

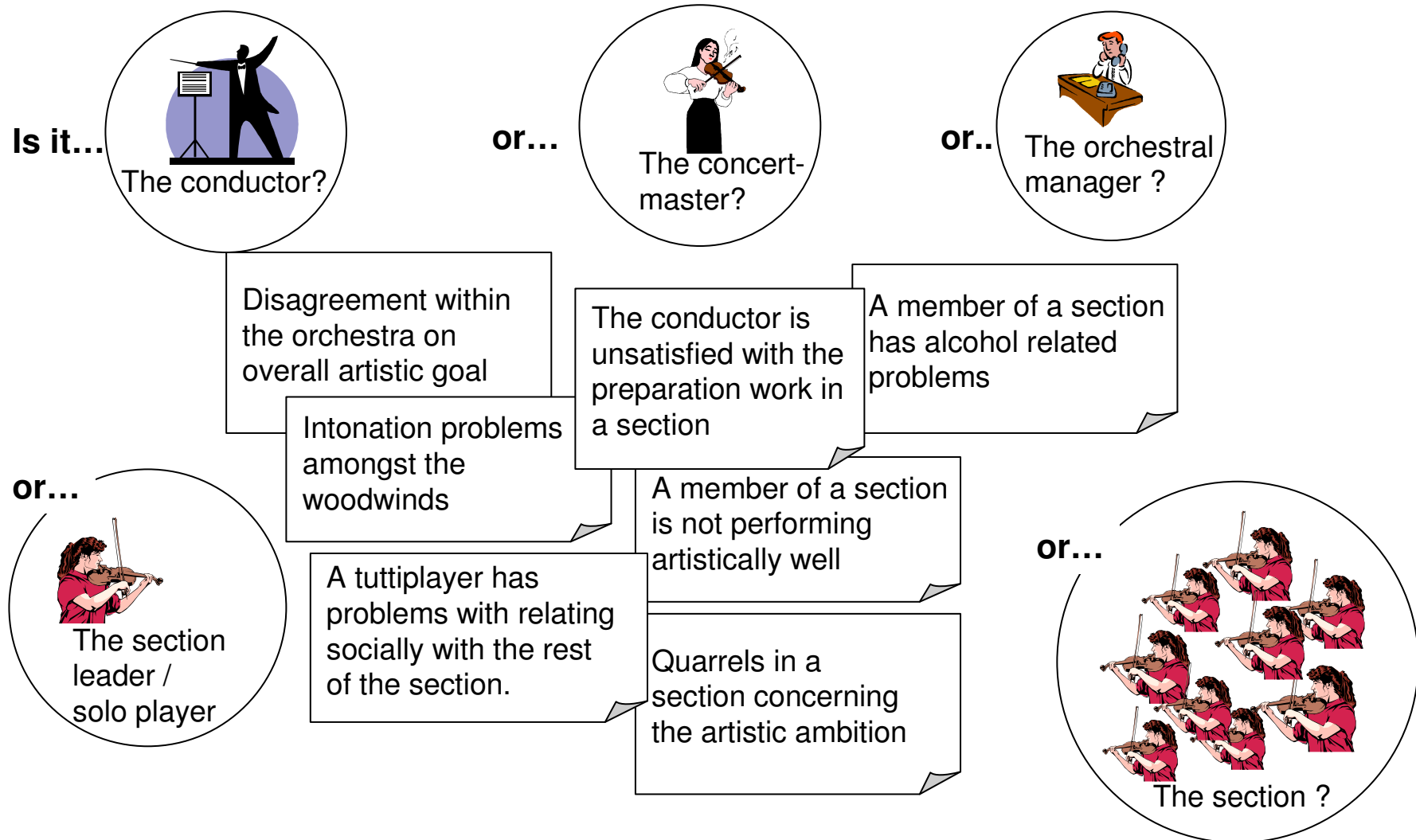
# Between collective individuality and managerial order



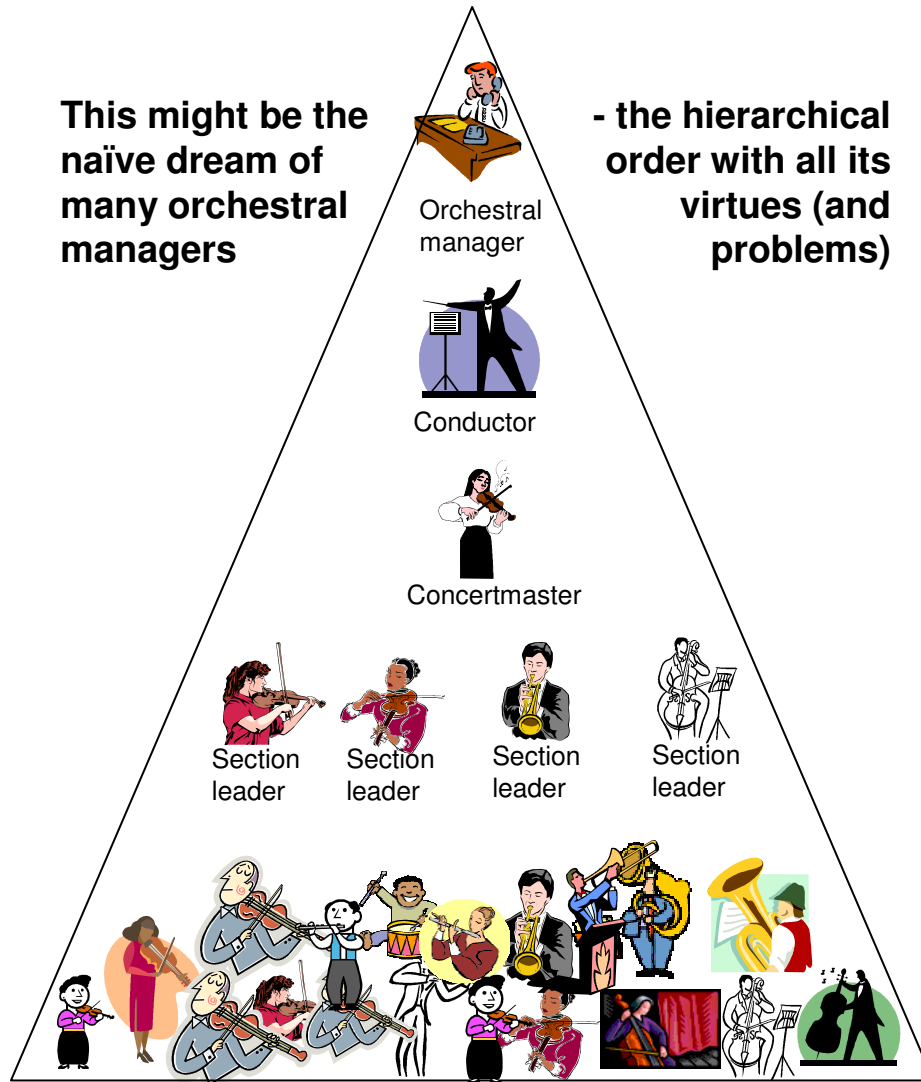
The distribution of responsibilities in the Symphony Orchestra

# Problems orchestral managers and musicians know of all too well !

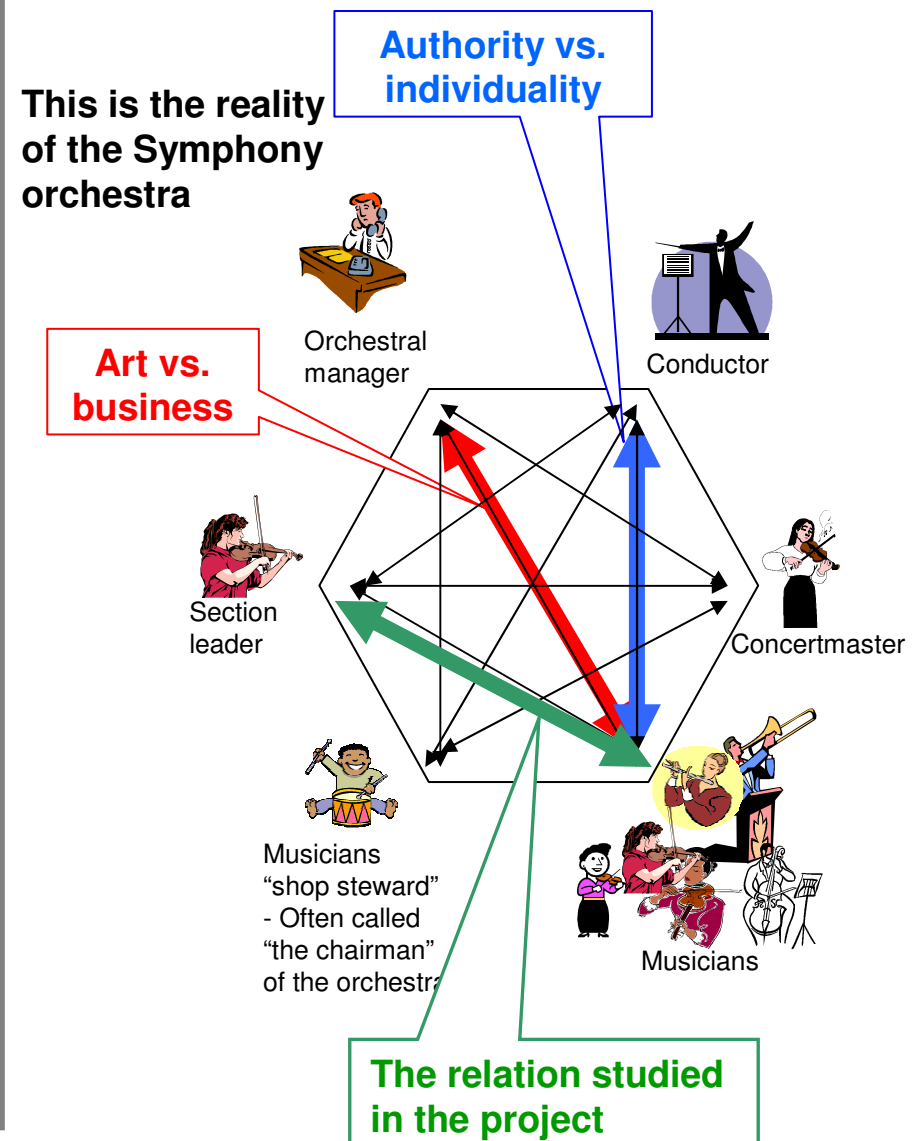
Who is responsible for taking care of issues / problems like these?



## The hierarchical dream



## – and the “nightmare” of reality



## The "section leader" project of five Danish symphony orchestras 2007-2008

Specific background and initiative	Lack of clarity concerning the role and obligations of the section leaders Orchestral managers and musician representatives of the five orchestras (forming the steering committee of the project)
Objective of the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To bring the problems and frustration out from corners and corridors into open discussion amongst the musicians</li><li>• To reach a common "diagnosis" and to get the musicians involved in constructive work finding general accepted solutions</li></ul>
Design and project consultant	Christian S. Nissen In collaborating with section leaders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Claus Myrup (Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra)</li><li>• David Alberman (London Symphony Orchestra)</li></ul>
Outline of the project	Two whole days (with an interval) with all the musicians of each of the orchestras. A combination of lectures, plenary discussions and group work. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• an investigation of the distribution of responsibilities</li><li>• description of present situation as seen by the musicians</li><li>• formulation of suggestions and possible solutions</li></ul>

## Investigating the distribution of responsibilities:

First the 5 orchestral managers and all musicians were individually asked:

”Who is responsible for taking care of the following 18 tasks / problems?”

### **A sample:**

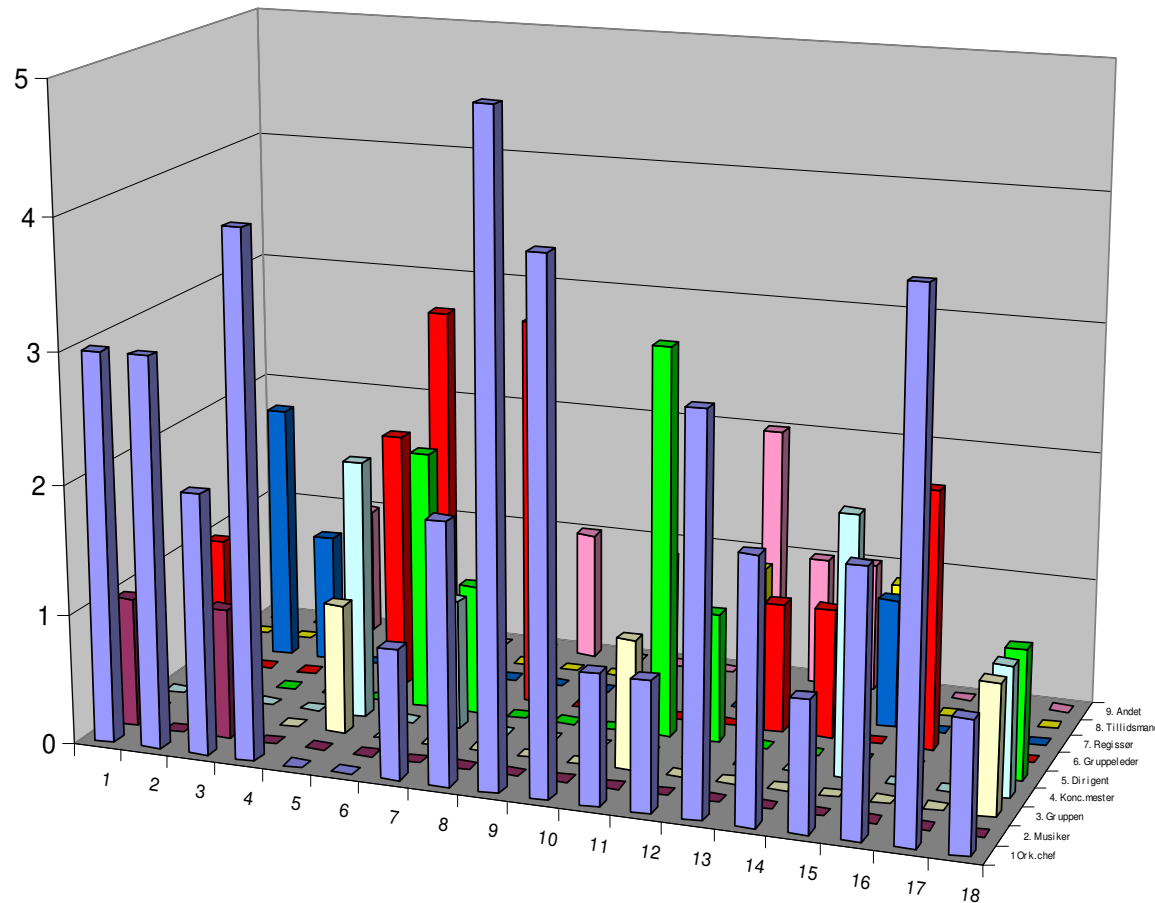
- A member of a section is not performing artistically well.
- A musician is frequently late to rehearsals
- An oboist has an excess use of reeds
- A member of a section has alcohol-related problems
- 2nd desk viola discovers that the section leader’s bowings do not match the 2nd violins.
- The conductor draws attention to intonation problems amongst the woodwinds.
- The conductor is unsatisfied with the preparation work in a section
- A tutti player wishes to take leave of absence. There is no possibility to hire a replacement musician
- A tutti player is unsatisfied with the artistic level of the section leader
- The orchestral manager has (like the audience and the press) discovered an imbalance in the orchestra
- A tutti player is complaining that the brass section is playing too loud.
- The conductor asks repeatedly for silence during a rehearsal.
- A tutti player is instructed by the section leader opposite the instructions from the conductor.

**Is it:**

The orchestral manager	The individual musician	The group
The leader / Concert master	The conductor	The section leader
The stage manager	The musicians representative	Others

## The distribution of responsibility

- as seen by the 5 orchestral managers



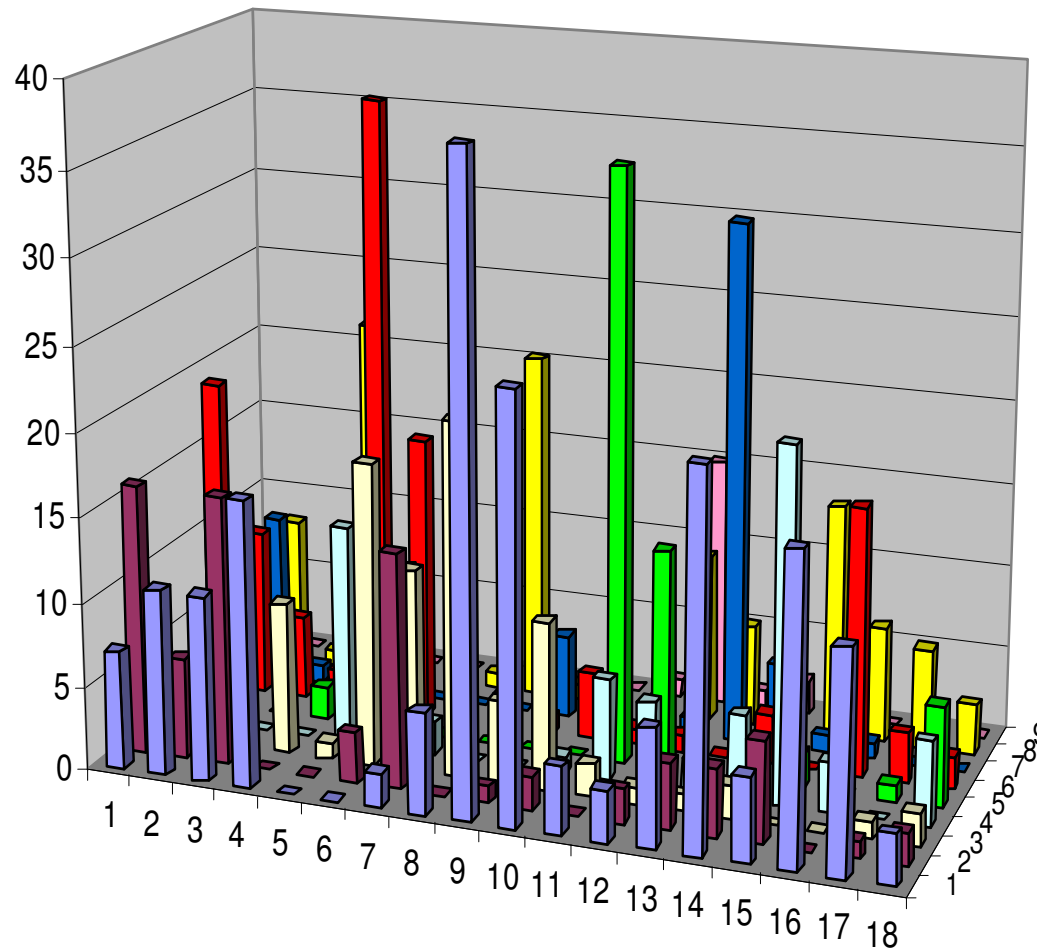
Note that:

- The top score is the manager
- Probably because all problems tend to end up on his/her desk
- 
- The variety between the 5 answers is probably (also) an illustration of differences between the orchestras

- The orchestral manager
- The individual musician
- The section
- The leader / Concert master
- The conductor
- The section leader
- The stage manager
- The musicians representative
- Others

## The distribution of responsibility

- as seen by 54 individual musicians in one of the orchestras



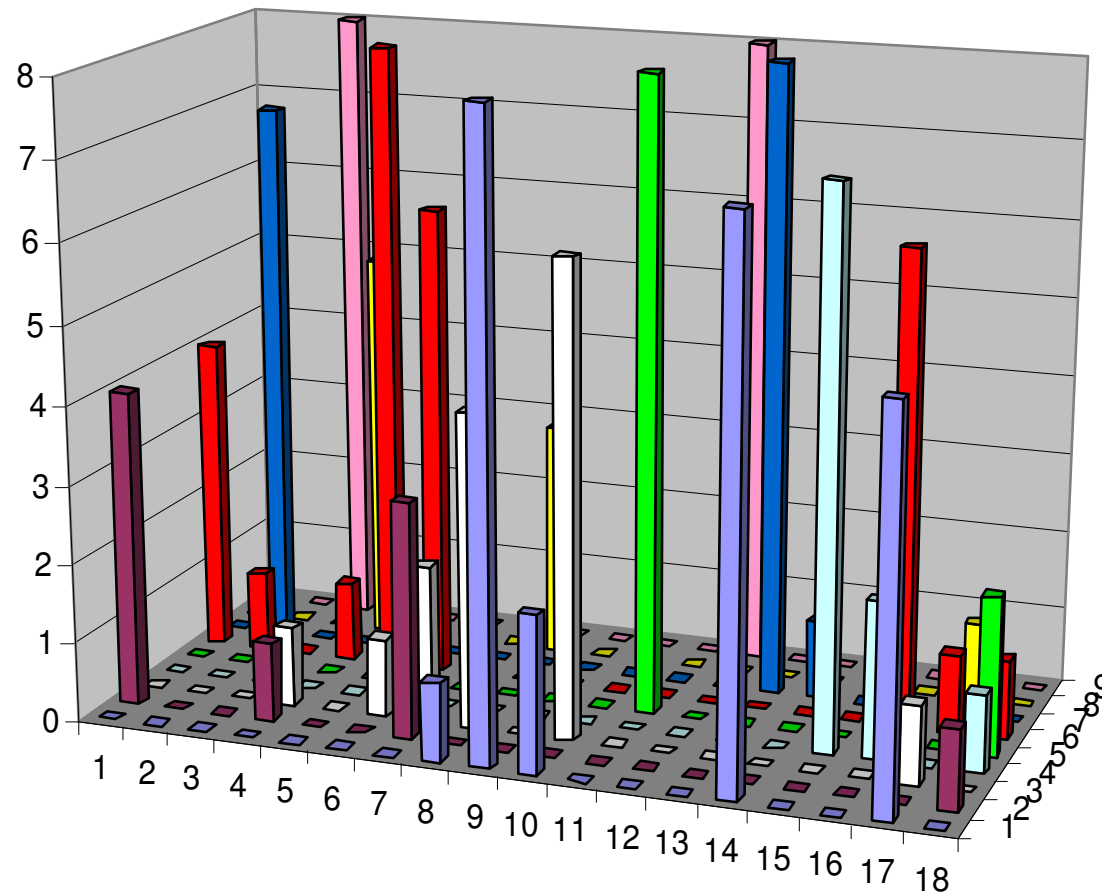
Note that:

- The even greater variety, although it is musicians working in the same orchestra
- The manager is no longer so dominant
- The musicians representative is mentioned by many
- 

- The orchestral manager
- The individual musician
- The section
- The leader / Concert master
- The conductor
- The section leader
- The stage manager
- The musicians representative
- Others

## The distribution of responsibility (described as it could/should be)

- as seen by the same musicians after working a couple of hours in 8 groups



Note that:

- A much clearer picture
- The role of the manager has diminished
- So has that of the musicians representative
- 

- The orchestral manager
- The individual musician
- The section
- The leader / Concert master
- The conductor
- The section leader
- The stage manager
- The musicians representative
- Others



## Specific section leaders' responsibilities, as suggested by musicians

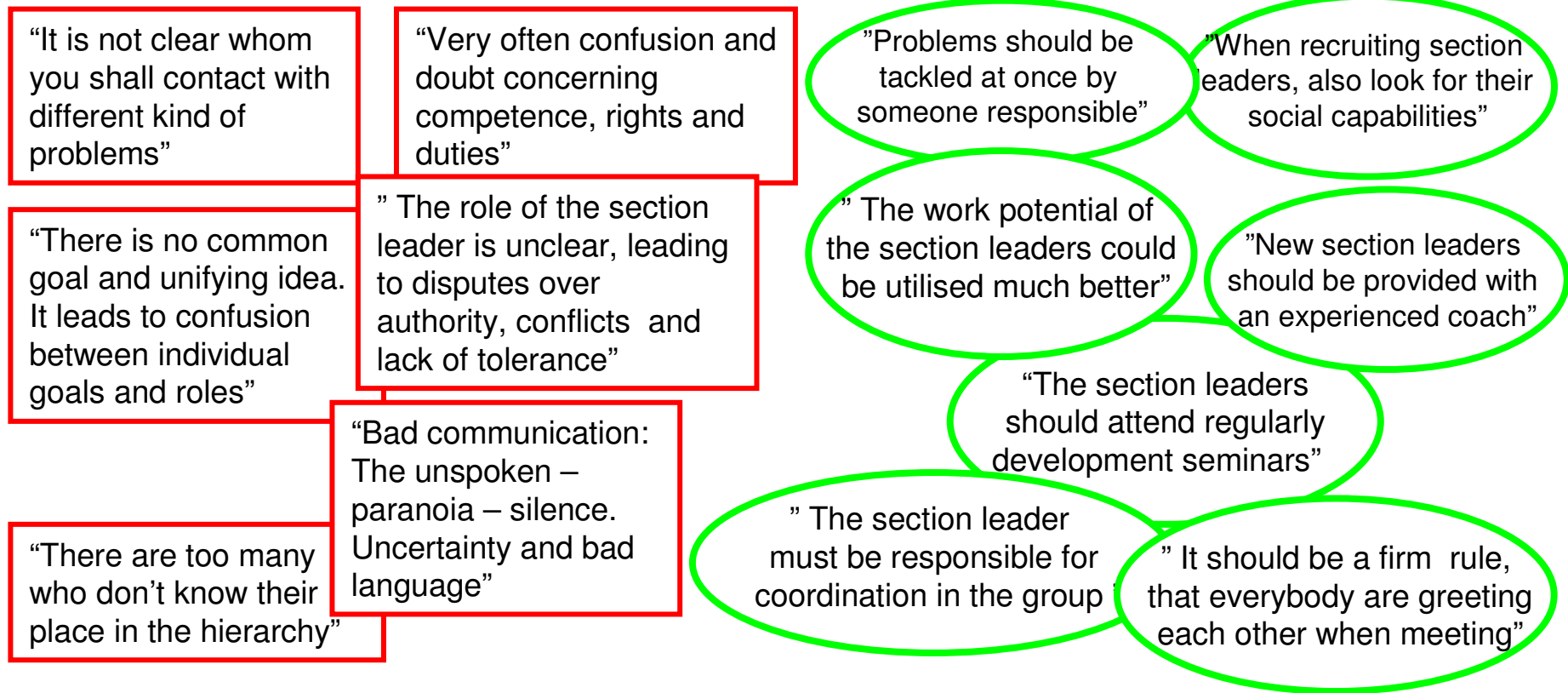
Shortened version of the 18 problems / questions		Individual answers 54	Group work 1 (8 groups)	Group work 2A All (8 groups)	Group work 2A Tutti (6 groups)	Group work 2A Solo (2 groups)
1.A member of a section is not performing artistically well		19	3	4	2	2
2.A musician is frequently late to rehearsals		10	0	1	1	0
3.An oboist has an excess use of reeds		5	0	0	0	0
4.A member of a section has alcohol-related problems		2	1	1	1	0
5.Section leader's bowings do not match the 2 <sup>nd</sup> violins.		37	8	8	6	2
6.Intonation problems amongst the woodwinds.		17	6	6	5	1
7.The conductor is unsatisfied with the preparation work in a section		22	6	3	2	1
8.Musician has problems relating socially with rest of the section.		2	0	0	0	0
9.A tutti player wishes to take leave of absence.		1	0	0	0	0
10.Tutti player unsatisfied with the artistic level of the section leader		4	1	0	0	0
11.Imbalance in the orchestra		1	0	0	0	0
12.Complaints that the brass section is playing too loud.		1	0	0	0	0
13.Complaints about bad dressing of one of the 1 <sup>st</sup> violinists		0	0	0	0	0
14.A 1 <sup>st</sup> violinist refuses to take part in "silly parading"		3	1	0	0	0
15.The conductor asks repeatedly for silence during a rehearsal.		0	0	0	0	0
16.Suggestion that all principal players meet once a month		16	4	6	5	1
17.1 <sup>st</sup> solo player should be replaced with the 2 <sup>nd</sup> solo player.		3		1	1	0
18.Tutti player is instructed opposite instructions from the conductor.		2		1	0	1

My (CSN) suggestion of relevance for section leaders

Highest priority among musicians

## Sample of **problems** and possible **solutions**, formulated by the musicians

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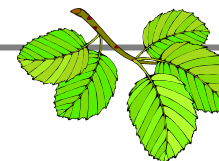
Problems and solutions were later categorized in three groups for further work:

1. Areas related to artistic quality
2. Communication within the instrument-section and with the conductor
3. The "social sphere" (making the section functioning better socially)

## Some general observations and tentative conclusions

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1. The orchestra is a very tough working place with many conflicts, both between different organizational roles and between individuals
2. Many problems are seen by the musicians as imbedded in the “culture” of the orchestra, something they have to live with.
  - Unclear division of roles and responsibilities
  - Lack of routine mechanisms for conflict solving
  - Small interpersonal strifes are allowed to develop into year long fights
3. The artistic quality of the orchestra can undoubtedly be improved by tackling these problems
4. The role of the section leaders is unclear (“primus inter pares”)
  - If we want the section leader to have some responsibility for the overall artistic performance of the section, he/she must (beside qualities as a musician) also have social/leader capabilities
  - The (artistic) competition ought to be supplemented with some additional evaluation of “social skills”, when recruiting section leaders
5. First and foremost, just by bringing these questions out in the open and having them discussed in the orchestra can be the first step towards a better working place – and a better performing orchestra

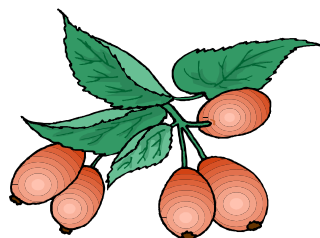
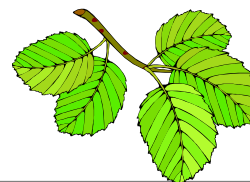


The symphony orchestra is very much like the mystery of the flying humblebee.



In spite of all troubles, let us not forget that the symphony orchestra plays beautiful music

- But it's possible to make it even better!



Thank you for your attention !

Christian S. Nissen

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