

Utah symphony and utah opera: a merger proposal



Utah Symphony and Utah Opera: A Merger Proposal The Utah Symphony (USO) and the Utah Opera (UOC) Merger was a union that was brought forth by the leadership committee at the USO in Salt Lake City. The proposal was an opportunity to strengthen a struggling symphony with a financially sound opera company. Although mergers between opera and symphony companies in the United States had been successful in the past, the merging of two major companies had yet to materialize (DeLong & Ager, 2005, p. 2). William Bailey, Chairman of the Board for the Utah Opera Company had motivation to move forward with the merger.

Successfully combining the two companies the size of Utah's Opera and Symphony Orchestra would be a first in the nation, and set precedence for others to follow. If the merger were successful, the proposed name of the new organization would be the Utah Symphony & Opera (USUO), and with its potential draw, it had the power to elevate the Opera to the national stage making it a tier-one organization, affiliating it with other such powerhouses to the likes of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In comparison to other major operas, its viability to increase the current combined annual endowment 10 fold was a likely probability.

The merger did not come without opposition. Carolyn Abravenal, widow to the longstanding maestro and music director to the USO publicly denounced the new company. Scott Parker, Chairman to the Utah Symphony is best suited to discuss the merger with Mrs. Abravenal to gain her support so that the symphony could achieve the true potential her husband had envisioned. Her husband had given 32 years of his life to the USO building it from a part-time ensemble to a world-class symphony (DeLong & Ager, 2005, p. 4). Mrs.

Abravenal's main concern was that the symphony would take a back seat to the opera, conversely, it would lead in name with the new company, the Utah Symphony | Utah Opera. Parker might consider sharing with Mrs. Abravenal that the merger was actually his idea and that Anne Ewers was also his choice to take the company into the future. Through Ewers' leadership, musicians could add variety to their repertoire, giving them access to a broader spectrum of performances. Performing with the Opera would allow for additional productions each year creating rotations for instrumentalists wanting to crossover and perform in oth genres. Combining the two styles could create a pop style opera that could potentially reach the younger demographic, once again increasing revenue. Although Ewers' experience was primarily in opera, it is her positional power and knack for building fiscally sound companies that made her the easy choice to lead both companies. While the symphony struggled at fundraising, Ewers' UOC annual budget grew 3X from her predecessor, mainly due to her corporate sponsorships that reached beyond the state of Utah (DeLong & Ager, 2005, p. 3).

One of Ewers' first challenges was to get Keith Lockhart, Music Director for the USO onboard with her plan on how to merge the two entities. Lockhart's concern was the proposed organizational chart that showed him reporting directly to Ewers rather than the Chairman as he had with the USO (DeLong & Ager, 2005, p. 14). Ewers personal strengths allowed her to share her vision with Lockhart, however she was dependant on Lockhart's leadership among the orchestra to help facilitate a smoother transition. The success of the

USUO moving forward could only happen with the collaboration of the musicians.

It was they who held strength in numbers, and without them the entire merger could collapse. If Lockhart failed to follow along with the proposed plan, Ewers faced an even greater obstacle, dissent amongst the majority of the company. Lockhart expressed concern that had the orchestra not believed in his leadership; they had the ability to render him ineffective as a conductor (DeLong & Ager, 2005, p. 9). This exposed a window of opportunity for Ewers to sidestep Lockhart should she feel his efforts were counterproductive.

Ewer could meet with the musicians without the presence of Lockhart and share with them that the symphony would not be taking a backseat to the opera, and it was the symphony they depended on for performances due to their year round schedule. The new direction could potentially allow for expansion of the symphony if they were to become the sole orchestra for the opera. This could allow for either growth in headcount, or increased pay from the additional productions. If they were successful in becoming a Group I orchestra, this would give them national exposure and perhaps advancement onto grander stages.

This approach for power and affiliation might be the key to motivate. The final obstacle Ewers faced was overcoming the concerns of the opera trustees, full-time staff, along with the artists. What Ewers had in her favor was that the each entity in its own was net positive in their income statements for 2000-2001, and both were forecasting the same in 2001-2002

(DeLong & Ager, 2005, p. 15). The symphony was operating without a CEO, which made it easy for the opera leadership to take step in and take charge.

This would ensure a seat at the helm, and someone that could operate with the opera's interest in mind. With the positional strengths of Ewer, she could exercise her marketing strategies for the symphony and tap her existing base to increase their annual contributions. If Ewers was successful in pulling all the departments together to support the merger, she will have demonstrated her strengths to overcome obstacles no other symphony and opera had been able to do in the history of our country. It was an opportunity to create precedence and pioneer a process for others to follow.

Ewers would eventually complete this venture and lead the USUO for the next five years until her departure to the Kimmel Center for Performing Arts where she became the President and CEO of Kimmel Center, Inc (Kimmel Center, Inc. 2010). References DeLong, T. J & Ager, D. L (2005, August 8). Utah Symphony and Utah Opera: A Merger Proposal. HarvardBusiness Journal, 9-404-116, 1-16. Kreitner, R. & Kinicki, A. (2010). Organizational Behavior, 9th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill HigherEducationKimmel Center, Inc. (2010). Anne Ewers. Retrieved from <http://www.kimmelcenter.org/about/anne.php>