

Bruce Ridge, ICSOM Chairperson opening address: August 17, 2011, Detroit,
Michigan

ICSOM Conference, 2011: *Now More Than Ever*

Delegates officers, guests, friends and colleagues:

Welcome to Detroit, and welcome to the 49th annual meeting of the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians. Now more than ever we come together at a moment that calls for the collective wisdom of those of you in this room, and now more than ever the world is aching to hear a positive message and a positive vision for the future that musicians can articulate uniquely. But also, now more than ever, we arrive at a time when there are many reasons to feel anger, and many obstacles to surmount.

This past season has been a time of difficulties for orchestral musicians, and the problems within the field have been well-publicized. The management of the Detroit Symphony forced its musicians to engage in a courageous six-month strike while ICSOM orchestras in Louisville, Syracuse, and Philadelphia have faced bankruptcies.

Despite the media's desire to seize upon these negative stories, and despite the efforts of some managements, some managerial organizations, and several self-serving pundits, many orchestras continue to demonstrate the viability of their organizations by achieving success even in the midst of the world-wide economic downturn. The economic realities faced by our country have been recognized by musicians everywhere, and none of us are delusional about the times in which we are living.

But instead of exploring new ways to effectively advocate for the value of symphonic music to each and every community, there are managerial voices that continue to suggest that there is some sort of "new model" that can be applied on a national basis in a one-size-fits-all manner. Instead of leading to new successful ideas, the negative self-fulfilling prophecy leads only to destructive coverage from a media eager to write the easy story and that, in turn, undermines our organizations' ability to serve our communities. Daily articles appear proclaiming that what is wrong with the field is its unsustainability, and that musicians and their union are to blame. It is an argument being made against workers all across America, and not just musicians.

But there *is* something wrong in our field. There is no doubt that there is a conversation that needs to be held about orchestras, and there is no doubt that it is not being held.

There can be no authentic conversation about change in our field that excludes executive compensation and artist management fees.

Our field is becoming a microcosm of the greater sociopolitical environment that permeates our national economic discussion. As the workers earn less, salaries for executives continue to rise in disproportionate ways.

Nationally, income for CEOs has risen 24% since the onset of the recession. In the late 1970's the wealthiest 1% of Americans earned 9% of the nation's income. Today, that same 1% earns 24% of the income, and controls 40% of the wealth. As wealth becomes more centralized, our field must become more astute at inspiring people to donate.

In our field, the Philadelphia Orchestra is spending a great deal of money to attempt to make the case that it is bankrupt, despite having enough to pay over \$600,000 to the orchestra's CEO. It has been estimated that the cost of the bankruptcy itself will approach \$10 million.

Here in Detroit, where the historic Detroit Symphony, known around the world as one of America's greatest artistic organizations, was forced into a six-month public labor stoppage by a management that disingenuously speaks of relationship building, and the penalty for the egregious failure of leadership by the CEO is a three-year contract extension that the *Detroit Free-Press* reported contains no cuts.

What other field, what other business would reward such failure of executive leadership? It is disingenuous for managerial organizations to engage in hand-wringing and speculation about what is wrong with our field, when the field itself rewards such failure. It is as though the field expects managerial failure. And when you expect the worst, you'll get it.

The courageous musicians of the Detroit Symphony were willing to recognize economic realities by accepting cuts in a good faith manner, but... they were also willing to fight for their organization, their community, and their colleagues everywhere.

While the economic difficulties of the city of Detroit are well-known, there are opportunities here as well that are being recognized. The board and management of the Detroit Symphony should articulate the reasons for sustaining this great organization here, instead of questioning the value of the orchestra in this city at precisely the time when the city needs such investment and renewal.

Now more than ever is the time to make the case for the arts in Michigan. The arts in Michigan are good business. The non-profit arts and culture industry leads to 108,000 jobs throughout the state. Personal income in Michigan is increased by nearly \$2 billion by these arts jobs. One study showed that the arts in Michigan account for roughly 6.5% of the state's economy. In this state, the arts employ more people than the plastics industry!

And while a segment of the city suffers from the economic downturn and unemployment, another segment thrives in a demonstration of the destructive disparity of wealth that exists in our country. Metro Detroit ranks ninth in the nation for numbers of millionaires, with over 92,000 millionaires in residence. The number of millionaires in the Detroit area has actually increased by 4% in the past year.

But while the CEO is rewarded, it has been the musicians who have sacrificed. It has been the musicians that have sought to preserve this great asset for Detroit, just as years ago, it was the musicians who fought to save their own concert hall.

Meanwhile in the field of symphonic music, a group of pundits that seek merely to elevate their profiles by proffering a message of doom (seemingly without regard to the damage they are inflicting) continue to reap the rewards of their negative efforts. I am not going to name them, as recognition is what they seek, and I have no desire to elevate their status more than they deserve, especially while they are competing for the title of "the Glenn Beck of Classical Music."

One of the world's greatest music schools is led by a gentleman who seems to suggest that his students should not expect to be able to achieve a full-time living in the field they are studying at his school. For this stewardship, his compensation package approaches \$500,000, which, according to the tax documents filed by the school, doesn't even include a \$500,000 interest free loan he receives from the school to purchase a home. Meanwhile, the school he oversees charges its students and their families' tuition of \$36,000 annually, along with \$12,000 in housing fees, and even a "technology fee."

Somewhere the parents of one of the students at his school are working multiple jobs to send their young artist to study for a career that the president of the school in my opinion undermines without caution, and they likely are not aware that much of their hard earned salaries go not only to the tuition for the child, but also to provide the school's president with a home that they could never even imagine.

Yes, there is indeed something terribly wrong in our field. The League of American Orchestras takes in over \$1.9 million in dues money from our orchestras, and pays its president a compensation package of around \$300,000.

But clearly, they say, musicians' salaries are the problem.

They call for change, but they don't seem to understand that destructive rhetoric is the enemy of change.

Where has this destructive rhetoric led us?

In Syracuse, an orchestra approaching its fiftieth anniversary with all the inherent institutional marketing possibilities that such a landmark moment presents, instead found itself with an interim manager that seemed almost in a hurry to liquidate the historic legacy he was charged with protecting.

In Louisville, where an orchestra that has commissioned 120 original compositions and performed over 400 world premieres which served to spread the music of America across the globe, is currently functioning as an organization that employs no musicians. It is an orchestra built by the people, and led at its founding by a mayor who believed in the concept of Confucianism that said that a city of high culture with happy citizens will attract wealth, business and power to the city.

In Philadelphia, the historic "sound" that introduced generations of children to classical music through *Fantasia* and a sound that is famed and revered universally, is now threatened. But it is not due to a mosaic of unsustainability sweeping the nation, but rather it is due to the fact that a decade of bad managerial decisions was followed by an extensive period where the orchestra had no music director, no CEO, and no board chair.

And of course, in ROPA, the New Mexico Symphony has faced a similar fate. In my travels this year it was relayed to me that a board member, committed to the notion of "a new model", actually said that the worst thing that could happen for their organization would be if someone were to donate a million dollars to them right now. Of course, with that kind of leadership and advocacy, I imagine that he need not be concerned that anyone would entrust him with their money

People will donate to and invest in organizations that inspire them, and they will not invest in organizations that question their own sustainability. No other business in the world studies its failures to create a new business model. No other business does this...well, no other successful business.

In this year of difficulty, where can we find hope? Where can we find a message of positive advocacy? Where can we find evidence that we do serve the citizens of this nation and the world through the creative endeavors of artists everywhere?

First we can look to our colleagues: This year, in response to ICSOM's Call to Action, musicians throughout the AFM sent over \$300,000 to assist the musicians of the Detroit Symphony during their courageous strike. In addition, musicians continued with their generosity as part of our united network of friends and contributed to the musicians of Louisville, Syracuse, and New Mexico. Since we initiated this program of Calls to Action, musicians have contributed nearly \$800,000 in just four years to assist their colleagues in need. And now as we all look hopefully to Honolulu, and a potential re-birth of symphonic music on the islands, we remember that an ICSOM Call to Action helped sustain them through the initial stages of their bankruptcy when generous musicians sent over \$112,000 to assist their colleagues. Even as we feel anger at the injustice that workers throughout America face in our current national economic and political climate, we must also feel faith in human nature and camaraderie. Musicians, even while they themselves face difficulties, stand ready to assist others. This

year, when the need was sent out for Detroit, Syracuse, Louisville and New Mexico, the musicians of Honolulu themselves contributed generously.

For all of us, as musicians, humans, and friends, we cannot afford to allow ourselves to only see the darkness without acknowledging the light. While there is much about which to be angry, we surely also must be inspired by the compassion that the musicians of ICSOM and all of our countless friends have demonstrated.

And where else shall we look? The San Francisco Opera's recent production of Wagner's Ring Cycle sold at a rate of 99.9% per performance, generating over \$7.2 million at the box office. The New York Philharmonic surpassed its fund raising goal by nearly half. The North Carolina Symphony met a goal for a matching grant of \$8 million. The Colorado Symphony has seen record ticket sales, up over 25% in one year! The Kansas City Symphony eagerly awaits the opening of its spectacular new concert hall next month. The Metropolitan Opera is seen in over 1500 movie theaters in 45 countries while performing to sold-out houses. In other artistic genres, the Metropolitan Museum of Art saw an attendance of 5.7 million, its highest attendance in 40 years! In 2010, in the depths of the worldwide economic downturn, arts giving grew by 5.7%, reaching \$13.3 billion.

But the negative pundits that should be advocates for the arts claim that we are on the edge of destruction and that a completely new model is needed.

And while they claim to be worried about an explosion, they seem to spend a lot of time lighting fuses.

It is a tried and true method of self-promotion. We see it as well in national figures that use serious political platforms merely to promote television shows, or in the talking heads on sports radio whose job it is to say the most outrageous thing imaginable in order to generate as many irate callers as possible. You can also write a blog, make outlandish statements, and use the website of the non-profit you are entrusted with running to promote your own name. Or you could give an interview and suggest that an ensemble of student musicians would be an adequate replacement for the great Philadelphia Orchestra.

Words come too easily on blogs. They try to paint musicians as reactionaries, as if we are resistant to change. There is no one in this room that doesn't acknowledge the need for evaluation of the field. Everything changes in time, and today's media offers both challenges and opportunities that didn't exist in the past. But the destructive negativity of unsustainability is becoming all that media wants to write about, and our field must stop destroying itself from within.

What other field does this do to itself? Look at the food industry: according to American Express, 90% of restaurants fail in their first year of business, but no one in the restaurant industry would suggest that Americans no longer like to eat.

We have a document written by the president of the Chicago Symphony (CSO), where he says "The Chicago Symphony now must solve a problem which has arisen from economic conditions beyond its control. A deficit has been incurred, and undoubtedly there will be annual deficits for some years to come. This affects the future of the orchestra." And he continued: "Our problem does not differ in kind from the financial problem that faces each of the major orchestras in the United States."

This would be shocking news...if it had not been written in April, 1940.

We live in a time when, for better or worse, the truth belongs to the person who says it most effectively. The media age that assaults us with 24 hour messages designed by psychological marketing has the ability to convince even the most jaded consumer that by merely buying a certain hygiene product, members of the opposite sex will surrender to your charms at first sight.

The “truth” they sell is in messaging, and even if you have an effective truth it will not be heard unless you have an effective message

This year I saw an interview with representatives of a group of 400 rabbis who had purchased a full-page ad in the *New York Times* to bring attention to an egregious statement they believed someone had made in a prejudicial manner. But I didn’t see the actual ad...what I saw was the residual interview. At that moment I realized that they had not just bought an advertisement...they had bought coverage and attention. They had purchased a message and an image. They had elevated their profile through an astute use of the media.

We have long advocated for a national campaign that could serve and advocate for the arts and especially live music. Negative coverage is easier to achieve, but if we disagree with the message of the League of American Orchestras, they are able to spread that message through the use of \$1.9 million in dues taken annually from our orchestras, and through a glossy magazine that generates a quarter of a million dollars in advertising revenue derived largely from arts management agencies.

We must harvest the frustration that we all are feeling and use it as inspiration. Our spirit will not be defeated, and as artists we will not allow ourselves to fall into the general malaise that seems to be depressing the nation, replacing inspirational words with messages that project only what cannot be achieved instead of what is possible. We must be inspired by the challenge. And we must not be stunted in dreaming great dreams simply because they are hard to achieve.

When the United States ended the Space Shuttle program recently, I couldn't help but think back fifty years to one of the greatest American speeches ever delivered. On May 25, 1961, John F. Kennedy challenged America to land a man on the moon and return him safely to earth by the end of the decade. On that day he said “While we cannot guarantee that we shall one day be first, we can guarantee that any failure on our part to make these efforts shall make us last.” In that speech he said that Americans strive to achieve great things not because they are easy, but because they are hard. He told an Irish folk tale where two young boys on a journey confront a stone wall, too high to mount but too long to circumvent. Facing the prospect of a retreat that would end their adventure, one boy threw the hat of the other over the wall, leaving them no choice to but find some way to overcome this obstacle.

Kennedy spoke in a time when America dreamt of what could be achieved, what could be built, and what could be created. He spoke without a hint of an assumption that there was anything that we could not achieve for our children.

We must engage in positive advocacy and education of the public. A recent poll indicated that 40% of Americans believe that nearly 5% of the federal budget goes to support the arts. A shocking 7% of respondents said they thought the government spent half of its budget on arts programs. This is the misconception that we deal with in an out of control political world of spin where the truth is a victim to the sound bite, and where leaders are held hostage to pledges written in different decades. In reality, the entire amount of the federal budget spent on the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is only .066%. And every dollar that the government invests in this way returns 7 dollars to the community.

But, as Winston Churchill once said, “a lie can get around the world faster than the truth has a chance to put its pants on”.

Musicians have demonstrated time and time again that we are willing to have the difficult conversations that are needed to allow our organizations to grow, but we cannot debate with those whose job it is to remain unconvinced. Musicians are willing to sacrifice precisely because they do love their orchestras and they do love their communities. In times of difficulties, our managements

should not take advantage of that dedication. Kennedy also once said, “We cannot negotiate with those that say what’s mine is mine, but what’s yours is negotiable.” Just as the current national disparity of wealth between CEOs and workers is unsustainable for a civilization, so is it as well within our field.

Musicians are angry, and rightfully so. I am angry. But we must not allow that anger to define us, especially in the press. We must harvest that anger and engage in positive advocacy. Daniel Barenboim wrote that “sustaining sound is an act of defiance against the pull of silence”. While some political and industry leaders would have us “shut up and sing”, we will make sure that our communities, our children, and the businesses that support the American worker continue to hear our voices of advocacy even as they continue to hear our music.

This week in Detroit we again come together as a united network of friends. We must not be discouraged, we must not be disheartened. We must not allow those pundits with disingenuous intent to define who we are or what we do. Together we must articulate a vision of a more positive future, and we must spread that message to our friends, our colleagues, and even to those who stand against us. Now more than ever our colleagues and our audiences look to those of us in this room for leadership, and we will not let them down. As we move forward we must know no fear.

I look forward to learning from all of you this week, and as always I thank you all for the honor of serving as chairman of this historic organization.