

Chairperson's Address – 2025

Welcome, everyone, to the 63rd annual ICSOM Conference. It's wonderful to see so many of you here—new faces and longtime colleagues alike. It is a privilege to address such a dedicated group of musicians.

This has been a challenging, exhausting year. Political turmoil, crisis after crisis, and a growing sense of uncertainty about what's next.

I never thought I'd see the day when the U.S. government would so brazenly turn on its own people. The hostility toward unions and the working class, the indifference to those simply trying to get by, the sheer corruption—it's stunning. It's despicable. And it is a betrayal of the values we are supposed to stand for as a nation.

In January, the President illegally removed National Labor Relations Board Commissioner Gwynne Wilcox—the first Black woman to serve on the Board—leaving the agency without a quorum, unable to fulfill its mission. The Supreme Court has so far refused to intervene, allowing this blatantly unlawful dismissal to stand. If political interference is allowed to undermine the NLRB, all unions are in danger.

In March, the world's richest man gutted the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, removing critical tools that our orchestras rely on to reach agreements in tough negotiations.

Also in March, the President acted to end collective bargaining for more than one million federal workers. And although the executive order is being challenged in court, just days ago, the Veterans Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency notified employees that their collective bargaining agreements had been terminated.

Let me be clear: if our government strips us of our rights, or if the courts decide that the law no longer applies to those in power, we will fight back. And if our opponents refuse to follow the rules, we won't be bound by them either.

There was a time before the National Labor Relations Act, when workers used tactics the law now prohibits. We gave up those tactics because the law gave us fair alternatives. If those alternatives disappear, we will bring them back. We will not fight with one arm tied behind our backs.

It's easy to feel small in the face of all this. The challenges we face as musicians, union members, citizens, and human beings can feel overwhelming. But if you ever doubt whether we're strong enough to face this moment—look around.

Look to the government workers who were illegally fired, refused to disappear, and who continue to fight back. They aren't going to go away quietly.

Look to the immigrant advocates who are still risking their safety to stand up for justice and dignity.

Look to the musicians of the Utah Symphony, told by a billionaire their hall didn't matter. They organized. They fought, and they won.

Look to the musicians of the LA Phil and Pacific Symphony, who lost homes to wildfire. ICSOM raised over \$150,000 to help them rebuild. That isn't charity. That is solidarity.

These aren't just inspiring stories. They're reminders that ordinary people can do extraordinary things when they act together.

This is what strength looks like. This is what solidarity can do.

The stakes couldn't be higher, and it's natural to be afraid—afraid of retribution, of being singled

out, even of violence or jail. Those fears are real; they live in our nation's history. But the Americans who shaped this nation—from the labor movement to the civil-rights movement—were afraid, too. They acted anyway. Courage isn't the absence of fear; it's choosing each other in spite of it. So we will be brave and we will be defiant. We will outwork, outsmart, and outlast those who seek to take away our rights and freedoms. We will show would-be tyrants they cannot have our rights, and ***we will never bow to a king.***

Last year, I asked each of us to examine our roles in addressing misconduct and inequality in our orchestras.

This year, I'm asking you to lean into this moment.

If we want to preserve democracy in the world around us, we must also practice democracy within our own institutions. That means not only defending our rights at the ballot box or the bargaining table. It means embodying democratic values in how we treat one another, how we listen, how we lead, and how we hold power accountable in our own workplaces.

Culture change isn't a distraction from the political crisis; it's part of the response.

When the world outside feels unstable—when our rights are under attack—we have a responsibility to strengthen our orchestras from within. We don't have to fix the entire world; but we have to do our part by improving our workplaces.

The ICSOM Governing Board remains firmly committed to this work. We believe that culture change is not a side project; it is central to the future of our orchestras.

But culture change doesn't happen from the top down—it's something we all have to build together. That's why your role as delegates is so important.

ICSOM is a member-led organization. The strength of this conference—and our entire movement—depends on your engagement. You are not just here to listen. You are here to lead.

Delegates, you are the connection between your orchestra and this room. When you bring back resources, ask tough questions, and help your colleagues understand their rights and power—that is what makes ICSOM stronger.

Thank you for showing up, not just this week, but all year long—for organizing meetings, serving on committees, and pushing your orchestras forward. That is what leadership looks like.

And this kind of member-driven work is at the heart of any real culture change.

But what exactly is culture change?

Our orchestras operate within a series of systems, like auditions, tenure, and committees. These systems didn't appear out of nowhere—they were built to solve real problems like: Who gets hired? Who communicates with management? Who plays the solos?

But these systems are not our culture. They are expressions of our culture.

Culture is something deeper than policy or process. It's our shared values, our unspoken norms, our expectations of how we treat each other. It's how we communicate, where we draw boundaries, and what we tolerate—or don't.

Culture change isn't an attack on people who benefit from these systems. They are participating in these systems as they were designed. Culture change is an invitation to reflect and evolve. As our world changes, our values must be revisited, and our systems realigned to reflect them.

And we've been here before. Consider, for a moment, auditions:

Once, we fought to include musicians in hiring decisions.

Later, we asked why there weren't more women in our orchestras, and we added screens and carpets.

Now, our members are asking why there isn't more racial diversity, and how we might adjust the audition process to help.

But a new audition process alone will not accomplish this goal. To create lasting, effective change, we must first talk openly about what matters to us, in our own words.

For instance, one might consider setting an expectation of professionalism for members, including those going through the tenure process. But what does professionalism mean to you? Before we can put professionalism into our CBAs, before we can make it a norm, we have to define it, which means we have to talk about it.

Without this step, change risks being misunderstood or resisted—not out of hostility, but out of confusion or a lack of ownership.

Now, consider misconduct.

The system we have now clearly doesn't deliver any sense of justice. It delivers expediency and avoidance.

Our "star culture" grants special privileges to some musicians but not others. It fosters arrogance, makes management afraid to enforce rules evenly, and undermines trust.

And we know that policies and training alone won't solve this, because we already have policies and training in place, and yet, the problem of misconduct persists. If we want lasting change, we have to go deeper. We have to focus on people.

This means we have to define our values. Live them. And hold each other accountable.

And we do this the same way we've always done big things: through organizing.

Organizing is about achieving big ideas through small actions, and you've already done this. Think about how you got your job. It started with learning that first excerpt. Then there were more lessons, more auditions, more growth. It didn't happen all at once, and it didn't happen all alone. It happened step by step and with support. That's organizing.

So, start small. Have a conversation. Ask your stand partner: What should it be like to work here? What do you value? How should we treat each other?

These conversations are hard. I know—I have them too. Every time I talk about DEI or misconduct, I feel vulnerable. But we must be brave, because the risk of doing nothing is far greater than the risk of trying and failing.

If we do the work, over time these conversations will grow into statements of shared values, codes of conduct, and eventually into actions aligned with those values.

But hope is easy. And good intentions—without action—don't change anything.

I want you to reflect on your personal responsibility within our collective—not just to yourself, but to your orchestra and each other. Ask yourself: what kind of workplace do you want? What are you willing to risk? And, how hard are you willing to work to help build it?

Because, look around, change is coming—whether we want it or not. We can shape that change, or we

can be shaped by it.

The governing board can only give you support and encouragement; we cannot do this work for you. What you decide to do next will determine whether your orchestra is a great place to work, or a place that is toxic and hateful.

And one day, someone will look back and ask what it was like to be a musician in this moment.

Will they say we protected each other? That we chose courage over fear? Will they say we created spaces where people could thrive?

Will they be proud of us?

In the words of the late Representative John Lewis:

“You must be able and prepared to give until you cannot give any more. We must use our time and space on this little planet that we call Earth to make a lasting contribution—to leave it a little better than we found it— and now that need is greater than ever before.”