

Senza Sordino

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I ♥ Abravanel: How Organization Saved Our Hall

by Lynn Rosen, Utah Symphony

We often talk about labor organization in abstract, “what-if” terms, but recent events in Utah show how the power of a unified and organized community can fight to preserve our Salt Lake cultural heritage. This article demonstrates the collective mindset of musicians, community—and even politicians and board members—in the fight against losing our beloved Abravanel Hall and how a motivated and organized bargaining unit can use its collective voice in powerful ways.



Utah Symphony

History

Abravanel Hall was built in 1979 as part of the 1976 Bicentennial project in downtown Salt Lake, which included the Capitol Theatre and the Salt Lake Arts Center. Symphony Hall was renamed Abravanel Hall in 1984 to honor Maestro Maurice Abravanel, Utah Symphony music director for 32 years. Architects from the top-ranked firm of FFKR were consulted to build a hall specifically to put on concerts by the Utah Symphony, which needed a home at the time.

Imagine our shock on April 29, 2024, when CEO Steven Brosvick informed members of the Utah Symphony that Abravanel Hall was expected to be razed to make way for a Sports, Entertainment, and Convention district to house a National Hockey League team relocating from Arizona to Salt Lake City. Organization-wide, no one was sure what steps to take. Needless to say, we musicians knew that we needed to do something to push back.

At an emergency orchestra meeting on May 6, we elected a Campaign Committee, chaired by Principal Percussionist Keith Carrick, which would work in conjunction with Orchestra Committee Chair Karen Wyatt. Other committee members included Principal Bassoonist Lori Wike, who was instrumental in research and preservation to get Abravanel Hall on the National Register of Historic Places, and violinist David Porter, the musicians’ spokesperson.

Reaching out to Elected Officials

Immediately upon forming the committee, Carrick and Wyatt began contacting elected officials. It became clear at

the beginning that management was in too difficult a position to take an official and public position on the hall’s future, so this outreach from musicians proved crucial. The task looked impossible as Salt Lake County operates the hall and the Utah Symphony is its main tenant. As Wike says, “basically we were faced with this disaster with seemingly insurmountable odds of stopping it. But we organized and we stopped it.”

Clearly, organizing was important, but Carrick found this to be different from a normal labor dispute. “In a labor dispute, you have your community, you have your management and the musicians,” he explains. “You’re trying to organize your musicians to reach out to those three different groups and get messages to them, or get them to change their minds or their tactics.

“In this case, the primary people who would make those decisions were political actors. We still had to organize, not like we were going to be opposing our management, but to utilize our management and try to come to some other sort of agreement with them on how to approach this. Our main opposition was the politicians, and that is the main difference between this and a typical labor dispute.”

For Carrick, this meant that there were more conversations and a lot of behind-the-scenes work. While “politics” are involved even in normal labor disputes between the musicians and board, he found that “in this case, it was real politics—real politicians.”

Unlike other orchestras with recent renovations, such as San Diego, Saint Louis, and Cincinnati, where preparations were made months in advance for fundraising campaigns and for finding alternate venues during the construction, there was no plan in place for what would happen to the Utah Symphony, only vague promises that something would work out somehow.

On May 4, Utah Youth Symphony violinist Jack Clark created a petition to Save Abravanel Hall on Change.org. As of today, this petition has over 50,000 signatures. Only five days after our initial meeting with management, we had

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Chairperson's Report

The Power of Established Organization

by Keith Carrick

In this issue of *Senza Sordino*, you'll read about the recent and ongoing attempts to radically reshape downtown Salt Lake City, including the potential destruction of my own orchestra's home, Abravanel Hall.

This story echoes a broader reality: a community at the mercy of a billionaire's ambitions and political leaders who lack the insight, strength, and skills to navigate the issue effectively.

There was no clear path forward when news first broke about Abravanel Hall's uncertain fate. Questions far outweighed answers. The anxiety among musicians and staff was palpable.

Orchestras inevitably find themselves in disputes with management. These conflicts range from minor disagreements to full-blown labor crises. However, the best responses to such challenges involve organizing—either internally or externally, depending on the situation.

Internally, musicians already know how to organize through orchestra or negotiating committees. Internal organizing is great for addressing workplace disputes but can also tackle broader workplace issues, including sexual misconduct, bullying, and discrimination. By working together, musicians can improve their workplace environment.

External organizing presents a more complex challenge, requiring broader community engagement. It is most effective in response to major labor disputes, such as strikes, or in the face of significant crises, like natural disasters, financial distress, or other external threats. The first and most critical step in external organizing is sustained outreach beyond regular performances. This work must happen years in advance of any crisis. Without it, success is left to chance. Even with it, success isn't guaranteed—but it becomes much more achievable. You might ask, "How can we plan for an unknown challenge years in advance?" The answer is "You can't." But you must do the work anyway so that the foundation is already in place when the need arises.

For the Utah Symphony, our long-standing tradition of performing for every schoolchild in the state on a three-year cycle has ensured that we've engaged with nearly every resident for generations. This institutional effort has built meaningful relationships with the public—but not all orchestras have such deep community ties. Our orchestras must become too important to fail in the eyes of our communities, ensuring their support when we need it most. If your orchestra isn't engaged in this work or seeing results, the musicians themselves must take the lead. Many orchestras have successfully built strong community connections—previous editions of *Senza Sordino* offer plenty of inspiring examples.



Scott Jarvie

Organization continues on page 7



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Fire Burn and Theater Trouble Quick Work Saves “The Scottish Play”

by Peter de Boor, Kennedy Center Opera House Orchestra



Steve Wilson

The superstition lives on. For most of the Washington National Opera’s (WNO) “Look-in” performance of Verdi’s *Macbeth* (a children’s performance featuring excerpts from the opera as well as discussion about all the elements that go into making it), the host had insisted she could not say the name of the title character because, as a member of the production, it would bring bad luck for her to say it. (This is a longstanding

superstition in the theater world.) But in the end, she did. And five days later, on Saturday November 23, disaster struck.

In the Theater Lab, a small performance space on the terrace level of the Kennedy Center just above the opera house, some faulty electrical wiring caused a small fire, triggering the center’s fire suppression (sprinkler) system. All the water used to put out the fire then flowed downward, causing a downpour inside the opera house, where the final performance of *Macbeth* was supposed to take place that evening.

The production’s Banquo, company favorite Solomon Howard, happened to come in early and heard strange sounds coming from the hall. He took a video of the ongoing shower and sent it to WNO general director Timothy O’Leary and WNO artistic director Francesca Zambello, alerting them. They conferred and decided that the sold-out performance must go on, although it soon became apparent that there was no way to have the opera house ready in time—the water had not even stopped falling from the ceiling.

After investigating several alternative venues, it became clear that the best option might be the only option: the Lisner Auditorium at George Washington University (GWU), a ten-minute walk from the Kennedy Center, was scheduled to be dark on Saturday (and where fortuitously the stage had been set for Friday’s dress rehearsal of Washington Concert Opera’s (WCO) *Manon Lescaut*). WCO’s executive director Meg Sippey immediately supported the idea and agreed to make the necessary accommodations at the hall.

The management team faced a myriad of complications. The Lisner auditorium seats fewer than 1400 people, while WNO had sold more than 2000 tickets under a very different seating plan. There would be no way to map the individual tickets of that night’s performance to unique seats in Lisner, nor even to guarantee that every ticket holder would have a seat.

The stagehands and front-of-house staff at Lisner had the day off, and there was no certainty initially that they would be available to come in to work. Clearly the sets could not be transported and put in place, but some modicum of costumes,

wigs, and props (not to mention certain percussion instruments) would be desirable to help convey the drama—but how to organize and move them?

Also, WNO would need to agree to a contract with the venue, a process that would normally take weeks. The backstage areas at Lisner, not generous to begin with, were already occupied by WCO. And while it was important to use the lighting and supertitle systems in the auditorium, it was equally important not to mess them up for WCO’s performance the next day. And, not least, the cast had been performing the opera fully staged on the large opera house stage and would now have to perform in a much smaller space, behind the back of the conductor (Evan Rogister, in his final performance as WNO’s principal conductor), with no rehearsal possible.

But a spirit of cooperation and a can-do attitude pervaded all involved. A plan was formulated to grant refunds to all requesting ticket holders while offering, on the honor system, general admission seats at the relocated performance. GWU Production Director Drew Thomas (who had once been a stagehand at the Kennedy Center opera house) did not balk at having to negotiate a rental contract in a matter of hours, nor at asking Lisner staff members to come in unexpectedly. The Kennedy Center production staff and stage crew wrangled all the necessary equipment and brought it to the new venue. Everyone pitched in without complaint, from O’Leary passing out programs and Sippey marking off some reserved seats for certain VIP attendees, to orchestra and chorus squeezing into cramped backstage areas. “It was a great testament to the community that we have in the arts,” said O’Leary. “The energy was absolutely spectacular.”

The actual performance came off without a hitch, with everyone who wanted one finding a seat. The audience did not seem to mind the absence of sets, and many welcomed the emphasis on the music brought about by the more intimate setting.

Despite the obvious success of this transported performance, many orchestra musicians were concerned about the state of the opera house and what it portended for our performances of *The Nutcracker* with Philadelphia Ballet the very next week. Some thought the hall might be shuttered for weeks or months to repair the water damage.

But the Kennedy Center management moved aggressively to address the problem. They engaged a professional emergency restoration and response team to assist in the clean-up, and 65 people worked to remove the water and dry out the hall, using wet vacs, dehumidifier units, and fans. They also installed an elaborate tenting system to focus the airflow on the affected areas and followed up with a sanitizing process. An internal review showed no signs of long-term damage, though the Center also engaged external industrial hygienists and engineers to confirm these findings. “We are committed to a full recovery from the incident and ensuring there are no lasting impacts to the building,” said Matt Floca, vice president of facilities for the Center.

And in a secondary miracle, *The Nutcracker* opened on time as scheduled on Wednesday. We hope that any future productions of “the Scottish Opera” will be unmarred by incident.



Bringing Music to the Masses How The Syracuse Orchestra Engaged the Community with a Mall Residency

by Kelly Covert, 2nd flute/piccolo,
Corporate Giving & Annual Fund
Manager, The Syracuse Orchestra

The Syracuse Orchestra is no stranger to innovation. As one of two musician-led cooperative orchestras in the United States, we have been on a non-traditional path since our beginnings in 2012. After our name change in February 2024, we were presented with a unique opportunity that would help us increase awareness of our organization and further our mission.

What if The Syracuse Orchestra did a pop-up concert and residency at the local mall? Destiny USA, the mall in question, is a major tourist attraction with over 26 million visitors per year, and with an emphasis on tourism from our local government we found ourselves aligned for this out-of-the-box idea. In keeping with two of our core values, innovation and collaboration, we set ourselves on a path to find a way to make it happen.

An initial pop-up concert was held in The Canyon, a large public space of the mall with three open balconies. To attract new people, we offered a free Video Games Music concert—and attract people we did. After the initial free concert, we opened a performance space in the basement of the mall that was large enough for full orchestra concerts, yet equally inviting as a space for chamber music concerts. We used the space as a sandbox of sorts by programming new and innovative music using chamber groups to gauge the viability of full orchestra concerts of the same music. Some of our most successful concerts included *The Music of Studio Ghibli* and *The Music of Bridgerton*, both of which will be performed as full-orchestra concerts in our regular season this year.

What started out as a four-month plan expanded into a seven-month residency. During that time, we sold 1,994 tickets, produced 65 chamber music and 12 full orchestra concerts, welcomed 378 new households to The Syracuse Orchestra, and brought in a total income of \$15,375. Kids under 18 are free for all of our regular season concerts, and we saw 820 kids attend these concerts, as well as four education concerts that brought in around 1,000 third-grade students to experience the joy of a full orchestra concert.

Destiny provided low-cost rent as well as \$60,000 of in-kind marketing support to present our branding and ads on kiosks and displays throughout the mall, and we received \$2,500 of support from the Syracuse City School District to host their Summer Arts Camp in the space. Creating this space at Destiny offered the opportunity to highlight our orga-



Alice Patterson

nization and brand directly in the community, while also filling a long-vacant retail space and enhancing the visitor experience, a crucial goal for the mall.

In the end we decided to end this very successful experiment primarily for bandwidth reasons—we just don't have enough resources to continue to make the space successful long-term. As concerts require significant staff resources—and as an orchestra with a lean staff—we decided the residency had fulfilled its purpose and run its course.

Most of the thousands we welcomed into our Destiny USA space were new to us, and about 10% of those have already returned to two or more concerts. In fact, almost 70 have become donors. We have also nurtured a wonderful partnership with the mall and returned in November 2024 for a free Veterans Tribute Concert in The Canyon. As a member of the orchestra and staff (as well as a musician board member), I am proud that we took this chance and found an unexpected and delightful way to strengthen our community ties and bring music to a place where anyone can experience it.



The Syracuse Orchestra

The Syracuse Orchestra performs a concert in The Canyon, a large open space in Destiny USA, a local mall. The orchestra produced over 70 total concerts in the mall during a seven-month residency.

I ♥ Abravanel *continued from page 1*

already found ourselves overwhelmed with broad support for preserving our hall.

The petition became a big deal. Generally, people tend to ignore such petitions, but once it hit the news cycle, it became much more powerful. “Every time we sat down with [the other side], we told them how many more signatures we had,” Carrick recalls.

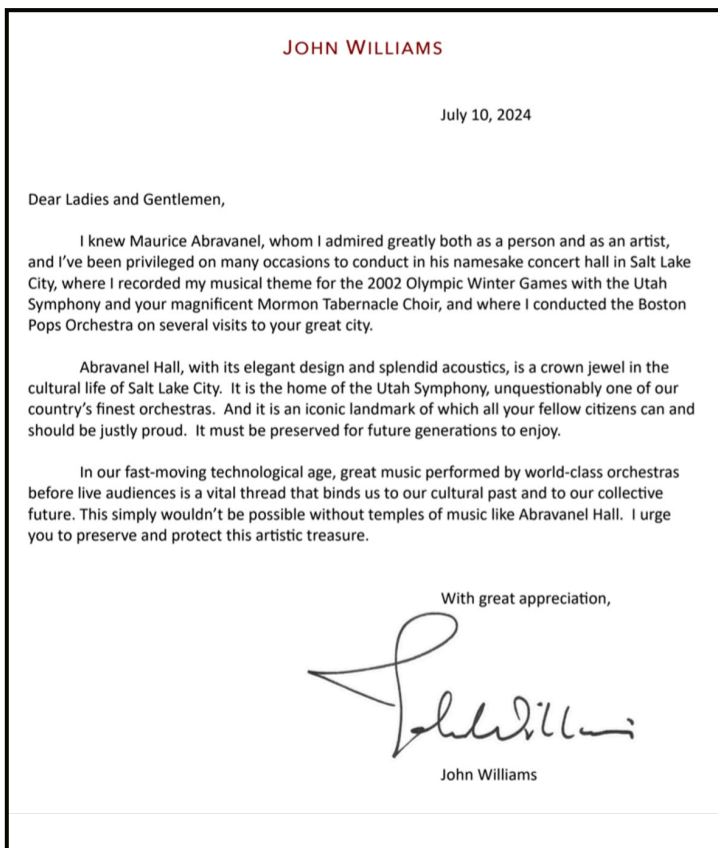
In terms of outreach to public officials, musicians attended meetings to advocate for our performance space and specifically to nominate Abravanel Hall to the National Register of Historic Places.

On May 28, the process was begun to nominate Abravanel Hall to the National Register of Historic Places, and on July 15, a final draft of the National Register Nomination was completed in record time—48 days—by preservationist and Historic Landmark Commissioner Adrienne White.

Reaching out to the public

Early on in the campaign, musicians reached out to the public and celebrities to spread the word further. Public groundswell—including Clark’s petition—likely influenced our politicians, creating a widespread message of support to preserve the hall.

Cellist John Eckstein contacted Composer John Williams, calling Williams “the most respected and beloved musician of our time.” Eckstein recalled that former Utah Symphony trombonist Jim Nova (now with the Pittsburgh Symphony) had worked with Williams previously and asked if Jim could reach out to Williams. The result was a beautifully written endorsement for saving the hall.



The letter from John Williams expressing support for the preservation of Abravanel Hall



Carolyn Abravanel, widow of Maurice Abravanel, speaks at the lectern at a gathering at Abravanel Hall on May 17, 2024. The night’s rally in support of the hall included the lighting of the Maurice Abravanel Hall sign for the first time.

David Porter’s role in PR was to drum up as much press coverage as possible and be the one who would speak to the press. He set interviews with local Salt Lake publications and radio stations and was also able to reach out to the *New York Times*.

“I was reading an article about Ryan Smith in the *New York Times* about the hockey team and I felt like it gave an incomplete appraisal of what was happening. And so I just emailed [the reporter],” recalls Porter. After many emails back and forth, “he said, ‘I’m interested; send me everything you have.’”

Porter continues, “What was remarkable about our efforts [was that] we have a lot of individuals in the orchestra with singular talents. I felt that the committee, as well as many musicians outside of the committee, recognized that certain people were going to be good at certain things, and they really allowed those people to do what they did best. And then everybody came together and coalesced with an enormous amount of information and pull, politically. I was just really impressed with how the musicians utilized their individual skills in a way that was organized and economical. Because we had very little time and we had to be aggressive without coming across as spoiled or entitled.”

Violinist Becky Johnson contacted KSL news anchor Carol Mikita and all the ICSOM and Utah Symphony Emeritus musicians. County Council member Jim Bradley spoke with Principal Clarinetist Tad Calcara about his instrumental role in naming Abravanel Hall for the esteemed conductor.

Humorist Garrison Keillor wrote a personal letter (to me) praising Abravanel Hall as “a miracle”. He writes, “A tragedy is gathering momentum in Salt Lake City and it’s time for lovers of good things to raise their voices and fend off the destruction of Abravanel Hall...(AH), home of the Utah Symphony, has a beautiful sound ambience that architects marvel at and so do performers. I did a show there with the Symphony and remember the warmth of the place, especially when the audience sang ‘America’ and ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’ and, I believe, ‘It Is Well With My Soul’—the beauty of a cappella voices was magnificent, second only to

Yuki MacQueen

Carnegie Hall or the old Methodist camp hall at Ocean Grove, New Jersey.”

When Yo-Yo Ma performed Dvořák with us in January 2025, he showed his support by wearing a button with our “I ♥ Abravanel Hall” slogan during the rehearsal and the concert.

As the ICSOM Alternate Delegate, I felt compelled to tell our story to delegates of the recent ICSOM conference in August in Portland, Oregon. The response was phenomenal, and newly elected MAL Rebecca Matayoshi from the Hawai‘i Symphony Orchestra created an online campaign to have orchestras make a short video showing their support. While this campaign came late in the process, ICSOM’s initial support was invaluable.

Everyone was encouraged to be involved in the process of saving the hall. Our Campaign Committee printed buttons and stickers to hand out to everyone (thanks to Matt and Tina Johnson!) We also printed cards (distributed at the ICSOM conference) with QR codes to sign the petition and to the county mayor’s office, where individuals could write letters of support to save the hall.

As a member involved in many aspects of the community, I was able to reach out and distribute pins and buttons to many different communities in the city, including a “I ♥ Abravanel Hall” poster to Carolyn Abravanel, widow of Maurice Abravanel, for whom the hall was named.

The Outcome

On October 1, Salt Lake City Council approved a project area for the sports and entertainment district downtown that included the preservation of Abravanel Hall. The resolution was unanimously adopted by the council and recognizes the importance of Abravanel Hall as a cultural and architectural icon in the city’s cultural and entertainment district and includes plans for its renovation—in its current location.

Special thanks to Lori Wike for her timeline of events used in compiling this article and for her tireless expenditure of

TIMELINE OF EVENTS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF ABRAVANEL HALL

- **April 29, 2024:** Musicians informed that Abravanel Hall was likely going to be razed
- **May 4, 2024:** Change.org Petition to Save Abravanel Hall created by Utah Youth Symphony member Jack Clark (at the time of printing, this petition has over 50,000 signatures)
- **May 6, 2024:** Emergency orchestra meeting to elect special committees
- **May 7, 2024:** Utah Symphony Musicians action at Salt Lake City Council meeting
- **May 28, 2024:** Process to nominate Abravanel Hall to the National Register begins
- **June 12, 2024:** Planning Commission unanimously votes to preserve Abravanel Hall on site in its present form and location, with funds allocated toward a modest renovation
- **July 10, 2024:** John Williams writes a letter in support of Abravanel Hall
- **July 15, 2024:** Final draft of the National Register nomination completed
- **July 18, 2024:** Press coverage of the John Williams letter begins
- **August 15, 2024:** City Cast Salt Lake podcast interview “If Abravanel Hall Ain’t Broke, Why Fix It” which included Musician Spokesperson David Porter
- **August 22, 2024:** RadioWest Interview “The Legacy and Future of Abravanel Hall” which included Porter
- **September 5, 2024:** National Register Public Hearing: Salt Lake City Historic Landmark Commission unanimously recommends nomination of Abravanel Hall to the National Register of Historic Places
- **September 17, 2024:** Revitalization Zone Committee makes a formal recommendation that “the

time and money to preserve Abravanel Hall. When I spoke with Lori, it struck me that she said, “The fact that we were in a union allowed us to fight this fight and it was all the musicians driving the bus with some board members behind the scenes. It couldn’t have been done without the community support. So it was a coalition as well as this broader community support.

“It’s about what musicians can do when you band together and you work really really hard because it was virtually impossible and yet somehow we did it,” remarked Wike.

But in terms of the people who did a massive amount of work, it was always the musicians, and it’s still not entirely over. “This story is still being written with twists and turns next year—once this gets to the state level,” remarks Carrick.

Wyatt notes further, “Our job now is to continue to keep our audience informed and engaged as we ensure a proper renovation that honors our beloved Abravanel Hall’s past while making it ready for our orchestra’s bright future.”



Buttons and stickers created to promote the preservation of Abravanel Hall

City and SEG prioritize an Abravanel Hall renovation that preserves it in its current location.” (Senator Daniel McCay, Senator Kirk Cullimore, County Mayor Jenny Wilson and SEG Representative Mike Maughan all spoke in favor of preserving Abravanel Hall during this meeting.)

- **September 19, 2024:** National Register State Review Committee unanimously votes to forward the nomination of Abravanel Hall to the Keeper of the National Park Service.
- **October 1st, 2024:** City council unanimously adopts final tax proposal with Council member Eva Lopez Chavez moving “that the Council adopt a resolution approving the final Capital City Revitalization Zone project area...that as the City Council recognizes the importance of Abravanel Hall as a cultural and architectural icon in the city’s cultural and entertainment scene, and its significant role in the future of the SECC District...”
- **October 6, 2024:** *New York Times* article “In Salt Lake City, Sports Drive a New Vision for Downtown” released online (released in print on October 10, 2024)
- **October 8, 2024:** County Council adopts a resolution “[stating] and [affirming] a commitment to preserve Abravanel Hall in its present form and on its current site...” (Thanks to the efforts of Council Members Jim Bradley and David Alvord)
- **October 10, 2024:** After additional requested revisions from the National Register State Review Committee are completed and the final draft of the nomination is officially submitted to the National Park Service
- **November 6, 2024:** After a vote at the national level by the Keeper of the National Park Service, Abravanel Hall officially becomes registered on the National Register of Historic Places

Organization *continued from page 2*

I cannot overstate how crucial this groundwork was to our campaign to protect our jobs. Every politician we spoke to had some connection to us: some loved our concerts, others remembered seeing us as children, and many shared memories of attending performances with parents and grandparents. When faced with this crisis, our community turned out in force, providing hours of testimony at public hearings. Had we not already cultivated such deep connections, organizing that level of support in real time would have been nearly impossible.

As you read in this issue, the battle over Abravanel Hall has been filled with twists and turns and remains ongoing. There are, of course, many other technical details to crafting an effective organizing campaign, many of which can be found online or through various training programs. ICSOM provided basic organizing training at this past summer’s conference to help delegates develop these skills and bring them back to their orchestra’s musicians.

In today’s political climate, organizing may be our most effective strategy. We cannot rely on government institutions to protect us in a labor dispute or other workplace issue—we must relearn how to protect ourselves. Speaking with one voice and standing up for each other is our best hope for surviving our nation’s turmoil. This will require time and effort, which means making sacrifices in other areas. But ICSOM cannot do this work for you—each orchestra must commit to the effort themselves. If you are motivated to do this kind of work, please speak to your ICSOM delegate—we’re here to support you however we can.



Karen Wyatt



Orchestra Committee Chair Karen Wyatt (right) presents an orchestra photo to County Council Member Dave Alvord and his Senior Policy Advisor Corrine Johnson

Karen Wyatt



Orchestra Committee Chair Karen Wyatt presents a photo of the Utah Symphony to Salt Lake City Councilman Jim Bradley



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