

2023 ICSOM Conference Address

by Meredith Snow, ICSOM Chairperson, 2017–2023

Overall this has been a good year for our orchestras. Things still feel a little shaky and tentative—kind of like your first day out after a long illness—but we are, in fact, well on our way to a post-COVID recovery. A number of our orchestras came out of the pandemic with their finances in the black, thanks to the government subsidies in the American Rescue Plan Act, the Paycheck Protection Program, and Shuttered Venue Operator Grants. Plus, our managements saved a fair bit of money by not producing concerts for a year, not to mention reducing our salaries—or in a few cases, not paying them at all.

But for the most part, we are now seeing progressive contract settlements with salary increases—some modest but some have been unexpectedly successful. Our audiences are returning and ticket sales have rebounded faster than was anticipated. In my own orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, ticket sales to this summer's Hollywood Bowl season were higher than they have ever been.

Of course, in orchestras where we have had long standing issues—both financial and administrative—recovery is more challenging. Our opera orchestras continue to face difficult situations as managements look to cut overall production costs on the backs of musicians. Nothing new there.

We lost the San Antonio Symphony to bankruptcy last August, and the musicians of the newly formed San Antonio Philharmonic are starting their long climb back to solvency and full-time employment.

Not that we ever had a surfeit of good administrators, but many have left the field or were laid off during the pandemic. Managements, having let go of staff, are now short handed. Positions which are critical to our non-profits' survival are understaffed or empty. You can't raise money without a development department and you can't sell tickets without PR.

Even before COVID we had a number of musicians vacancies, positions that had remained unfilled. Since then, more musicians have left and we are facing a generational shift in membership through retirement. Probably close to 10% of ICSOM musicians will be retiring in the next few years. I will be one of them. This is going to be a big change for us, but it can also be a big opportunity.

In the seven years I have served as ICSOM Chair I have worked—alongside the Governing Board, our DEI Forum, the Sphinx Organization, the League of American Orchestras and, of course, Symphonic Services—to raise awareness around the lack of diversity and inclusion in our orchestras. The door has been barred to people of color for as long as our orchestras have existed. Yes, we have made some progress, especially with gender, but despite serious, well-intentioned efforts—going back as far as the 1960s—we have not moved the needle towards greater diversity in our musician ranks. In fact, according to the latest survey by the League of American Orchestras, we are going backwards as the few musicians of color we do have are also retiring.

We are making some progress towards adjusting our audition practices. In this most recent round of negotiations, more orchestras have codified fully screened auditions. In the next few days, we will be taking a close look at our tenure review processes with an eye towards greater transparency.

But ultimately, the audition and tenure practices we employ are only as fair and free of bias as the individuals who utilize them. It is our responsibility—especially those of us here who hold positions of influence—to examine ourselves and our attitudes, to recognize implicit bias and microaggressions at work, and to help our colleagues at home do the same. I am excited that we are going to spend these next few days together exploring these ideas in greater detail.

As you know, this is my last ICSOM conference as Chair. It has been an honor for me to serve this great organization and to work closely with this amazing group of multitalented, dedicated individuals who comprise your governing board. They make me look better at this than I actually am. A few of them are most likely going to say things about me between now and Saturday—some of it may be true. But here is the thought I would like to leave you with:

I did nothing alone. The *power* of ICSOM is that we all participate—everyone here in this room, the governing board, you, our delegates, our Locals, Symphonic Services and the AFM. We act together, sharing knowledge and pooling resources to strengthen our orchestras and improve the lives of our musicians at home. The *passion* that drives us to volunteer our time is to preserve our music and to keep the doors to our halls open. It is a passion that reaches far beyond our individual lives into our communities and our schools and into the practice of our art.

The American Federation of Musicians and our Locals comprise the political framework that allows us to stand together, under the law as a union, to harness the power we possess to preserve our art, our livelihood, and our way of life.

It is unbelievable to me that I stood before you nearly seven years ago at the beginning of my service in this office and spoke about the insidious tyranny of the Trump presidency. And here we are again, or perhaps still, standing at the edge of that precipice.

In Timothy Snyder's book, *On Tyranny: 20 Lessons From the 20th Century*, chapter two talks about defending the institutions that uphold our democracy. Snyder says, "Institutions don't protect themselves; they go down like dominoes unless they are defended from the beginning".

Our institutions are ICSOM, the AFM, and our orchestras. These are what we must stand and defend through our active participation.

We here in this room are the backbone of our orchestral industry. The work you do through ICSOM and the AFM promotes the health and sustainability of your orchestras. It keeps our industry alive and, in its own way, it preserves our way of life and our democracy. It can be an onerous and exhausting task at times, but it is your dedication to your art, to your colleagues, and to this union that keeps our orchestras on stage and our musicians employed.

So let's get to work.