

## Address to the 2015 ICSOM Conference

Bruce Ridge, ICSOM Chair

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<https://youtu.be/OgjKdH0DB1E> (click here to view on YouTube)

Thirty-three years ago I left Virginia Beach to attend school here in Philadelphia. While I didn't stay here very long I look back upon that year as one of the most formative times of my life. It was my first opportunity to hear one of the world's greatest orchestras, the Philadelphia Orchestra, on a weekly basis, and I was surrounded by young musicians who in the ensuing decades would emerge among the best in our field. While being in such an atmosphere elevated my understanding of music, I think the most lasting lesson of my time in Philadelphia is how it shaped my sense of humanity.

Somewhat to the consternation of my instructors, I spent more time wandering around these streets than I did in the practice room. While I had traveled to large cities before, this was my first opportunity to spend an extended time in one of the world's greatest urban environments, and having spent most of my childhood on the beaches of the Outer Banks, I was exposed to people in this city whose lives were very different from mine. I spent my time talking to homeless people I would meet on the streets, and immigrant vendors running fruit stands on various corners. I wanted to learn more about their lives, and especially how they found consolation and inspiration from the music they were hearing, either on the radio or in their minds.

I wrote dozens of poems, songs, and short stories about the people I met, and what I surmised from that time is that *hope* is the world's most precious commodity, and I knew that music of all styles provided hope to everyone I met.

We live in a time when it is easy to question sanity. If we are not diligent, we can too often allow our days to be overtaken with an unending din of negativity, fueled by news reports of public figures, many of whom could serve as incidental characters in a Sinclair Lewis novel, waging campaigns built on hate speech. That news is often accompanied by reports of senseless violence, and unrest in our souls and on our streets.

But music always rises above the uneasy noise of the world, and provides comfort from the cacophony that bombards us from a 24-hour news cycle.

In Baltimore this spring, less than 48 hours after civil unrest spread through the city, the Baltimore Symphony performed a unifying outdoor concert as a demonstration of peace in their city. Music Director Marin Alsop said "With so much need alongside so much possibility, I hope we can...set an example and inspire others to join us in trying to change the world."

I am forever inspired and heartened by the fact that music continues to have the ability to unite people, and continues to be a force for change and strength for people across the world.

It never leaves my thoughts how the world turns constantly to music. On days of joy, our happiness must be accompanied by music. On days of great personal pain, we must be comforted by music. On regular days, when we need solace from everyday trials, we turn to music. And in times of great tragedy and devastation, music reminds us of the most noble aspirations of humanity as citizens of the world refuse to allow violence to rob us of any part of our souls.

At this moment for people of all nations, our music and our orchestras have never been more relevant in a world that is heavy with burdens.

And yet, despite the hope, education and inspiration that our orchestras provide to our communities on a daily basis, we must continue to overcome a predetermined notion, often held even by our most influential supporters, that our orchestras somehow are not sustainable.

It is often difficult to find the truth when confronted so consistently with the tired cliché of the death of classical music, but again this season orchestras in all budget ranges demonstrated their resiliency.

- The Arizona Opera exceeded its fundraising goals
- The Buffalo Philharmonic saw record season ticket sales and subscription revenues for the third consecutive year
- The Charlotte Symphony received a \$2 million gift
- The Cincinnati Symphony raised over \$26 million and signed a new contract that adds 15 new musicians over the next 5 years
- The Dallas Symphony achieved a balanced budget and received \$5 million gift
- The Detroit Symphony raised \$1.4M in one evening
- The Houston Grand Opera exceeded its fundraising Goal, raising almost \$173 million
- The Houston Symphony received a \$5 million donation, the largest gift in nearly a decade
- The Memphis Symphony received a \$1M gift for education programs
- The Nashville Symphony set fundraising and ticket sales records
- The Omaha Symphony saw record attendance
- The Oregon Symphony set records for ticket sales and contributions, and its gala raised a record \$700,000
- The Pacific Symphony's gala raised a record \$1.6 Million
- The Richmond Symphony received a \$1 million gift for outdoor concerts
- The Rochester Philharmonic reported a 19% increase in single ticket sales
- The St. Louis Symphony received a \$10 million gift
- The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra saw its highest attendance in 20-years

And the San Diego Opera, an organization that was considered dead by its former manager and many in the press, has sprung back to life following an effort led by its musicians and supporters, ending this season in the black and receiving a \$1.25 million dollar gift.

You know, I truly dislike that word "sustainability." It is not an inspirational word. People donate to organizations that inspire them, and they do not donate to organizations that question their own sustainability. I'd like to propose a moratorium on that word sustainability. Whenever we are confronted with the notion of what is sustainable, we should respond with a vision of what is achievable.

Michael Kaiser recently wrote:

*"...when the conventional wisdom suggests that "every arts organization is in trouble," there is also an implied excuse for not giving generously to a special campaign and not even attempting a turnaround of a troubled organization...Contributions, in fact, are largely dependent on the mood of the donor base...And success breeds success in the arts and in all not-for-profit sectors.*

The successes for our orchestras don't end with the list I have already recited. In recent weeks, the Atlanta Symphony announced that it ended this season with a surplus, and has raised \$13 million to add new players. And, the Indianapolis Symphony saw ticket sales increase 15%, and subscriptions rose 24%. While this news is very encouraging, it does have a bittersweet aspect, as the successes follow unnecessary lockouts and cuts for the musicians. In fact, in reporting this news, the *Indianapolis Business Journal* stated "Much of the orchestra's recent turnaround has been attributed to budget cuts, which included steep pay cuts for musicians."

Nonetheless, the news is good and the past is behind us, but the idea that cuts are needed to sustain is counterintuitive, and inconsistent with facts. The latest study from *GivingUSA* reports that in 2014, giving to the arts in America reached an all-time high of 17.2 billion dollars. In terms of donations, arts and culture was America's fastest-growing charitable cause in 2014, rising an estimated 9.2 per cent.

None of this is meant to diminish the difficulties we face. We have serious issues to confront. Currently, numerous ICSOM orchestras are facing difficult negotiations, and we all still wait with great hope for the rebirth of the New York City Opera. In OCSM, we all watch the musicians of Orchestra London with our admiration as they seek to preserve their orchestra. And in Hartford and Binghamton, musicians everywhere stand ready to offer our assistance.

In a field where there is constant chatter of "business models" it is always fascinating to me to see how many bad business ideas are proposed for orchestras. Any business knows to protect its "brand." Successful companies do this almost instinctively, and iconic images are created in the minds of the American public that lead to decades of success.

For orchestras, our "brand" is the symphony on stage, playing great music and striving for excellence as a symbol to the community of the value of aspiration to the highest of ideals. An orchestral organization can do outreach and education, and can even produce other types of programming. Some of these things are necessary, but they cannot come at the expense of protecting the "brand." For if the orchestra on stage is cut, and its presence in the community is diminished, then all of these other programs are built on quicksand.

This year, once again, the musicians of ICSOM rose up to support our colleagues in need across North America. When the ICSOM Governing Board issued a Call to Action to support the Atlanta Symphony musicians during their second lock out in as many years, the response was overwhelming. And again, when OCSM released a Call to Action to support the Musicians of Orchestra London, many of our orchestras answered that call as well. I have never been more proud of the benevolence of our members in what I have always called our united network of friends. It is truly humbling to see the generosity of the musicians of so many orchestras, with budgets large and small. We all hope that we will never again have to issue a Call to Action, but we know we will. We must be vigilant, and in these next few weeks as negotiations are continuing, we must be ready to respond, and I have no doubt that we will *always* respond. But for this moment, today marks the second consecutive year that we have been able to open our conference on a day on which no orchestra is locked out.

We must continue, undaunted, in our message of advocacy. A new generation of orchestral leaders is emerging, and in them I see great hope for the future. But as they have grown up in an entirely different time, a time in which we have more technology in our pockets than was on the Apollo space crafts that sailed to the moon, we must be open to new ideas and new uses of technology to promote our orchestras and the positive mission of the arts. But those of us who have gone before must also be willing to assist the next generation of leaders, by sharing the accounts of the difficulties we have faced and the gains we have achieved. For in every orchestra, every benefit of our careers is vulnerable should we not be vigilant. The greatest leaders of ICSOM are yet to come, but we must seek out and encourage those leaders, ever mindful that every generation produces indifference as well as revolution.

This conference, two of the best leaders ICSOM has ever known will be stepping down from the Governing Board, and of course I mean President Brian Rood and Member-at-Large Matt Comerford. We all owe them a great deal, but personally I owe them even more. Their support has been steadfast; their resolve has been inspiring, and their work ethic astonishing. While we will have an opportunity to say much more about these gentlemen this week, please join me as we begin to try to say thanks for all that they have done.

Despite the negativity about the future of the arts often found in the media, America remains fertile ground for the arts. There are more museums in America than there are Starbucks and McDonalds *combined*. The arts and culture industry in this country represents over 4.3% of the entire Gross Domestic Product, which is a larger share than travel and tourism. But the arts are often the first to be cut, even though the percentage of the Federal Budget devoted to the arts in 2013 was about one-hundredth of one percent. Cutting the arts in a disingenuous claim of an attempt to balance the federal budget is a little like trying to lose weight by trimming your toenails.

These cuts are enabled by the false negative rhetoric that surrounds the arts and our orchestras. Recently, when radio stations in Florida changed their formats away from classical music, blogs and articles throughout the world seized upon this news as further evidence that classical music was losing its relevance, but barely any of those reports were amended when in just a matter of days a new Florida station announced that it would become the voice of classical music in the region. The fact is simply that our music has never been more relevant to this fragile world at this fragile time.

While it is probably true that every generation could make this claim at one point or another, we live in a troubled time. Acts of terrorism are perpetrated around the globe, and numerous countries stand at the brink of war. In one of our major American cities, there were 216 homicides in the first half of 2015 alone. In our country last year, handguns robbed over 10,700 people of their lives.

We often ask “what is the answer?” For me, the answer is clear. We must provide young people with hope and education, and no education is complete without music, just as no life can proceed without hope. It may be a troubled world, but music is a source of *constant* hope, and we should be encouraged by numerous recent events.

The United States Senate just passed the *Every Child Achieves Act*, and for the first time music is named as a core academic subject.

In New Orleans, a music education program called *Trumpets Not Guns* is changing the lives of young people by offering them musical instruments and an alternative to violence.

And, recent polls show that a large majority of Americans believe that children should have opportunities to play musical instruments as early as elementary school and that music and arts education are extremely important.

Music therapy is changing lives as well, offering relief from pain and enriching the lives of those who suffer with Alzheimer’s and other ailments. Gabby Giffords credits music therapy with helping her learn to speak again after she was critically injured in an assassination attempt. With each passing week Doctors and Therapists are learning new ways to utilize music in the healing process, offering more and more people hope, and a more fulfilling life.

Across the world people turn to music as they refuse to yield to hopelessness. In Ukraine, a war torn country where many face daily bombings, the Donetsk Opera defiantly continues to perform, stating that “When you are surrounded by ugliness, beauty becomes something you cherish even more.” I read a report this year that stated “Creating something new is an act of defiance in the face of violence.”

Musicians respond to violence universally with hope. In Iraq, a musician, a cellist, is determined to answer attacks with music, and in the hours that follow horrific car bombings, he shows up at the site of the carnage and plays Bach as an act of peace in response to an act of war.

Here in America, just across the Delaware River from Philadelphia, in Camden, a city afflicted with homelessness and a city often named among the most dangerous, a public art display that places pianos in a city park offers moments of hope to those who might not otherwise have an opportunity to ever play music themselves. Moments of hope are never trivial, and we must spread the message that our orchestras are populated with musicians that can offer such hope.

Yesterday, in an effort to use our presence in the city as a symbol of community service, we held our first service event at an ICSOM Conference when we provided music and assistance at a soup-kitchen just several blocks from here, in collaboration with Broad Street Ministries. On their twitter feed, Broad Street Ministries wrote: "Today ICSOM extended radical hospitality by creating a trauma informed space with music." I'd like to thank all of you who participated, and we hope that this can be just a beginning for service work for all the communities we visit with our annual meetings.

The answer is hope, and hope is found in music. Imagine the numbers of school children the musicians in ICSOM orchestras reach every day across our country. Music education can inspire young people to reach for a higher ideal than the violence that too often surrounds them, proving that creativity is a positive act of defiance. It is no exaggeration to say that music education saves lives.

The lives we have chosen to lead stand for unity and understanding in a fragile world. Our orchestras must not only be preserved, but they must continue to grow. By growing we can bring even greater positive change to the lives of those we reach, and what would be lost without our orchestras is devastating to contemplate. Our music is the hope that the world needs, and we will not be silenced.

In Israel, a recent encounter at a road block established by the Israeli army found that a soldier and a Palestinian music student both played the violin, and in this moment of tension in a long-troubled region of the world, the soldier and the student played the violin for each other, separated by centuries of ideology, but united in a moment by music.

Every concert we perform, every lesson we teach, every note we play is inherently anti-violence. And as long as a single violin has the ability to unite a Palestinian child and an Israeli soldier, even for a fleeting moment at a roadside blockade, I will remain hopeful for the world.

This week, as always, I will look to you for inspiration, and I look forward to continuing our work together in this coming year. I thank you for your support and friendship, and for the honor of allowing me to serve as Chairman of ICSOM.