

Meredith Snow – 2019 ICSOM Chairperson’s Address

To quote Charles Dickens, from *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, ...” So he describes an age of radical opposites during the French Revolution—wisdom and folly, good and evil, class warfare between the rich and the poor, a time of despair and suffering on one hand, and joy and hope on the other.

Well, we’re in the thick of it now. Whether we chose to pretend it’s not happening, or spend our time buried in the 24-hour news cycle, we are experiencing a political, social, and economic upheaval like we have not seen since the early 1970s. One could go so far as to say that our very democracy is at stake.

Where do our ICSOM orchestras stand in the midst of the economic and political chaos of today’s United States? How do we best defend our art form and keep our doors open? How do we justify, maintain, and increase our wages? Is our non-profit music merely entertainment for those fortunate enough to afford the price of admission? Or do we indeed have a wider calling towards social justice and the preservation of our art, a vocation that seeks to express the voice of our humanity beyond merely keeping our own doors open?

As the majority of wealth in our national economy flows upwards into the hands of a few, ICSOM is seeing a change in the balance of power in our non-profit sector of the music industry. As orchestras continue to generate less earned income, we become increasingly dependent on endowments and donations. This is shifting the leverage points we have traditionally used in negotiations. Where there are labor issues, boards and managers seem to have no qualms about leaving musicians out on the sidewalk until they come to heel. There is less commitment to the orchestra, to the community, and to the music we create. The **bottom line**, the balanced budget, is their idol, with little care for the underlying civic duty to our non-profit art.

It makes perfect sense for our fellow AFM musicians to fight the mega corporations like Sony and Warner Bros. tooth and nail for a share in the billions in profits they generate every year—but how do we maintain and grow our non-profit corner of the music industry?

This past year, despite the two strikes in Chicago and with the fate of our colleagues in Baltimore still hanging in the balance, ICSOM has had 19 progressive contract settlements. A good year by all accounts, but how do we position ourselves over the next 5, 10, and 20 years to keep our doors open and our orchestras relevant?

Certainly, it is increasingly important that we maintain our ties to each other and to our AFM Locals, and that we renew our relationships to our fellow unions in the workplace and across the country.

The social media campaigns that our musicians have created—many in conjunction with Randy Whatley—that connect us with our audiences and supporters, in many cases have been the turning point in contested negotiations. This grassroots organizing has changed the tide of public opinion and awoken some managements to their responsibility to our citizens as well as to the orchestra itself.

The social outreach that is going on in every ICSOM orchestra—education, food banks, health care partnerships—makes us a vital and visible part of our communities.

I believe that our commitment to diversity, an open willingness to look at **our** role in auditions and tenure review, as well as the hiring of subs, conductors, soloists, and programming of repertoire, can create a more equitable playing field and will ultimately increase our reach into our communities.

For the past three years as Chair, I have beaten about the bush and hesitated to say this to you in so many words: the American orchestra model, if you will, of board, management, and union musicians, is a triumvirate—three powerful entities existing in relation to each other that create a single entity. This is what we are and it is not going to change in my lifetime. If we cannot learn to work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, trust in a shared vision of our future, our orchestras are not going to survive. Every economic crisis, and I believe we are headed into one right now, will pitch us into another round of labor disputes and cuts. That respect and trust is a precious commodity. I wish I could give you a formula for how to get there, but every relationship is a different animal. I can tell you that it takes daily maintenance and a significant amount of vulnerability and belief in common cause.

Over the next four days we will explore and discuss as many topics as we have time for—what our orchestras have been doing, what our negotiations looked like, and how we can facilitate change within our own orchestras to secure a better future.

I hope that these discussions will be challenging and thought provoking.

I would ask of every person in this room, if you think you know the answer, please stop and think again. Question your ready responses and patterns of behavior. We are all on the same side here. If we can't find common ground within these four walls how can we hope to meet the challenges that face us at home?

Thank you all for being here. It is no small sacrifice to give your time and attention for the betterment of your orchestra and colleagues.

Finally, I want to announce that the ICSOM Governing Board and Randy Whatley have been busy putting together an email campaign in support of the Butch Lewis Act, which, as you know, creates a loan program for multi-employer pension funds. You'll be hearing more about it over the course of the week. We want to reach as many musicians, friends, family, and neighbors as possible. We don't know how long this bill will remain in play, it's possible that this campaign could last all the way in 2021, so we will be calling on you multiple times as it moves through the Senate. **But it will be easy** to email, call, or tweet your support for the legislation. We will target Republican senators where we have an ICSOM orchestra in residence, and with the help of our ROPA colleagues, we will engage with Republican senators where we have no home constituency. The Governing Board and the AFM will be contacting you for your support. More to follow.