

Opening Address to the 2014 ICSOM Conference
Bruce Ridge, ICSOM Chair
Los Angeles, August 25, 2014

We have often marveled (and occasionally despaired) at the fact that we work in a field where all too often organizational failure is accepted, and all too often such failure is even expected. For me, this has never been more strikingly illustrated than in the recent announcement from the management of the Green Bay Symphony, a member of ROPA, that it would close following this next season despite several recent profitable years.

The executive director publicly labeled the profitable years “a fluke.” What other business would do that? Well...no other business. Successful businesses would highlight the profits, knowing that success breeds success. No business would dismiss profits as “a fluke” thereby suggesting that their successes had nothing to do with the quality of the product, the excellence of the employees, or the importance of the service to the community.

Too often our field continues to attribute organizational failure to the ever-impending “death of classical music.” But other businesses face difficulties too. After all, it is said that 90% of restaurants in America fail in their first year of business, yet no one would claim that Americans no longer like to eat.

But in a field where organizational failure is too often accepted, even expected, it seems amazing that so many orchestras can be overcoming such suppositions to be performing so well, especially in these economic times. Such successes are being experienced in places with positive expectations, and in life what you expect is often what you will get. If you find failure to be a reasonable result, and you spread such a message, then negative results are often what your vision will deliver. If you sow the wind, then you are certain to reap the whirlwind.

As we review the orchestral season, it is clear that difficulties remain, and it is clearer still that there will be a few storms ahead. But what is even more apparent is that, if success is a fluke, there certainly have been a lot of “fluky” things going on for orchestras and the arts.

- The Chicago Symphony received the two largest gifts in its history, totaling \$32 million
- The Indianapolis Symphony saw a 19% surge in ticket sales with an increase of 30% in subscription sales.
- The Cleveland Orchestra announced a balanced budget, growing audiences, increased endowment, and a record number of student attendees
- The Lyric Opera of Chicago, which has operated in the black for 26 of the past 27 seasons, saw significant increases in revenue and fundraising, and an increase of 8% in ticket sales
- The city of New York City increased funding for arts in the public schools by \$23 million, and is expected to hire 120 additional arts teachers

- In Syracuse, where Symphoria works heroically to establish a great and permanent orchestral presence in the wake of the unnecessary Syracuse Symphony bankruptcy, the new orchestra is now receiving grants, including funding for its educational mission
- The San Antonio Symphony celebrated its 75th anniversary as it prepares to move into its new home, the Tobin Center
- The Florida Orchestra saw an increase in attendance of 30%
- The Houston Symphony's gala raised over \$2.5 million in one evening for education programs on the heels of consecutive years of record breaking fundraising
- The New York City Ballet's Spring Gala Celebrated Fifty Years at Lincoln Center and raised over \$3 Million
- The Milwaukee Symphony reached a goal of \$5 million dollars from new donors
- The Cincinnati Symphony's endowment has grown by 43% and the number of gifts has increased by 94%, leading to a double-digit increase in attendance
- Our newest member, the Grand Rapids Symphony launched a \$40 million endowment drive with a \$20 million gift
- The Detroit Symphony's holiday concerts set a new box office record just one year after seeing a 43% increase in donations
- The Buffalo Philharmonic saw an 11.9% surge in contributions, endowment growth of 7.7%, and an increase in ticket sales with records set for subscriptions

In previous conferences we have come together to rally support for the musicians of Hawaii, and this month the Hawaii Symphony has ratified a new two-year union agreement and has just announced programming for its third season.

And in Louisville, where in 2011 the board sought to replace their great musicians through ads on Craigslist, that legendary orchestra now approaches a new season with a new manager, a new music director, a new Local union president, a budget surplus, and new donors who have given over \$5 million.

I have been traveling the world over the past decade spreading the message that for every story of failure there are ten stories of success for the arts, all the while hoping that we could sow the seeds of positive advocacy that could lead to a new era of artistic relevance for the modern world. I was recently inspired by a quote from Gustav Mahler, who said:

“I am hitting my head against the walls, but the walls are giving way.”

Many of these successes might not have been possible if not for the friendship that exists among musicians throughout the world. I have often referred to ICSOM as a “United Network of Friends” and that is indeed what we are. The response to ICSOM's numerous Calls to Action, to raise funds to support our musicians in need, has been remarkable. More than that, it has been reassuring and inspiring. The response to our Call to Action to support the Locked Out Musicians of the Minnesota Orchestra gave tremendous and tangible support to their effort, and

their efforts were indeed made on behalf of all us. With the recent attention to the negotiations at the Metropolitan Opera, I was already being asked by our members how they could donate to support the musicians. When we support our friends we are truly investing in our own orchestras and our own families as well.

One of my most moving moments of this past season came on January 14, while in Tampa. I walked into a meeting of the committees of the Florida Orchestra, and they handed me a check for \$800 to send to the Minnesota Orchestra musicians. What I knew at that time, but couldn't quite reveal for another hour or so, was on that day the most egregious lockout in the history of orchestras had finally ended.

As uplifting as the response to these Calls to Action has been, we nonetheless hope we never have to issue another. But we know we will, and we know we must remain prepared to support any musician in need. We must remain vigilant because we don't know what might occur even in these next few weeks. But, as we gather here today in Los Angeles, for the first time in several years we commence our discussions on a day on which no orchestra is locked out.

Numerous issues still await our collective action. Problems large and small face musicians and arise on a weekly basis. We must respond always, unified, and without apathy or any sense of futility.

Musicians who travel abroad are now faced with a difficult decision regarding their instruments which, through no fault of their own, may contain minuscule amounts of ivory. I want to speak very clearly about this issue: we deplore the despicable poaching of elephants which, in this day, is done almost entirely by a criminal element; a criminal element that funds terrorism. Recent reports show that the elephant population has reached a terrible tipping point, where more elephants are being slaughtered for their tusks than are being born. This must stop. While practically no instrument maker today still uses ivory in the manufacture of instruments, we nonetheless call for an end to the use of ivory in the crafting of any new instrument.

However, it is simply a fact that many of our antique instruments were made with small amounts of ivory at a time when it was completely legal. As we call on the citizens of the world to work to stop this poaching, we also ask our government to recognize that this slaughter perpetrated by terrorists cannot be stopped by launching initiatives that serve to punish musicians by putting their instruments, and therefore their livelihoods, at risk.

We ask every member of ICSOM to write to their congressional delegations, expressing support for initiatives that serve to protect all endangered species, but also asking that reasonableness be applied in the evaluation of our cherished and irreplaceable instruments.

When we act together our voices will be heard as clearly as our music.

I have been reading a book this summer on how the internet and tools such as Twitter have changed how we all communicate and organize. The impact on world events has been immeasurable. In the revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarak, Egyptians armed with little more than smartphones in their pocket rose up together through communications on Twitter, and they accomplished a revolution in a country where you needed a permit from the government to gather in groups larger than five.

When Nigerian schoolchildren were kidnapped by the despicable terrorists of Boko Haram, the world became aware through a Twitter hash tag campaign, and in a matter of hours a group that was previously unknown to most of the world was exposed, and now the world must be charged to act.

Authoritarian governments use three techniques to suppress the spirits of the people they attempt to control. They use isolation, fear, and apathy.

Through isolation they intend to keep the like-minded citizens of the world from organizing.

Through fear they intend to suppress the actions of the people through the knowledge of what might happen to them should they dare to rise.

And apathy is really futility. They create a sense of “what can I do? I am just one person.”

By no means do I intend to compare these horrific world events with the plight of the artist in North America, but it occurs to me that these same techniques are used by less nefarious factions to control the thinking of a people. In the battle for advocacy of our place as artists and musicians in society, there is an attempt to keep us isolated, to keep us fearful, and to keep us apathetic.

At this time of darkness for the world, music remains an inextinguishable light. Where others respond with vitriol we respond with music, and where others respond with violence, again we respond with music.

As the current border crisis expands, there are many who have responded by carrying accusatory signs and shouting epithets of hatred and division. But the musicians of the San Diego Symphony responded by joining with the musicians of the Orquesta Baja California to play Bach on opposite sides of a border fence in a profound demonstration of peace in a very noisy world.

We will not be isolated. We will not be fearful. We will not be apathetic.

We must not listen to the negative voices, and we must never doubt ourselves or the role we play in a society that yearns for relief from the destructive rhetoric that bombards us all from the ideologues that dominate the media. They are profiting from the division they sow.

I was recently amazed when I saw an audacious commercial promoting Koch Industries that claimed that they employ 60,000 Americans. Well, the arts employ over 4 million Americans, yet the role of the artist is seemingly forever diminished.

Currently ICSOM is building what we believe is the most important Twitter feed in classical music. We have over 6000 followers, and that allows us to spread our message instantly around the world, but we need 10,000 followers, we need 15,000. We must use this tool to spread the importance of the arts in education, in health, in financial impact, and in the elevation of the human spirit at a time when inspiration is harder and harder to find. Musicians must deliver that inspiration to a slumping world, and we will.

The work for ICSOM and on behalf of musicians across the world can be exhausting, and on many nights I find my writing interrupted by the sunrise. The light of the day often greets me while I am still absorbed with the darkness of the night.

On August 11, I was returning to North Carolina from Dallas following multiple trips on behalf of ICSOM, and, having arrived at the airport early, I fell asleep at the gate, not more than ten feet from the door to the Jet way. Apparently I slept more deeply and for much longer than I intended. Eventually I awoke to music in my head, which almost inexplicably it seemed to me, was *Old Man River*. I lingered for a moment in that place between sleep and wake, not really knowing where I was, until I saw that the shoeshine guy across the hallway was indeed singing, *Old Man River*. But that reverie was then interrupted with the announcement “Passenger Ridge, door closing in 15 seconds.” I jumped into motion, saying “I’m right here. Weren’t you even going to put a mirror under my nose or anything?”

But I as ran to the jet way, I turned back to hear a bit more of *Old Man River*, but instead saw a CNN TV monitor with the words “Robin Williams dead; apparent suicide.”

I boarded the plane, barely awake and confused. It was a dark flight. On that day in the world, there were people trapped on a mountainside in Iraq, facing a terrorist onslaught. War had escalated again in the Middle East. Protests of racial injustice had begun in Ferguson, Missouri, which I knew would inevitably lead to more violence. And now, Robin Williams was dead.

That day reminded me of a song on Simon and Garfunkel’s third album. The song has the two voices singing *Silent Night* as a news program softly plays in the background. The words of the reporter slowly rise in the mix as the music grows softer. The news that is reported is the actual news of another day in August, some 48 years earlier. The stories that are reported in contrast to the strains of “sleep in peace” include:

- Opposition to the Civil Rights Bill
- A report that the National Guard would be called in should Martin Luther King hold a rally just outside of Chicago
- Escalation of the war in Vietnam

- The House Un-American Activities Committee’s investigation of protestors of the war
- And, The death of comedian Lenny Bruce

There has always been darkness in the world, and there always will be; but there has also always been music. Many in our network of friends are still reeling from the terrible event that occurred in Chautauqua last week, and while there can be no logical explanation for this or these other events, we will still respond with music.

As Leonard Bernstein famously said just after the assassination of President Kennedy:

“This sorrow and rage will not inflame us to seek retribution; rather they will inflame our art. Our music will never again be quite the same. This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before”

Our music has never been more relevant to a world that slumps with the weight of its burdens. Our friendships with each other have never been closer or more needed. Those of us in this network of friends have a shared legacy, a shared childhood, a shared present, and a shared future. Whether we realize it or not we have never been more powerful than we are right now. And while it is a dark world, it is also a beautiful world. And we add beauty to this world every time we walk on stage with our colleagues, knowing that our friends across North America and the world are walking on to their stage as well at the very same time to spread the very same message of hope.

Our Conference theme is *The Art of Advocacy*, and this coming year we will pursue that art as vigorously as we pursue the art of music. It will only be through the art of advocacy that we will achieve our expectation of a thriving musical and cultural society across North America and throughout the world. When others merely talk about what is *sustainable*, we will talk about what is *achievable*. When others say what can’t be done, musicians will demonstrate what is possible by joining together through our united network of friends to spread our message of hope.

Those of you who know me best must realize that there is a certain irony in my standing before you to dispute that it is a dark and tragic world, and yet that is exactly my purpose here today and it is also the reason that I have decided to stand for re-election to an unprecedented fifth term as chair of this historic organization. I am eager to take this message across the world even more tirelessly than I have over these past eight years. For every time a TV monitor in an airport lounge tells me some bad news, I think of my thousands of friends who on a daily basis achieve astonishing things that represent the very best of humanity.

I think of the Musicians of the Minnesota Orchestra, who stood together against powerful people who sought to break their spirit and in standing together emerged closer and stronger.

I think of the negotiating committee of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, who orchestrated a magnificent public relations campaign and stood together in the face of overwhelming worldwide news coverage as their own manager sought to break their will by denigrating an entire art form.

I think of the musicians of the Louisville Orchestra that worked against great odds, standing together to literally save their orchestra.

I think of the musicians of Syracuse, who in creating Symphoria are seeking to achieve something their previous board leaders refused to even attempt.

As I have served in this role, I have been moved and inspired by every musician I have met. On overnight flights back to North Carolina I never travel alone. I am always accompanied by the music from every concert I have heard and every rehearsal I have attended.

We will not be isolated. We will not be fearful. We will not be apathetic.

This is not a time to feel darkness for the world. This is a time for all of us to bring light to the souls that we know are burdened. It is not too trite to say “We *are* the music makers and we *are* the dreamers of dreams.” We must not doubt ourselves, or allow negative voices to influence us. We must never validate the words of those we do not respect. It is crucial that we all allow ourselves to recall the amazement we felt when we were learning music for the first time, and when we knew nothing of the negativity that sometime surrounds our field.

We will greet any doubts with a unified message of hope. We will stand in favor of any positive message, and we will continue to care for each other as the united network of friends that we are. It is fatiguing to always feel that we are working against something, or trying to prevent something. In this week together, we will talk about things to work for and positive visions that we can imagine and achieve.

In this week, and in this coming year, as always, I will again be counting on you for inspiration.

We will not be isolated. We will not be fearful. We will not be apathetic. The world will hear our voices just as they have always heard our music. I look forward to continuing our work together in this cause.

Thank you very much.