

2022 ICSOM Chairperson Address

By Meredith Snow to the 2022 ICSOM Conference in Grand Rapids MI – Aug. 24, 2022

To our ICSOM Delegates, AFM International Executive Board & Local Officers, Symphonic Services, Player Conferences, and guests, welcome to ICSOM's 60th Annual Conference where we are celebrating six decades of advocacy for our orchestras.

I wonder if our original founders, the musicians and union activists from the Baltimore Symphony, Boston Symphony, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, The Metropolitan Opera, Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Rochester, St Louis, and Toronto, could have envisioned that ICSOM's member orchestras would have more than triple in number since that initial meeting in 1962.

Through six decades of economic & social turbulence—the good, the bad, & the ugly—ICSOM has continued to grow in membership and effectiveness. In the words of Tom Hall, retired violinist of the Chicago Symphony & ICSOM historian, “ICSOM is a community of orchestras which, through communication and mutual support, help individual orchestras improve their standing and thus provide a basis for improving the condition of all others.”

Together, through our network with each other and the American Federation of Musicians, we have helped our orchestras triumph over adversity, we have shared information and ideas for greater stability and economic success, we have most recently begun to increase our investment in diversity and community involvement, and just maybe, along the way we have taught our managers a thing or two about how to manage...

It's hard to imagine that our founders would have envisioned a pandemic shutdown – it sure surprised me. Nevertheless, with ingenuity, flexibility, and substantial Federal subsidies, our ICSOM orchestras have mostly come through with flying colors. It will take a few years for some to make up the lost income, and several of us are still negotiating under difficult circumstances.

I said to you two years ago, at our first-ever online conference, that I did not want to lose a single orchestra to COVID. We have not. But our brothers & sisters in San Antonio have suffered a crushing blow from their inept and unworthy management & board. After 20 years of cuts to musician wages & working conditions, it comes as no surprise that the San Antonio Symphony Society Board of Directors has simply given up and declared bankruptcy. Shame on them. They have abandoned their responsibility to preserve this great orchestra. We will hear from Riely Francis, the San Antonio Symphony delegate on Friday morning. ICSOM stands at the ready to assist the Musicians of San Antonio Symphony in whatever way we are able – just as we have helped other orchestras in crisis.

I am excited about all the work surrounding diversity and equity that has been going on in so many of our orchestras since the pandemic shutdown. We have a long way to go – but we have made a good beginning. President Austin will be speaking in detail about our ICSOM Media Committee activities in a moment and I hope you have all read our most recent *Senza Sordino* edition which focuses on individual orchestras' DEI initiatives.

We have some thought-provoking presentations for you in the next few days – and I am especially eager to hear what’s uppermost in your minds. This conference is our opportunity to share issues that we are working on at home and what we see coming up in the near future.

Here's what’s uppermost in my mind:

Even though we dodged the pandemic bullet, our orchestras remain in jeopardy because our country, our democracy, is in jeopardy. Rights & freedoms long assumed sacrosanct are being stripped away by a radical Supreme Court, State legislatures are curtailing the right of their citizens to vote, and the looming reality of climate change continues to destabilize our economy and our planet.

When the going gets tough, the arts go first.

I think we need to turn our attention to the ongoing political crisis in this country – the silent, slow-motion insurrection that is undermining our democracy as we speak.

We know that our orchestra associations deem themselves a-political by necessity. Our non-profit business model requires that we fundraise from every ideological stripe – I am pretty certain that the vast majority of our donors are not particularly interested in a social revolution.

But WE are not our orchestras. We are members of the American Federation of Musicians and of ICSOM. We are a labor union. And unions have the collective power to change our society; to stop the upward flow of wealth into the hands of the few; to wrest back control from the oligarchy that runs the corporate media, the fossil fuel industry, for-profit health care, **and our elections** through dark money flowing into super PACs. As Bernie Sanders likes to say, “they have the money, but we have the people.”

How can we—ICSOM—help to turn the tide in our country? What can we do alongside our AFM colleagues, to affect the political landscape and help create a more egalitarian society – one that supports the rights of *all* our citizens and preserves our democracy? Are we already too late to affect the 2022 midterms? The 2024 presidential election cycle will be here in the blink of an eye.

Our union is our political vehicle. Will we use it? I encourage you, our delegates, to take this opportunity to talk with one another, the Governing Board, and our Executive and Local AFM officers, to see what direction we might take in the coming months.

The future of ICSOM is in our hands. We are the living network that connects our orchestras to each other – and we are their voice within our union. Let’s make use of it and see what we can accomplish together.