

2006 ICSOM Conference

President's Speech
Bruce Ridge, President

Mr. Chairman, President Lee, delegates, and distinguished guests,

I must begin my remarks this morning by expressing my gratitude to all of those who have so patiently helped to educate me and motivate me throughout this very busy year. Many new friendships have been formed, and many old friendships have been strengthened. I have learned something from everyone who took the time to so courteously communicate with me. But I must offer special praise to my dedicated colleagues on the Governing Board, and particularly to our outgoing Chairman, Jan Gippo. He came to this office at a crucial time for this organization, and his commitment to our cause should be celebrated by all of those he has so honorably served.

During this year where I have had the honor of serving as President of this great and historic organization, one of my happiest moments came when I opened the May 28 edition of the *New York Times* to find large and colorful print proclaiming that "Rumors of Classical Music's Demise haven't just been exaggerated, they've been dead wrong." My mood only improved when I turn to the inside pages to read that for "Classical music, this is the golden age."

How can such bold statements be made? They can be stated so affirmatively simply because they are true, and yet it is a truth that has somehow eluded general recognition and acknowledgement. Some of our communities ask "Can we continue to support the Arts?" and some of our managements ask "can we continue to sustain growth?"

The answers must be resoundingly stated. Our cities cannot afford not to continue to support the arts, and our managements can absolutely continue to support the growth in their organizations. The success of our orchestras can take a role of leadership in our cities, marking the rising tide for a community's financial, artistic, and educational health.

And yet, we hear the same tired and false rhetoric. Structural deficits...sustainability....relevance. And frequently, we hear this rhetoric from a strange source, our own managements. Ours is the only industry I can think of where some managements seek to both promote and undermine the product at the same time.

Since the Players' Conferences came into being, salaries have gone up dramatically. The number of full time orchestras has increased, and benefits that add to the livelihood of the performing artist have improved. While we acknowledge these facts at times, here is what we all too often fail to say: None of these improvements would have occurred on their own, and none of them would have occurred without ICSOM, ROPA, OCSM and our union. Few managements have ever offered to increase salaries and benefits merely because it was the right thing to do. They did so only when they were compelled to by a unified body of musicians. This is a unity that has become international.

ICSOM is only as strong and only as effective as its members. The industry now turns to those of us in this room for leadership, and we will answer the call. The lifeblood of ICSOM is communication. We must reconnect with the musicians in our orchestras, and each orchestra must connect with the next. We can share ideas, debate controversies, offer solutions, forge inalienable alliances, and inspire those within the sound of our voices and our instruments. The same feeling we experienced as kids when we first heard the music that made us want to do this for with lives can be communicated through our artistic and financial successes.

ICSOM, this Governing Board, this industry, and all of your colleagues need your help in order to succeed in this mission. We need you to participate in the debate. We need you to inform and lead your orchestras, and we need you to help to educate us about your concerns. And further, to reach the heights to which we aspire, we need the continued support of our union, and we need the American Symphony Orchestra League to be a true advocate for our orchestras.

If we effectively communicate the inherent importance, relevance and value of our orchestras, then we can build a new success for our organizations that will lead to a better life for the skilled performer. Our unity will prepare us for all that we face in negotiations, and our coming together will allow us to build the message that will result in improved working conditions, salaries, job security, and the ability to spread our music in a way that will resonant with our audiences, our political leaders, and even our managements. Our enthusiasm will be infectious, and our resolve unshakable.

While I am filled with hope for all that we can accomplish, I am also not without reason. Many of our colleagues face difficulties. We must send the message that we will always stand together.

The negative rhetoric about our industry must change, and we are the ones to change it and mold it into a positive message that we can spread to our constituencies and their communities. Our orchestras can serve as beacons of hope and symbols of excellence in a world that is too often without hope and too often content with mediocrity. The true nature of anything is what it becomes at its highest. In this way we can inspire our communities and lead them to a higher level.

We must reach out to our colleagues and re-engage them in this effort. We must reach out to our boards and build a shared vision for all that we can achieve together. We must reach out to our communities and demonstrate that we will invest in them as they invest in us. And in all cases, the greater the investment, the greater the return.

We must do all these things, and more, or we risk allowing the negative rhetoric about symphony orchestras to prevail. If we have been losing the PR war, then we must now proclaim that we will no longer cede that victory. To borrow words that John F. Kennedy once used to inspire this nation: "While we cannot guarantee that we shall one day be first, we can guarantee that any failure to make this effort will make us last."

At a time of uncertainty in the world, where discord seems more valued than debate, where doctrines of fear and rhetoric of violence replace the inspirational words of hope that have, at moments of past crisis, led the citizens of the world to aspire to something greater than themselves, ...art (as Bernard Holland wrote)...art is our fragile claim to control over our lives.

Everywhere we look, near and far, there is evidence of the importance of what we do. The power of symphonic music is unmistakable. It is seen and heard through historical events. It was experienced internationally when Leonard Bernstein conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the fallen Berlin Wall. It is heard on one of my favorite vinyl records; an amazing live recording by the Boston Symphony of Mozart's Requiem at a memorial mass for President Kennedy in January of 1964. I felt it on the lawn at Duke University immediately following September 11, where thousands of people held candles as they listened reverently to the sounds of their own symphony orchestra. This was a scene repeated across the world by hundreds of orchestras in hundreds of locations. It is felt in the response of our audiences and seen throughout our communities as we help attract businesses, educate our children, and spread the name of our great cities.

We must remember... this we did with our lives for a reason. While it is and has always been so

in vogue for orchestral musicians to be cynical, it is not beyond us to continue to indulge in our dreams. The greatest musicians among us are those who are still inspired by the opportunity to inspire. Through uniting together and reaching out to our communities, we can and will insure that the arts continue to thrive, and we will continue to enrich the lives of our audiences and improve the livelihood of our colleagues all while inspiring the next generation of musicians.