

Senza Sordino

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Chairperson's Report

by Keith Carrick

On the back page of this issue, you'll find a statement from the ICSOM Governing Board regarding individually negotiated agreements. This is a conversation we've been having for a long time, and it ties directly into the kind of culture change we're trying to achieve in our orchestras.

We understand that some members may not immediately see the connection between these agreements and broader workplace culture. But we hope the statement and this column can provide some context and clarity that help make that link.

Let's be clear: this is not about shaming anyone. Many of us—including me—have these agreements. Participating in a system that encourages them doesn't mean you've done anything wrong. You've simply operated within the structure as it currently exists.

But we believe that structure is no longer serving us well.

As the Board has reflected on what real culture change requires, individually negotiated agreements kept coming up. They can foster inequity, secrecy, and unequal treatment—issues that go far beyond pay and touch on how power operates in our orchestras.

When we talk about addressing structural racism or inequality, the conversation often focuses on auditions and hiring. But those same forces show up in these agreements. We don't talk enough about the implicit and explicit biases that can be baked into them. If we're serious about equity, we have to examine every part of the system that contributes to unequal treatment.

There are also problems in the way these agreements affect accountability and discipline. Similar to what we see in professional sports, some musicians who are seen as "stars" aren't held to the same standards of behavior as their colleagues. That kind of dynamic undermines trust and fairness—it damages the workplace culture we're trying to build.

Transparency is another major concern. Principal players have the ability to vote on contracts that determine the pay and conditions of section musicians. Yet, section musicians rarely have any say in the benefits or working conditions negotiated by principals. These decisions shouldn't be left to private deals between individuals and management. This

imbalance isn't just symbolic—it can materially affect the experience of other section members.

"Equal pay for equal work" isn't just a slogan. It's a principle that most of us believe in, and these agreements can erode that principle. Two musicians doing the same job—one entering during a period of budget cuts, the other recruited during a boom—can end up with vastly different compensation for identical work. That's not fair.

Of course, not every titled position must be compensated the same. Some roles do come with greater expectations, leadership, or responsibilities. But the orchestra—as a collective—should have a voice in shaping those decisions. If there's a case to be made for additional compensation, let's bring it to the orchestra through the waiver process. That way, we preserve flexibility but do it transparently and with input from the entire ensemble.

So, where do we begin? Like most organizing, it starts with a conversation. Ask a colleague if they've read the ICSOM statement. Talk about what fairness and transparency could look like in your orchestra. Think about what kind of workplace you want—and what steps it would take to get there.

Importantly, we need to do this before positions become vacant. If we wait until a spot opens up, we're working against the clock, which rarely leads to the best outcome.

Some may worry that without these individual agreements, orchestras won't be able to attract or retain top talent. But people already make career decisions based on compensation. What matters is how those decisions are made—individually, or collectively.

We also can't ignore the fact that some musicians come into these roles without much leverage and end up underpaid. Collective input helps protect them, too. Fairness works in both directions.

Here's the bottom line: individually negotiated agreements represent a deep power structure in our orchestras that deserves more scrutiny. We're not saying there can't be exceptions. We're saying the process should be equitable, transparent, and accountable to the musicians it affects.

This won't change overnight. It took many years to build the system we have now, and it will take time and commitment to create something better. But if we want healthier, more equitable workplaces for the next generation of musicians, we must be willing to make bold changes. This is one of them.



Scott Jarvie

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SF Musicians for LA

A Benefit for Fire Relief

by Barbara Bogatin, San Francisco Symphony
ICSOM Delegate

Following the horrific fires in Los Angeles this past January and the devastating effects on performing artists in the area, the musicians of the San Francisco Symphony (SFS) wanted to find a way to lend meaningful support to our fellow Californians. In SFS, we have a musicians' action committee that supports our negotiating committee and initiates orchestra-wide projects and activities. Led by principal bassist Scott Pingle and first violinist Melissa Kleinbart, this committee saw a golden opportunity during a free week in March to put together a benefit concert to raise money for several LA organizations that are aiding victims of the fires.



San Francisco Symphony

After a whirlwind month of planning, organizing, advertising, and community outreach, we brought together musicians of the San Francisco Symphony, San Francisco Symphony Chorus and San Francisco Conservatory of Music, along with conductor Edwin Outwater and pianist Garrick Ohlsson, to create "SF Musicians for LA: A Benefit for Fire Relief" on March 8, 2025. The SFS Administration and staff worked alongside the musicians to spread the word, and everyone volunteered their time to make this momentous event a success. We were thrilled to be able to raise \$118,500 from ticket sales which were split evenly between the Entertainment Community Fund and ReBUILD LA, the campaign by Habitat for Humanity of Greater Los Angeles dedicated to supporting those affected by the Palisades and Eaton fires.

From the stage of Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco Mayor Daniel Lurie addressed the audience with a poignant statement: "Tonight I'm reminded of the benefit concert that we held here in 2017 for Napa and Sonoma after those devastating fires...[as in 2017], this concert was an example of how this community responds. We come together and lift one another up in times of need."

The program featured works by Copland, Dvorak, and Rachmaninoff, ending with a powerfully moving rendition of "Make our Garden Grow" from Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. Conductor Edwin Outwater, a native of Pacific Palisades, one of the epicenters of the wildfires, posed the question raised in Voltaire's novel, "How do we endure in a cruel world?" He continued, "there's no easy answer, but Leonard Bernstein's answer is to build a garden and make the garden grow. Work together to build something back. That's what we're doing here tonight."

Before taking their seats in the orchestra, Scott and Melissa spoke to the audience about the "healing power of music and the virtue of charity." The San Francisco Conservatory of Music students who joined the orchestra were delighted to play side-by-side with many of their teachers who are SFS members. The whole city came out to lend their support and our benefit con-



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Melissa Kleinbart

San Francisco Mayor Daniel Lurie (center) poses for a photo with violinist Melissa Kleinbart and bassist Scott Pingle

cert was featured on the NBC Bay Area news broadcast later that night. It was a truly collaborative event that showcased the commitment and power of the performing arts in our great city!

Gratitude for the Orchestra Community

by Marion Kuszyk, Los Angeles Philharmonic

There are certain events in life that can change a person forever. The night of January 7 was one of those moments. Before January 7, my husband Brent and I were focused on fixing up our new “empty nester” home in Altadena that we purchased just a few months prior. This house represented stability in our lives, and it felt so peaceful residing there. Our youngest child successfully graduated high school and started college, so we were finally starting to focus on the two of us.

Then the Eaton Fire ravaged Altadena, and our lives were upended in a way that I didn’t even know was possible! Somehow we started muddling through the chaos—dealing with finding a new place to live, insurance, starting over with all new stuff—all while struggling with grief and uncertainty. While all this sounds daunting, one wonderful thing I learned is that I can believe in people! *So many* people wanted and still want to help, and we learned that it’s okay to accept help. We simply would not have made it through to this point without everyone’s incredible support!

Los Angeles Philharmonic President & CEO Kim Noltemy and the Philharmonic’s board of directors have been amazing, and numerous other people reached out as well. Too many to count; however, I do have a special shout out to the oboe

section of the Toronto Symphony. Even though I have never met any oboist in that orchestra, Principal Oboist Sarah Jeffrey took the time to coordinate with the section there to send a “care package” of reeds as well as other reed making supplies. I was so touched, especially because reeds are so personal and I, for one, tend to hoard mine. It’s true that the last thing anyone wants to do after an epic wildfire wipes out their home is to sit down and make reeds, but this enabled me to start getting back to the business of making music instead of insurance calls!

It’s overwhelming and there is not enough I can do to express the amount of appreciation that I have for EVERYONE who have reached out. Honestly, I got teary when I received a check from all the ICSOM orchestra donations. I feel the love and it’s overwhelming! I cannot thank you enough and it makes all the difference in the world. It’s a long journey to recovery but I know we’ve got this!

Back to Normal

Are We There Yet?

by Christopher Still, Los Angeles Philharmonic

It’s been five months since the fire took our home in Altadena. We have an architect. The lot has been cleared. There’s progress. Tangible, documented progress.

I just wish my mind felt as clear.

People keep asking, almost every day, “How are you guys doing?” Someone literally asked me that five minutes ago. And I’m never quite sure how to answer. I smile. I say, “we’re hanging in there,” or “little by little.” Something that acknowledges their support, which I truly feel and appreciate, without trying to summarize the full mental terrain of post-trauma logistics and daily emotional aftershocks.

The other kind of reminder? That’s quieter, but just as relentless. A dozen times a day, my brain still reaches for things that no longer exist. Where’s that blue shirt? The stapler? That awesome vintage straight mute that belonged to my dad? Oh right. Ash.

Because we’re not going back to normal. We’re moving forward—into something we haven’t seen before. Right now, the neighborhood is still just dirt and construction fencing. But it will be different. The houses, the stores, the skyline. Even the birds will sound different.

I’m still writing thank-you notes by the dozen. Still overwhelmed by the generosity of friends, colleagues, and strangers who showed up in ways big and small. That part hasn’t faded.

There’s still music to be made, coaching to do, life to live. And we’re doing all of it. Just with a little more perspective, a little less stuff, and a lot more gratitude.

We’re not “back”—but we’re still here.

The support we’ve received from across the ICSOM network has been nothing short of staggering. Donations, messages, offers of help—so many acts of solidarity from colleagues around the country. If you haven’t received a thank-you note yet—or seen one hanging on the musicians’ board—please know it’s on the way. We see you, we feel you, and we are so grateful.



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ICSOM Governing Board Statement Regarding Individually Negotiated Agreements

The ICSOM Governing Board believes that individually negotiated agreements do not serve the best interests of our orchestras and should be phased out in favor of entirely collectively negotiated agreements.

Individually negotiated agreements undermine the principles of fairness, equity, and collective representation that are fundamental to the strength and stability of our orchestras. These agreements:

- Lead to both overcompensation and undercompensation, eroding trust and morale within the ensemble.
- Introduce inconsistent benefits and privileges that impose unfair working conditions on other musicians.
- Are susceptible to bias, whether implicit or explicit, making them vulnerable to age, race, and gender discrimination in hiring, salary, and workplace treatment.
- Weaken the collective voice of musicians, excluding the full bargaining unit from participating in the determination of wages, benefits, and conditions that impact all members of the orchestra.

For these reasons, the ICSOM Governing Board believes that all employment terms for all members of the bargaining unit should be subject to transparent, collectively negotiated agreements that ensure fairness, consistency, and inclusivity for all members. As each member orchestra considers the transition away from individually negotiated agreements, it must carefully evaluate its own circumstances and determine the appropriate steps toward this goal.

We urge our orchestras to engage in open and proactive discussions about this transition and to work toward employment agreements that reflect the collective strength and unity of our profession.