

Opening Address to the 2016 ICSOM Conference
Washington, DC
August 24, 2016

Bruce Ridge, Chair
International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM)

Delegates, colleagues, and friends:

It is a great pleasure to be with you all again. I am very excited about this week. And as the week progresses even more friends will be joining us. But as excited as I am about this week I am even more excited about the future.

It is meaningful that we are gathering here today in our nation's Capital at a time of decision for our country, and a time of unrest for the world. Just two miles from here, the memorial for Martin Luther King stands with his words forever carved in granite to remind us of some of his most powerful aspirations for the world. There we are reminded that Dr. King once said "I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits."

This will be the final time that I speak before you as ICSOM Chair to open our annual conference. It is impossible to avoid feeling sentimental at moments of transition in life, and as I speak here today I am certainly not immune from nostalgia.

It was never my intention to become ICSOM Chair. I have been a professional musician since I was 15 years old, and the timing of my early career was such that I was able to meet many of our greatest leaders of the past, and then work with the great leaders of the present. But time only moves in one direction, and I am now privileged to know the musicians who will become the greatest leaders of our future.

Being here in Washington today makes me reflect back well over thirty-five years, when I would come here to study with the principal bassist of the National Symphony, Steve Brewster. I began before I had a drivers' license, so my parents would drive me four hours each way from Virginia Beach for lessons every other week. I think that at the time I didn't fully recognize the sacrifice they were making in surrendering an entire day of their lives so frequently just to assist my studies. It is impossible to state how much I wish they were still here, but if they were I hope that they might feel that I have done something with my life to earn such incredible support.

A little over ten years ago, I was convinced by members of the Governing Board to become more involved in ICSOM, especially Brian Rood and Richard Levine during a fateful cab ride to the airport in Pittsburgh. They convinced me that there was a need to change, and I had seen it as well. The pervasive outlook for the future of our

orchestras was dim, relationships throughout the field were fractured, the members of our orchestras were not caring for each other and standing with each other in an empathetic way, and many within our own organization were questioning the relevance of ICSOM.

When we began this effort over ten years ago, orchestras faced a constant barrage of negativity, and while some of that remains we have found ways to work together to articulate a different message...a message of hope for the future of our orchestras in our communities. That message has been largely successful.

In recent weeks I have been reviewing some of my statements from my earliest speeches as Chair, and it's interesting to compare what we said we were going to do with what we have actually achieved.

In 2006 I said:

For too long the messages in our (orchestras') glossy brochures have conflicted with the messages in our inky newspapers. I would suggest to you that musicians have been losing the Public Relations war, and we must proclaim now that we will no longer cede that victory...

Where it is asked "how can our community continue to support the arts" the answer must be, resoundingly, "How can we afford not to?"...

This will be the focus of ICSOM over these next few years. We will work to spread the message... that ...where the arts are concerned...the greater the investment, the greater the return.

We must work to make this truth more apparent, and for that...the responsibility falls on our shoulders.

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 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.

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 ensure that the arts continue to thrive, and we will enrich the lives of our audiences while inspiring the next generation of musicians.

So, those words are now a decade old, but I think they reflect much of what we have done together. We started talking about beauty...we started using expressions like "a united network of friends." We swore that we would not be isolated, we would not be fearful, we would not be apathetic. We talked about what was possible more than what was not. And while others spoke of what was sustainable, we spoke of what was achievable.

Perhaps most importantly, we were not too inhibited to talk about our hopes and we were not too shy to talk about our dreams. Indeed the musicians of ICSOM have become so unified that it is almost difficult to remember that there was ever a time when we were not.

This friendship and unity has been most visibly on display through the incredible generosity of our members through the multiple Calls to Action that have been issued. Through these Calls we have sustained musicians and their families in times of terrible crisis. Whenever we asked, you all responded. I think Bob Marley might have said that "You never know how strong you are until being strong is your only choice." In this decade the musicians of our orchestras have endured numerous labor disputes, and outlasted a terrible recession. But we have not just endured, we have grown. We have stood against negativity, cultivated new techniques for negotiation and advocacy, and led the way in demonstrating how music is an inherent call for peace and inclusiveness.

Who can forget the negative pronouncements that accompanied the Detroit Symphony strike in 2010? So many in the press claimed that the city of Detroit could no longer support a world class orchestra, and those of us who were more optimistic were accused by pundits across the world of being resistant to change and determined to embrace only the status quo.

Who could have envisioned that just six years later the Detroit Symphony would have a budget surplus, an increase in subscription revenue, and individual donations of millions of dollars? Who could have envisioned that the relationships would become so strong that a donor would leave a \$5000 gift for every member of the orchestra in her will?

The musicians of North America could envision it, and we did envision it, and we were right.

Much success has been achieved by our orchestras, and in this season alone:

- The Atlanta Symphony recorded its second budget surplus in a row
- The Baltimore Symphony received a \$6 million gift earmarked for education and the musicians received substantial raises

- The Buffalo Philharmonic received a \$1 million gift
- The Chicago Symphony saw its fifth consecutive year of record-breaking ticket sales
- The Cleveland Orchestra reported a surplus, endowment growth, and larger audiences
- The Florida Orchestra eliminated its debt, and raised its endowment to \$17 million
- The Grand Rapids Symphony reached its \$40 million endowment goal
- The Indianapolis Symphony received a \$10 million gift and reported its third straight year of balanced budgets, with increased revenue, contributions, and subscriptions
- The Jacksonville Symphony increased ticket sales by 9%
- The Kansas City Symphony set all-time records for attendance and the musicians earned raises that amount to nearly 20% over the term of their contract
- The Nashville Symphony musicians earned a raise of 10.9% over two years
- The New York Philharmonic announced a \$25 million gift on opening night
- The St. Louis Symphony saw increases in ticket sales, revenue, endowment and contributions

In the United States, the latest studies show that charitable giving to the arts rose 6.8% in 2015. Music is now a part of federal education policy, the economic impact of the arts for our cities is widely recognized, music therapy is increasingly being accepted as treatment for numerous medical conditions, and soon an opera singer, Marian Anderson, will be honored on United States currency.

But it hasn't all been successful, and many issues still weigh heavily on my thoughts. When I assumed this role I believed that we could build bridges across all areas of the field, but the chasms have proven deeper and wider than I imagined. Among our managements, the corporate mind-set of too many of our boards is in conflict with the artistic aspirations of our musicians, and sometimes even with the missions of the orchestras they are charged to maintain.

I have always believed, though, that consensus can be reached, and solutions can be found among those who are really seeking them.

In Asheville, North Carolina, there is a rock-climbing wall on one of the downtown streets, but they don't want you climbing it at night, so there is a five-foot fence around it that they lock up. I've looked at that fence many times, and thought "if you think you can climb that wall, then that fence isn't going to be much of a problem." I've tried to

apply that lesson to our work. Sometimes we never reach the largest obstacles because the initial barriers are too much of a nuisance to surmount.

We must continue to elevate our efforts, and we will face new difficulties. Even now, we must stand ready to assist the Musicians of the Fort Worth Symphony as they work courageously for a fair contract that reflects the growth of their city and maintains the widely acknowledged excellence of their orchestra. And we can unfortunately be certain that difficulties for other orchestras will emerge as well, some as early as this fall. I have no doubt that the musicians of ICSOM will be as eager to stand with their friends and colleagues in the coming months and years as they have over this past decade.

"International" has always been part of our organization's name, and when we began in 1962 we did have international members. But in recent years ICSOM has built and renewed friendships with musicians across the world, and I am very excited that at this conference we will welcome friends from Amsterdam, London, Paris, as well as Canada and Australia. This is especially important, as the world stands at a moment of turmoil, and the need for the activism of musicians everywhere is great. From the floods of Louisiana to wars in Aleppo to attacks on the streets of European capitals, the citizens of the world are in need of unity, of comfort, and of generosity.

In recent years my thoughts have turned to the role that music plays for all of humanity, especially as we have seen the world slump in moments of turmoil and violence. I have been constantly reminded of the words of the great violinist Bronislaw Huberman, a man responsible for saving thousands of Jewish musicians from the Holocaust, who said that "The true artist does not create art as an end in itself. He creates art for human beings. Humanity is the goal."

Now in modern times we are bombarded with the negative and so often destructive words of political candidates and the media. I know that there will always be opportunists that place personal ambition over service to others, but the portrait they consistently paint of the world is so drastic and self-serving that they seem to suggest that our only options are a choice between immorality and lunacy.

An article I read earlier this year among the din of political analysis reminded me of the choices the world now faces. At times of crisis, the article said, leaders tend to emerge who "...Lead people to feel they have lost control of their country and destiny, people look for scapegoats, a charismatic leader captures the popular mood, and singles out that scapegoat. He talks in rhetoric that has no detail, and drums up anger and hatred."

This plays into what another writer has called "The Persuasive Power of Repeated Falsehoods." Musicians face these "repeated falsehoods" everywhere we look. But we know the truth...Our orchestras are not dying, music is not losing its relevance, the world is not beyond hope, and humanity will persevere.

Yesterday, at Central Union Mission, we again stood for humanity as we served and performed for those who were both hungry and in need of solace, and too often neglected by our society. This is no small gesture. Musicians must seek ways to serve our communities, and by doing so at our annual meetings we will inspire the colleagues in our orchestras to do so throughout the year, and we will inspire our audiences with our actions just as we have always inspired them with our music.

That is how to respond to terrorism, that is how to respond to violence, that is how to respond to hunger, and discrimination, and injustice.

I, too, see the world in a time of crisis but I see it differently than those candidates or those media pundits, all of whom profit from the division that they sow.

In June in Orlando, a man with an unspeakable weapon, unimaginable to America's founding fathers, killed 49 people and wounded many others in a vicious attack on the LGBT community and an attack on all the values we aspire to uphold. The actions of one destroyed the lives of many, but in contrast to that one, many thousands lined up to donate blood, and no doubt saved additional lives. There are always more people who want to help than want to hurt.

It is easy to see only the destructive people, but even while under assault there remains more kindness in this world than misanthropy.

Perhaps I can be somewhat more optimistic because of who I have spent my time with in the past ten years. I have spent ten years surrounding myself with the musicians of our orchestras, musicians who achieve amazing things on a nightly basis. They constantly aspire to beauty and strive to be part of something they know is greater than themselves. Our musicians respond to violence with hope, they hold benefit concerts for food banks, they perform and serve in soup kitchens and their music is as relevant in the halls of cancer hospitals as it is in the world's greatest concert halls.

I have been on the road for ten years, and at times I have felt like Jack Kerouac. It has been an honor to be welcomed in your concert halls, your backstage lounges and your homes. I have heard performances I will never forget, like the Louisville Orchestra's *Nutcracker* just before they were locked out. They played like they might never play together again, and a piece that so many of us often play through in our sleep was performed with overwhelming emotion. Then this past May in San Juan, I heard one of the most joyful concerts I have ever attended, when the Puerto Rico Symphony played a program with music students from across the island in what is an annual event. It was humbling to be allowed to join them all backstage, and meet the parents of the students and witness the indelible role that the musicians of the orchestra play in the lives of so many.

I have traveled to visit with about 75% of our membership, and in being so welcomed in your concert halls I have constantly been aware that you have all been incredibly gracious to me, and I want you to know that I never once took it for granted.

There have been long nights, and the successes have been matched by bruises, but the musicians of our orchestras have pulled me through, and I have felt you all traveling with me everywhere I have gone. I have been amazed, inspired, and invigorated by your talent, your strength, your dedication, and your humanity.

In our troubled world, as we are assaulted with a 24-hour news cycle that too often sees human suffering as programming, humanity will always persevere in the face of violence, and music will forever be a response to hatred.

This we did with our lives for a reason. This is who we are. We are musicians, and we stand for beauty, peace, understanding, and compassion at a time when the world has never needed us more.

Also inscribed in stone at the nearby memorial for Martin Luther King are these words: "Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a better person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in."

I want to thank you all for the friendship and support you have shown me in this decade, and I will miss you. After all of this time I still believe even more deeply in the message of hope that the musicians of our orchestras have articulated for the world. We have given our members things to work for, instead of only articulating things to work against. We have stood together as a united network of friends, we have been generous with each other, and we have been kind to those in need. I have no doubt that we will continue sharing the hope for the world that music provides. We will stand as a beacon of peace, inspiring our members and our audiences alike, and our music will remain an antidote for darkness. In this way musicians will always imagine, and will always work to realize, a more beautiful world.