration! Have you ever seen the standard orchestral audition screens? As a performer you feel as if you are playing to a blank wall. And, furthermore, there are many ways to beat the system - you can ‘signal’ to jury members through a pre-arranged mechanism, the way you tune for example, or through other musical means while playing. For example, a female wind or brass player draws in breath differently than a male player. If a jury member or members need to know who is playing, the screen will not stop them.”<sup>474</sup>*

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<sup>471</sup> Discussions with Roger Ruggieri, former principal bass and a member of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra’s bass section for 52 years.

<sup>472</sup> Commentary provided by Fergus McWilliam who joined the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra’s horn section in 1985. See, *supra* at fn. 453.

<sup>473</sup> James Wilt, Associate principal trumpet Los Angeles Philharmonic at: <https://www.trumpetherald.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=1321795>

<sup>474</sup> Information gathered through author’s interviews with Marcia Peck, Evelien Prakke, Emi Ohi Resnick, and other female orchestral players in NL and the U.S.

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Another issue brought to the fore by orchestral musicians in relation to blind auditions relates to another form of equality, the real diversity issue. Is it possible to diversify the orchestra in terms of face and race to reflect a multicultural society if auditions are judged blind? Should orchestras rethink the 'blind audition' in order to promote diversity within the ranks of members? Would it be possible for orchestras to move with the times and add other factors into the audition process, should this engender changes in audition rules? These questions will be analyzed further in the second part in *Of Rowe and race*. The jury is still out as to how a fair audition should be conducted, an important question when dealing with musicians' vulnerabilities. Is it even fair to judge an orchestra on its methods to determine its personnel? Audition outcomes have found their way to court proceedings on both sides of the ocean, in both jurisdictions examined from the 'employed musicians' perspective. *A long and winding road* spotlights U.S.-based cases in which orchestral freelance substitute musicians attempted to bypass the audition procedure and describes similar case in the Netherlands. An analysis of this jurisprudence will reveal some of the lacunae in judicial cognizance of the trials and tribulations characteristic to the orchestral profession.