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Orchestrating values: social impact at the Reina Sofia School of Music

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Why music? Because it unites us.

Paloma O'Shea, founder of the Reina Sofia School of Music

Nulla aesthetica sine ethica. Nulla ethica sine aesthetica.

inscribed on the Reina Sofia School of Music headquarters

Our mission is to develop talent and bring music closer to society.

The Board of Trustees of the Reina Sofia School of Music

In the fall of 2023, at the annual Values Day of one of Spain's largest public companies, the music performed was composed specifically to reflect the multinational corporation's values and purpose. It was also created to leverage music's transformative power to unify diverse staff members, providing a common language to bridge corporate functions and personal perspectives, ultimately fostering inclusion. As such, this music was meant to be heard with an attentive and empathetic ear.

The music was primarily performed by a select group of professionals and top-level trainees from Madrid's Reina Sofia School of Music, widely recognized as one of Europe's premier institutions for musical training. Through the School's new corporate initiative called the Symphony of Values, companies could commission custom compositions that expressed their corporate principles, developed collaboratively in interactive workshops and sessions. The four-phase program offered team building, collective reflection, and leadership lessons.

This case was prepared by Professors Marta Elvira and Carlos Rodríguez-Lluesma, and Cintra Scott, case writer. July 2025.
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As CEO of the School, Julia Sánchez Abeal brought business acumen to her work with the corporate sponsors of cultural institutions. One of her main goals in this endeavor was to generate a steady income stream that would help fund the organizational mission to develop talent and bring music closer to society (see Exhibit 1). At the heart of this mission was not only the students (174 from 38 different countries in 2023), but also other important stakeholders, including an expanding network of alumni, faculty, staff, sponsors, and patrons.

Remarkably, the School fully waived tuition entirely for the select group admitted to its rigorous musical programs, driven by the belief that financial limitations should never prevent talented students from enrolling. In the world of non-profit institutions, the School had another unique feature: about 70% of its operating budget was supplied by private-sector patrons.[1] Loyal sponsors included many of Spain's largest companies, as well as a growing number of donors outside of Spain (see Exhibits 2 and 3).

On the day of the presentation, Sánchez explained to her colleagues and clients: "The Symphony of Values has moved us into a new, deeper type of relationship: as co-creators." As she saw it, her School's mission and expertise, as well as how it served as a reference in its field, positioned it well to work on three levels simultaneously:

1. At the individual level, developing musical talent to begin rewarding careers;
2. At the corporate level, benefiting its many stakeholders, including alumni, staff, and patrons; and
3. At the societal level, increasing exposure to the positive and transformative power of music.

Sánchez further remarked:

> Music brings people together because it touches everyone equally, eliminating barriers of language, environment, and tradition… In addition, the practice of music instills values—including dedication, shared leadership and empathy—that favor coexistence and social cohesion.

Could the School succeed in the eyes of students, donors, and others? How might this success look? In other words, how might Sánchez and her team best thread together diverse stakeholder interests? Could the same core values guide the School's educational and cultural contributions for students, audiences, and enterprises - both for-profit and non-profit organizations pursuing distinct missions? Furthermore, was fully waiving tuition for all students, regardless of the families' income, both fair and viable in the long run?

A brief history (1991–2023)

The Reina Sofía School of Music (*Escuela Superior de Música Reina Sofía)* was established in Spain in 1991 by founder and president Paloma O'Shea. Drawing on her experience and passion as an award-winning concert pianist, O'Shea founded the School, leveraging a strong network within- and beyond- the classical music community. O'Shea dedicated much of her life to this endeavor, balancing her intensive executive role with her responsibilities as mother of a large family, which included Ana Botín, the current president of the multinational Santander Bank. Botín herself was strongly committed to the School, serving as a member of its Board of Trustees and as president of its International Circle, a group comprising sponsors and ambassadors from various countries (see Exhibit 4).

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Queen Sofía of Spain provided critical support to the School, including lending her name and acting as Honorary President. World-renowned musicians, such as conductor Zubin Mehta, Yehudi Menuhin, and Mstislav Rostropóvich helped the young institution quickly establish its reputation. Thus, by 2001, British classical music magazine *The Strad* had already called it "one of the best Schools in Europe, if not the world."

In 2008, the School moved from its original, suburban location to Madrid's central Plaza de Oriente, between the Royal Palace of Madrid and the Royal Theater opera house. In this elegant, bustling plaza, classical music frequently emanated from the School's building, upon which was inscribed the Lattin motto: *Nulla aesthetica sine ethica. Nulla ethica sine aesthetica* ("No aesthetics without ethics. No ethics without aesthetics").

In 2014, Julia Sánchez Abeal, then 33 years old, was hired as CEO, while O'Shea remained active in her role as Founding President. Sánchez had earned her MBA from Columbia Business School in New York, had worked at KPMG in Madrid and as a consultant and group manager in London, and had additional international experience in the field of impact investing. Immediately before joining the School, Sánchez was COO and a member of the founding team of Teach First Spain (*Empieza Por Educar*). Five years into her tenure as CEO, in 2019, Sánchez was selected by *Mujeres & Cía*, an online portal for female executives, as one of the Top 100 Women Leaders in Spain. Despite lacking formal musical training, Sánchez distinguished herself as an articulate leader adept at effectively linking business with culture.

In 2016, the School began offering an accredited university-level degree (within the Bologna European framework), which was joined in 2018 by a master's degree in music performance. Alongside its traditional program, accepting musicians as young as 14, the School maintained a highly selective admissions program, with an acceptance rate of just 5–6%. By 2022, the School proudly reported a 91% employment rate among its 866 graduates, with most of the remaining 9% pursuing further studies.

In December 2022, shortly after celebrating its 30th anniversary, the School announced an ambitious expansion plan aiming to nearly double its size by incorporating two adjacent buildings in central Madrid (expanding from Calle de Requena 1 to include Requena 3–5 along the plaza, as seen in Figure 1).

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