

## Chairperson's Address 2026

Good morning, everyone.

On behalf of the ICSOM Governing Board, welcome to Honolulu, and thank you to Local 677 and the musicians of the Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra for hosting us.

There are many obvious reasons to hold a conference in Hawai'i. Some of them are even related to union business.

For many of you, this was one of the longest trips you have ever made to attend an ICSOM Conference. Thank you for taking the time and making the effort. I am so glad that we are here together, reminding ourselves that solidarity has no center and no edge.

Our presence here also gives us an opportunity to learn from the musicians of the Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra: from the challenges of sustaining an orchestra in one of the most geographically isolated and expensive places in the country; from the history of collapse and rebuilding; and from the strength and ingenuity it has taken to keep moving forward.

That same spirit of solidarity has guided ICSOM through a very busy year, beginning with the renegotiation of the Integrated Media Agreement—which, as usual, is taking longer than it should. The media landscape changes rapidly. The negotiating process apparently does not.

I also want to thank Rebecca, Nicole, and Kevin for representing our members so thoughtfully and effectively at the AFM Convention in Ottawa. Conventions demand long days, careful attention, and a willingness to engage in difficult conversations. Each of them brought intelligence, professionalism, and a deep commitment to our members throughout the week. They represented ICSOM exceptionally well.

Since returning from Ottawa, I have had time to reflect on what we experienced there. The convention was sometimes stressful and contentious, as delegates debated serious questions about the future of our union. Yet what I keep returning to is gratitude for what we witnessed: a raw, vibrant, and deeply human form of democracy.

We will never agree about everything. However, democracy is not measured by the absence of disagreement, but by whether people can participate meaningfully, be heard, and remain committed to one another after decisions are made.

As a result of that process, we are proud to report important changes to the AFM Strike Fund.

Over time, the Fund's current structure has become less useful to some orchestras. Some groups had maxed out the benefits available to them, while other orchestras were reluctant to join because the contribution level required by their weekly salary was more than they were prepared to take on.

The reforms approved in Ottawa give orchestras much more flexibility. Participating groups, together with their Locals, can now choose from an expanded range of contribution and benefit levels. Wage growth will no longer automatically push an orchestra into a higher contribution tier, while groups that want greater strike protections will have more options to build it.

This was an important ICSOM goal. It required extensive discussion, careful drafting, outreach to Locals and delegates, and determined advocacy at the convention. I am proud of what we achieved together.

More importantly, I believe these changes will make the Strike Fund more useful, accessible, and sustainable for musicians across the Federation.

This year, we also welcome a new Players' Conference: the Freelance Musicians Association.

Freelance musicians play an essential role throughout our industry, including in every ICSOM orchestra. Our orchestras could not function without the artistry, professionalism, and flexibility of our substitutes and extras.

We share many concerns with freelance musicians, including fair pay, job security, access to benefits, and workplace protections. We look forward to working with the FMA to improve conditions for freelance musicians throughout the Federation, as well as for the subs and extras who are indispensable to our orchestras.

Those are real accomplishments. But solidarity is measured not only by what we celebrate or what we win. It is also measured by how we respond when one group of our colleagues is threatened.

And right now, that obligation calls us to Milwaukee.

The librarians of the Milwaukee Symphony exercised their legal right to organize and secured union representation through Local 8. They stood together, voted, and claimed the same collective voice and workplace protections that the rest of us depend upon.

And that is exactly where orchestra librarians belong.

Librarians are not peripheral to the work of an orchestra. Before any of us can play a note, they must obtain, prepare, correct, mark, organize, and distribute the music on our stands. Their work requires deep musical knowledge, specialized skill, judgment, and extraordinary attention to detail. They are every bit as essential to an orchestra's success as those of us who work onstage, and they deserve the same dignity, collective voice, and union protection.

We have now learned that Milwaukee Symphony management is threatening the job of one of those librarians under circumstances that strongly suggest retaliation for this organizing effort.

Let me be absolutely clear: threatening or firing a worker for exercising their right to union representation is illegal. It is immoral. And ICSOM will never accept it.

The right to organize means nothing if an employer can punish the people courageous enough to exercise it. An attack on these librarians is an attack on every musician who has ever joined the union, served on a committee, spoken collectively, or demanded a voice at work.

Milwaukee Symphony management should reverse course now.

If it does not, management should understand that it will not be dealing with a single librarian or a single Local. It will be dealing with all of ICSOM and with musicians across the Federation. We will use every tool available to us to defend our colleagues.

We will not tolerate retaliation.

We will not allow management to isolate our colleagues.

And if Milwaukee Symphony management chooses this fight, we will respond with the full force of our collective power.

Milwaukee is one example of the challenges before us. But our responsibility extends beyond responding to the crisis in front of us. We also have to prepare our orchestras for a rapidly changing world. The way people engage with art is changing. The way they spend their time and money is changing. Philanthropy is changing. Our communities are changing. The labor movement is changing. And the political and economic environment in which all of our institutions operate is changing.

In that world, we have to ask some fundamental questions: What does it mean to be an orchestra today? What purpose do we serve? And what role should we, as musicians, play beyond performing at the highest possible level?

Artistic work will always be at the center of what we do. But artistic excellence alone cannot guarantee the future of our institutions. Our orchestras also need to be vibrant, relevant, human places—deeply connected to their communities, valued by the people they serve, engaged with the civic and cultural life around them, and worthy of the musicians who work inside them. Management and boards have enormous responsibility

for building that future, but musicians have agency too. We cannot simply stand apart from these questions and hope others get them right. We have a responsibility to help shape the institutions in which we work.

This is why at this year's conference, you will hear about connecting orchestras more deeply with their communities and with local government: because those relationships can make our institutions stronger, more visible, and more important to the places where we live—and musicians should be helping to build them. You will hear about the collapse and rebuilding of the Hawai'i Symphony because we need to recognize the warning signs of governance failure before they become an existential crisis and be prepared to act when we see them. And you will hear about coalition-building with the broader labor movement because, in a world where workers' rights are increasingly under attack, musicians cannot defend those rights alone. These are not abstract conversations. They are ideas and tools we need you to take home and put to work.

I know how tempting it is for us to say, "That's not our job." And no, musicians should not be expected to run our institutions for management. But the future of our orchestras is far too important for us to leave entirely to someone else—or to chance.

We have to pay attention. We have to ask questions. We have to organize. We have to push our management and boards to make decisions that strengthen our institutions, and we have to take responsibility for what is within our power to change.

And that includes the culture inside our orchestras.

For the past several years, ICSOM has been talking about culture change, because an orchestra cannot become indispensable to its community while being a miserable place to work. We cannot claim to embody humanity onstage while tolerating cruelty backstage. We cannot build institutions that inspire audiences if talented people enter them only to become exhausted, isolated, bullied, and driven away.

If we do nothing, unhealthy cultures will perpetuate themselves. The bad people will stay, and the good people will leave.

That is why culture change is not a special project set aside from the "real" work of the union. Culture change is part of how we secure the future of our orchestras.

Right now, I believe we have reached a difficult point in that work. The crises that forced these conversations into the open no longer command the same attention, but the conditions behind them have not disappeared. The harm continues even as our sense of urgency fades. And that is why this is precisely the moment when we must recommit.

The struggle to build a more just and humane world is not taking place somewhere beyond our orchestras. It plays out inside them.

Our responsibility as a union is not merely to protect jobs. It is to help ensure that those jobs are worth having—that musicians can work without fear, that standards are applied consistently, and that no colleague is expected to sacrifice their safety or dignity to preserve someone else's career.

Our workplaces are where our principles are tested. It is easy to speak about dignity, fairness, and solidarity in the abstract. The harder question is whether we will defend those values when doing so is uncomfortable, when the person causing harm is popular or powerful, or when accountability threatens arrangements that benefit only some of us.

Our orchestras cannot be places where abuse is excused because someone plays well, bullying is tolerated because someone has status, or misconduct is overlooked because someone is important. And we must never accept artistic excellence as a justification for mistreatment.

Of course, due process remains a fundamental union principle. Every member deserves fair procedures, a genuine opportunity to respond, and protection from arbitrary discipline. But due process cannot become a slogan we invoke only on behalf of the accused. It cannot mean that one person receives the full support of

the union while the person reporting harm is left isolated, disbelieved, or forced to navigate the consequences alone.

That is not solidarity.

It is a failure of solidarity.

In some orchestras, job protections have gone too far, shielding harmful conduct from meaningful consequences. Our duty to represent members does not require us to defend every act, excuse every behavior, or prevent every consequence. Solidarity does not mean protecting one member's ability to harm another. That is not what job security is for. Moses did not come down from the mountain with stone tablets saying, "Thou shalt defend the assholes in your orchestra." We get to decide where the boundaries are in our workplaces. We can define misconduct clearly, establish fair procedures for addressing it, and ensure that proven violations carry real consequences—even when that feels uncomfortable, and even when enforcing those standards means disciplining some of our own members.

Racism, sexism, extremism—and those who protect, encourage, or spread hatred—have no place in our union or our orchestras. When those beliefs manifest themselves in conduct that harms our colleagues, we should be willing to kick those people out of our orchestras.

Now, people who embrace these ideologies do have rights.

And chief among them is the *right to go work somewhere else*.

Changing this culture will not be easy. It will require the same discipline every person in this room already understands:

It will require practice.

Think back to when you were a student. You didn't wake up every morning excited to practice. You practiced because that is what the work requires, and you did it without any guarantee of getting a job.

You practiced for years—slowly, frustratingly, one small improvement at a time—because you knew that progress is possible only if you keep showing up.

Culture change works the same way.

Most days, you are not going to wake up excited to rewrite a policy, rethink a procedure, organize your colleagues, or have an uncomfortable conversation with someone who disagrees with you.

But you do the work anyway.

You do it knowing that progress will be slow. Some attempts will fail. People will resist. You may work for years without any guarantee that you will accomplish what you set out to do.

But every conversation, every small improvement, every person you persuade, every colleague you protect moves the work forward.

And maybe, after enough time and enough effort, you win something that matters.

A workplace becomes safer.

A procedure becomes fairer.

Someone who once felt powerless discovers that they have a voice.

That is why we keep doing the work—not because it is easy, not because it is fast, and not because we know we will win.

We do it because if we work hard enough, for long enough, we just might change something for the better.

I myself have received heated messages from ICSOM members upset by these ideas, and I know some of you have encountered similar strong reactions from your colleagues.

We should listen carefully and respond thoughtfully. That, too, is part of the work. But disagreement, hostility, or discomfort cannot deter us from doing what we believe is right.

Tradition is not a defense of injustice.

Difficulty is not an excuse for inaction.

The next crisis will come. Another colleague will be harmed. Another policy will fail.

When that happens, people will ask what we changed after the last crisis. They will ask what we did with the warnings, the testimony, the outrage, and the opportunity we were given.

If our answer is that we became distracted, tired, or afraid of making people uncomfortable, they will criticize us for failing to do enough.

And they will be right.

The ICSOM Governing Board will continue to ask difficult questions and challenge systems that are not serving our members. But we cannot build a new culture for your orchestra from somewhere else. Lasting change must be understood, built, and owned by the musicians in each workplace.

Talk with your colleagues. Ask what kind of orchestra they want to work in. Review your policies. Raise concerns in meetings. Speak with your committees. Build support. Persuade people who are uncertain. Invite newer musicians into the work.

ICSOM can provide information, support, examples, and advice. We can help you think through opposition and connect you with people who have done similar work. We will have your back every step of the way.

But each orchestra must develop the commitment and power to make change for itself.

That is what a union is.

It is not a distant organization acting on our behalf.

It is the musicians in your orchestra choosing to take responsibility for one another.

This responsibility falls especially heavily on ICSOM delegates. Delegates are the connection between ICSOM and our orchestras, and that connection works only when someone is prepared to maintain it.

This work requires more than attending a conference once a year. It requires communication, preparation, follow-through, and a willingness to engage colleagues in difficult conversations.

But commitment cannot be supplied from somewhere else.

We need delegates who will show up, communicate, organize, and carry this work home.

Not everyone has the time, energy, or capacity to do this work at every stage of life. Burnout is real. Circumstances change. There is no shame in recognizing that you need to step back.

But if you can no longer give this position the attention it requires, I ask one more act of leadership from you: help identify and recruit someone who can.

Find someone who is curious, dependable, willing to learn, and committed to the fight. Share what you know and give them a genuine opportunity to lead.

Our goal should not be to hold these positions forever. It should be to leave behind stronger delegates, stronger committees, and stronger orchestras.

We need this commitment because the stakes are larger than any one orchestra. Our rights and institutions are under pressure, and the future will demand more solidarity from us, not less. We must be smart about how we respond, but we cannot lose sight of what is right or shy away from defending one another.

You may not be thanked for doing the work. You may be criticized for making people uncomfortable. You may spend years working for a change that seems obvious once it finally exists. And you may not be remembered for it.

Most of the people who built our orchestras and our union have been forgotten by history. We do not know the names of every musician who organized the first committee, fought for the first contract, demanded a pension, established an audition procedure, defended a colleague, or refused to accept an unsafe and undignified workplace.

But we live inside the protections they created.

Every day, we benefit from their courage, their time, and their willingness to do work whose rewards they might never personally enjoy.

That is what solidarity asks of us.

It reaches backward to people we will never know and asks us to honor what they built. And it reaches forward to musicians we may never meet—the people who will sit in our chairs, inherit our contracts, enter through the procedures we create, and live within the culture we leave behind.

The reward for this work is not recognition.

The reward is leaving something better.

A safer workplace. A stronger contract. An orchestra that is a little more humane.

I believe strongly that an orchestra that is a great place to work is an orchestra better prepared to meet the future—better able to attract and retain great musicians, earn the trust of its community, and remain a vital part of the world around it.

Maybe that is all we get.

But that is enough.

That is solidarity.

That is unionism.

The work is ours, and I ask you to join us in recommitting to it.

I hope everyone here leaves this conference with the courage to go home, speak up, organize, and fight for the changes our orchestras still need.

The work will not be easy. We will not always know whether we will win. But we do know that nothing changes unless someone is willing to try.

So let that someone be us.

Thank you, and enjoy the conference.