

Bruce Ridge
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A Message of Hope

Perhaps it is almost too obvious to say that there always seems to be a sense of pessimism that hangs over our industry, year after year. We hear dinosaur references and terrible phrases such as "Roadmap to extinction."

But even in the face of this rhetoric, I remain ever more optimistic about the future of our orchestras....about how they can better serve their communities, and about all that we can accomplish together.

I am forever amused at the discussion of our aging audiences. My first job was with the Virginia Symphony back in 1979, and all I heard back then was that the audience for classical music would soon be dead. Today, when I look out at the audiences for the North Carolina Symphony, I am thrilled to see the young and the old, the single and married, the well-dressed and the sartorially challenged. It is as if the audience feels a sense of ownership for their orchestra.

Symphonic music will survive, and flourish, simply by proving its relevancy to the community. Through our organizations we can work with managements, and especially development directors, to convince them to cultivate the atmosphere where the business leaders of a city understand that contributing to the arts is not just giving a gift, it is making a tangible investment in the community.

One of my favorite books is Babbitt by Sinclair Lewis...I like to re-read it every year or so. It always seems to yield something new. I especially love this one passage, where the business leaders of the fictional town of Zenith are establishing the "vision" for what their city could become. A symphony orchestra is seen as a crucial element. One of the town leaders says: "An orchestra with first-class musikers and a swell conductor...goes right into ...New York and Washington; it plays at the best theaters to the most cultured and moneyed people; it gives such class-advertising as a town can get in no other way; and the guy who is so short sighted as to crab this orchestra proposition is passing up the chance to impress the glorious name of Zenith on some big millionaire that might- that might establish a branch factory here!"

But, how do we work to realize the goals of this optimism? Musicians must work with our boards to cultivate an environment for a shared vision. We in the Players' Conferences spend a great deal of time talking about Executive directors, but really, the average tenure of executive directors in this industry is just 5 years, and we all know that in many cases it is much shorter. Boards and musicians are more constant. We form the community. And if a relationship of understanding is fostered between the board and the musicians, then an executive director will be forced to adapt to that atmosphere.

The musicians need to reach out to the audiences on their own as well. Your Players' Association should have its own letterhead, sending thank you notes from the musicians to donors, supporters, and even the press for positive coverage. The musicians are the community, and we can build stronger ties with the public, the press, and even the political leaders than an executive director who has just moved to town for a few years could possibly hope to build. Through these means we can counter the rhetoric that has long been used against us as we have sought to build a better and more rewarding livelihood for the orchestral performer in our society.

We also must continue to elevate the tone of the debate that surrounds many of these issues. Our organizations are strong enough to welcome disagreements respectfully shared. We must be wary of those who would assail the politics of personal destruction through the use of the politics of personal destruction. We must remember that we need not concern ourselves with attacks upon our orchestras from outside forces if we are at all willing to attack ourselves from within.

But still, despite this optimism, there are many problems facing us. Perhaps what concerns me the most is how many of our colleagues in our orchestras seem disengaged from the business of their workplace. We must reach out to our players, and inspire them. This is especially true of younger musicians who might not understand the sacrifices that went before them. If we do not continue to educate and inspire the musicians in our orchestras, and then despite all we have gained, we will be left clutching a fistful of rain. Our colleagues look to those of us in this room for leadership...and to lead, we must offer a message of hope.

The message of hope that we can promote is that orchestras are relevant to

the community. Orchestras are an investment, with both financial and educational results for the community. Every orchestra is a family, and every manager has been granted a sacred trust with the community to preserve that family.