

# Senza Sordino

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## St. Louis Symphony Orchestra's Powell Hall Transforms

By Eric Dundon, SLSO Public Relations Director, and Henry Skolnick, ICSOM Delegate

With the start of the 2025–26 season, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra has returned to its historic concert hall following a two-year transformational expansion and renovation. Powell Hall has served as the SLSO's home since 1968, and the former vaudeville house and movie theater was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2001.

The \$140 million project created the Jack C. Taylor Music Center, with a renovated Powell Hall at its heart, transforming the 1925 building into a vibrant and accessible music center for the entire community. The first major renovation of the building since it became the SLSO's permanent home in 1968, the project added 64,000 square feet to the venue and was designed by the New York City–based architecture firm Snøhetta.

"The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra musicians are beyond excited to return to our beloved home," said Bjorn Ranheim, co-chair of the SLSO Musicians' Council, our orchestra committee.

During the 2023–24 and 2024–25 seasons, the orchestra played at alternate venues throughout the St. Louis region, meeting new audiences as the orchestra traveled to different corners of the community.

Powell Hall at the Jack C. Taylor Music Center reopened for the first week of classical concerts September 26–28, 2025 with the world premiere of Kevin Puts' new song cycle, *House of Tomorrow*, featuring mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato.

Visitors to the transformed venue will find a host of new amenities to make the concertgoing experience more comfortable. A new lobby adds gracious gathering space. More facilities—including restrooms, concession areas, and a coat check, among others—make the experience seamless.

And for the musicians, there's a new, modern backstage area. Powell Hall was never built to accommodate an orchestra and previously lacked amenities for a modern orchestra.

"We were fortunate that the auditorium itself suited an orchestra so well, but our 100-year-old building has needed a touch up for a while," said Will James, the SLSO's Principal Percussionist.

The new backstage remedied these shortcomings. Musicians now enjoy a light-filled, spacious new lounge to unwind before or after rehearsals or concerts. A state-of-the-art music library space complements the reconfigured stacks in the



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depths of the Powell Hall basement, carefully preserving the SLSO's vast sheet music collection. New men's, women's, and gender-neutral dressing rooms address a glaring inequity—Powell Hall previously didn't have a women's locker room. Twelve new practice spaces provide musicians convenient options to hone their craft. And climate-controlled instrument storage facilities have been vastly improved—especially for percussion, timpani, and pianos.

"The added practice and rehearsal spaces, coupled with a beautiful musicians' lounge, make for a much more comfortable and productive environment, both pre- and post-concert," said Chris Tantillo, SLSO Musicians' Council co-chair, prior to the opening of the space.

These improvements will help attract the highest-caliber talent to St. Louis and retain them once here.

"We've always been fortunate to have the world-class acoustics of Powell Hall, and now we finally have backstage and front-of-house facilities to match! This is a very exciting

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# Chairperson's Column

## From Values to Policy

By Keith Carrick

As we head into another CBA expiration season, I want to bring our attention back to some of the important issues that continue to trouble our industry.

Too often, we treat these problems as separate from bargaining, as though they belong to some other conversation. They do not. Bargaining is where our values become policy and where our aspirations are tested against what we are actually willing to fight for.

For that reason, this is the right moment to revisit several areas where our orchestras still need serious work.

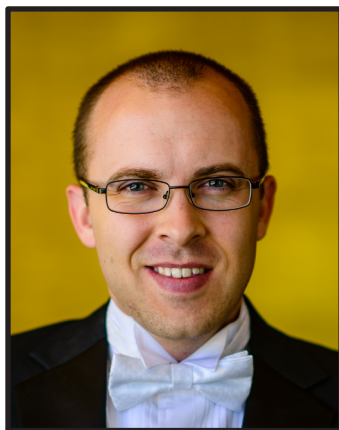
Misconduct policies and procedures must be clear, understood, and enforced. It is not enough to have language on paper that few people understand or procedures that are applied inconsistently. Musicians need to know what happens when harm is reported, what protections exist, and what standards govern the process. A policy that is vague, inaccessible, or ignored is not a real safeguard.

Audition procedures also deserve continued scrutiny. If we care about fairness, then we must continue working to make auditions more transparent and accessible. We should ask whether our procedures create genuine opportunity, whether they serve the artistic goals we claim to value, and whether we are willing to track outcomes honestly enough to learn from them.

Tenure is another area where ambiguity too often substitutes for fairness. Expectations should be clear. Feedback should be timely, specific, and actionable. Candidates should understand the process they are moving through and have a meaningful voice in it. A fair tenure process does not weaken standards; it strengthens them by making them understandable and consistently applied.

And beneath all of this lies the larger question of orchestra culture. We still struggle with serious power and economic imbalances along lines of race, gender, and position. We still tolerate uneven enforcement of rules depending on who is involved, and we still struggle with the gap between our stated values and our daily practice. Our union means very little if some voices carry more weight than others, or if the same rules do not apply equally to everyone.

At the same time, we should be honest about the challenge of change. There is a temptation to demand that everything be fixed at once, and there is an equal temptation to study every problem so long that nothing changes at all. Neither path is sufficient. The better path is the middle one: serious, steady progress.



Seth Jarvie



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# Re: Precedent

By Nicole Jordan

In Article I (*Re: The Library*), I laid the groundwork for something most of us already know instinctively: The library isn't an add-on to orchestral life. It's part of the artistry and the infrastructure that quietly holds everything together. That infrastructure—the preparation, decisions, and labor that exist long before anything happens onstage—is easy to overlook precisely because it usually works. When the infrastructure is healthy, it's invisible. You don't think about it because you don't have to; you simply trust it to do what it was built to do and move through your day assuming it's quietly working in the background.



Jeff Rothman

What no one sees (unless they're behind the scenes or part of the machinery making it happen day to day) is how that same infrastructure is holding up under the weight and pressure it carries every single day. The tiny frictions. The wear and tear. The compounding strain of one more request, one more late change, one more unexpected need—all small pressures that quietly add weight to a system already operating at capacity. Because most people never feel that growing strain directly, they don't recognize where it's building, but the few of us who are inside that infrastructure and part of its structure can see exactly where it's pressing the hardest and where it's starting to buckle.

For an even clearer picture, think about a levee system during a storm. When a storm hits, water levels rise and pressure builds steadily against the barriers that comprise them. Nothing looks wrong. The levees are doing what they are supposed to do: holding. On the surface, everything still appears stable, even as the force against them increases. What you don't see, though, is that the wall isn't equally strong everywhere. Over time, from previous storms, some sections have taken more hits than others. Some have been patched instead of reinforced. Some have been rebuilt. Some have been eroded completely and never repaired, carrying more strain than anyone realized. So as the pressure keeps increasing, it isn't pressing against a perfectly even structure. Instead, it's pressing hardest on the spots that have already been worn thin. Those weaker areas give way first, and eventually a breach follows.

When that breach happens, it often gets talked about like bad luck. A rough patch. A one-off emergency that just needs a quick fix. But, breaches aren't random, and they aren't about luck. They're the visible result of strain that's been accumulating for a long time due to pressure rising faster than maintenance and reinforcement. Once the load exceeds what the wall was built—and updated—to handle, one crack becomes many, exposing a system that's been quietly carrying more than it was ever designed, staffed, or resourced to sustain. That's how

pressure reveals where a system has been stretched past its limits—and that same pattern shows up in orchestras.

In an orchestra, the collective bargaining agreement functions much like that levee wall. It's the structure designed to absorb pressure, distribute strain, and keep any one part of the system from taking more than it can sustain. When the language is clear and actually upheld, it holds because the load is fairly balanced across the whole unit. However, the moment the language leaves work unnamed and open to interpretation, or the protections in it stop being enforced consistently, the balance shifts and the pressure begins to concentrate on the parts of the system with the least protection.

Since this series focuses on the library, it's worth looking at how the above dynamics show up there.

When bargained language exists but stops being honored consistently and starts getting treated like it has room to bend, a "just this once" makes the week work, or that tour work, or that really special program with that amazing artist work. Then comes another. And another. Bit by bit, those exceptions become the norm and begin reshaping the agreement into something that was never actually bargained at the table. And eventually, the cost of that reshaping falls to the people who rarely benefit from the thing those "just this once" exceptions were traded for to pay, widening the gap between who is protected and who is expected to absorb the strain.

Conversely, when language is unclear or missing altogether—as is often the case with the library in CBAs—the work still has to happen. The orchestra still needs the same preparation, decisions, and labor to make the week work, so the gap between what's required and what's defined gets filled however the moment demands. Pages are bowed, parts are corrected, materials are assembled, questions get answered. But, because the contract doesn't clearly define and account for that labor, the library's work is easy to overlook. Once that essential labor is easily overlooked, it becomes much easier for it to be pushed around, handed off, or expected without the same clarity or safeguards other work inside the bargaining unit receives.

To be fair, playing musicians don't have the day-to-day details of their jobs written into the contract either. However, that specific labor is still structurally anticipated and protected through service definitions, limits, and other carefully negotiated safeguards. Even so, playing musicians are no strangers to having their work misunderstood due to much of it happening out of sight. A good portion of the week-in, week-out labor is invisible: individual practice, score and part study, physical maintenance, instrument care—all of that happening long before everyone comes together to rehearse and perform. That invisibility creates space for a different narrative to be introduced: "Musicians only work 20 hours a week."

This phrase, usually heard around the negotiation process, is used to collapse invisible labor—practice, preparation, recovery, and cumulative physical strain—into something that looks part-time on paper. That framing is dangerous because it makes it easier to undervalue the work, justify paying less, or argue against paying more. Contracts exist to push back

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time for our institution,” Double Bassist Brendan Fitzgerald said.

Along with the musician-forward services, the project positions the SLSO for greater flexibility in the future. New media suites make audio and video broadcasts easier and more efficient.

### Preserving the signature sound

Powell Hall is one of America’s most acoustically remarkable and visually stunning concert halls. Countless musicians, both SLSO members and visiting artists, praise Powell Hall’s exceptional warmth of sound.

Stéphane Denève, the Joseph and Emily Rauh Pulitzer Music Director, describes the acoustic quality as “a beautifully melting sound.”

Adds Principal Violist Beth Guterman Chu: “The warmth and depth of sound at historic Powell Hall has helped to guide our orchestra into having a rich, deep, and complex sound. We are so excited that the new amenities, education wing, backstage, and front of house will now match the exquisite hall itself and create an even more welcoming and comfortable experience for everyone who walks into the building. While out of the hall, we have been so grateful for the generosity of our community to help us turn this dream into a reality,

and we thank them for having been with us in different concert halls these last two years.”

Long before the first shovel overturned dirt on the project, Kirkegaard—the project’s acoustics firm—extensively studied and tested the acoustical qualities of Powell Hall, understanding its strengths and potential areas for improvement. Part of Kirkegaard’s studies included 3-D mapping of sound movement in the auditorium using “blasts” like popping balloons to chart the path of sound waves throughout the space.

Testing and interviews with musicians and staff revealed potential for improvement for the acoustics on the main floor. The acoustic model was used to confirm the proposed design solutions, which included adding low profile curved walls near the stage that will provide additional reflections from the stage to main floor audiences. The SLSO took great care in confirming the impact these new elements would have on the acoustics of the space. Kirkegaard and the project’s construction team created full-scale mockups of the shaped walls using lightweight and low-cost prototypes, which were lifted in and out of place during a special orchestra rehearsal, while musicians and staff listened carefully to the difference.

While architectural adaptations to the auditorium are the most visible way the acoustics have changed, Kirkegaard also recommended ways to reduce the intrusion of outside noise into the hall, including creating sound vestibules, reviewing



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materials and equipment selections for acoustical impact, and replacing old exit doors with acoustically rated ones.

### Accessibility and safety

For those with accessibility needs, visiting the almost 100-year-old Powell Hall wasn't so straightforward. With uneven surfaces, limited seating options, and a lack of amenities for people with a range of needs, barriers made a trip to the venue difficult or impossible for some. The renovation project addressed these issues and provides a more inclusive environment. Improving the accessibility of Powell Hall and making it more welcoming to all was a strategic cornerstone of the project.

Some of the improvements are obvious: adding three new elevators, increasing seating row depths, and adding many more accessible seating locations. Accessibility improvements also encompass the entire visitor experience. Patron parking and guest drop off is vastly improved through a new patron drop-off zone and a reconfigured parking lot with a new east-facing entrance closer to vehicles. Added handrails make the balcony more inclusive to seniors and people with neurological and sensory disabilities. The improvements continue in the back of house, where artist and staff amenities have been redesigned. All of these accommodations were designed to be as invisible as possible.

### Centering education and learning

Another facet of the 64,000-square-foot expansion opens new doors that foster community connections through the power of music: a new Education and Learning Center (ELC) designed to unite the region's residents as part of the SLSO's vibrant community.

This nearly 4,000-square-foot space serves as a home for the SLSO's education programs, a rehearsal space for the SLSO's two resident choruses and the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra, and a hub for events that brings the community together and explores creative collaborations. The SLSO collaborates with these ensembles throughout each season.

The state-of-the-art space supports music education programs and the teachers and students with whom the SLSO connects, more than 250,000 students around the world in the 2024–25 season alone. It can also act as rehearsal and creative laboratory for all SLSO ensembles, in addition to being an essential anchor for community engagement with our institution. Crafted to mimic the environment of Powell Hall, the floor consists of the same white oak as the concert stage.

### Reopening

Construction began in March 2023 and was completed in September 2025, the 100th anniversary of the building's opening. For much of the first year of construction, crews focused on creating infrastructure and laying the groundwork for the expansion. In summer 2025, new seats were installed in the auditorium and musicians gathered to play on the refurbished stage for the first time in two years.

Musicians and the community have welcomed the reopening of the storied venue. The 2025–26 season includes some



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of the world's great artists for a festive season with some of the biggest and boldest pieces in the symphonic repertoire.

"This great venue has a unique character, and I always feel its beautiful soul while rehearsing or performing on stage. I am so excited by the renovation and expansion of our home," Denève said.

The renovation and expansion of Powell Hall is part of decades-long urban development in St. Louis, which includes housing developments; hotels; schools; and visual, media, and performing arts facilities. Other significant projects in the community include the construction of a new stadium for the St. Louis CITY SC soccer team, the new National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency campus, the revitalization of the Gateway Arch and designation of Gateway Arch National Park, the Brickline Greenway, and more.

Snøhetta, the internationally acclaimed architecture firm, is the project lead and design architect. The firm's portfolio includes the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Shanghai Grand Opera House, and the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet.

### Crediting the community

Powell Hall holds a special place in the hearts of countless people in the community, as well as the orchestra's musicians. A credit to the place of the SLSO in the community, the project has received outstanding support from many, who view the space as a nexus for community unity. That sentiment is shared by many SLSO musicians.

"As our individual instruments are our voices, Powell Hall is the instrument and voice of the SLSO," said Jelena Dirks, the SLSO's Principal Oboist. "I am so excited to be home and to be able to share that, becoming an even more welcoming and supportive focal point for the arts in St. Louis."

Cutting the ribbon to the new building in September 2025 ushered in a new chapter for the 145-year-old institution.

"I am so thrilled to be a part of this exciting time," said Jennifer Nitchman, SLSO flutist. "The support of the community and our donors for this project bodes well for the future of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra."



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against the practice of undermining musician labor. In theory, they are meant to account for the reality of the work and counter the rhetoric used to shrink it. In practice, though, they don't always do that evenly across the bargaining unit.

That's exactly what's happening when it comes to librarians and the labor they perform. They remain clearly misunderstood within the very system their work makes possible, which makes it easier for both the work and the people doing it to be undervalued, underprotected, improperly classified, or quietly left out of the standard language altogether.

Library work is well defined. It's just rarely described accurately by everyone (except the librarians). Everyone knows the library is critical, but far fewer people can clearly articulate its role because they only encounter the work through a vague sense that the music "gets ready." Library work is precise, technical, and constant, yet it's often talked about as if it's a single, simple step in the process. When work gets reduced like that, people start making assumptions about it—how long it takes, what it requires, how many people are needed to do it, and who is responsible for it. Those assumptions shape expectations, timelines, and demands placed on the library before anyone checks whether they're realistic (except the librarians—they've been saying it's unrealistic from the beginning, so it isn't exactly news to them). This is one of the first signs of stress along the wall.

Another stress point shows up in information: in who people think has it, who is withholding it, and what happens when others act on what they assume they know. Inside an orchestra, information behaves like currency—traded casually, hoarded strategically, and spent freely, while the work of verifying it sits elsewhere. Because the library is seen as the place that "just knows," it becomes an expectation that every piece of information gets funneled there to be confirmed. Someone hears something from another ensemble, remembers something vaguely from years ago, or simply believes a thing must exist because it should and suddenly that belief arrives at the library's door as a task, a directive, or a deadline.

When the library doesn't already have the answer, or when the answer requires time, research, or confirmation, the reaction often isn't curiosity or partnership. It's frustration. The library starts to be seen as "difficult" or "slow," not because the request itself has been examined for unreasonableness, but because the assumption behind it was never examined at all. At that point, the labor shifts and instead of preparing music, librarians are now having to repair the request itself by clarifying what is true, what is false, what needs research, and what never existed in the first place. Additionally, because orchestras talk to one another, misinformation travels quickly. A mistaken belief in one hall becomes an urgent demand in another long before anyone verifies it. Librarians end up searching for materials that never existed, apologizing for things that were never real, and untangling certainty that turns out to be wrong.

These are just some of the ways pressure accumulates along those stress points long before anyone names it. Hours that should be spent preparing music disappear into explaining our jobs, arguing for structural protections, performing labor that was never formally accounted for, and validating assumptions

that evaporate under scrutiny. Work lands on the library based on partial information or unexamined belief, and the time, labor, and emotional fallout of sorting it out settles there as well. When expectations arrive assumed rather than verified, the pressure to clarify what is actually possible pushes straight into the library, compounding already tight timelines, limited staffing, and the thin margins under which the work is getting done.

This is where accumulated pressure turns into risk, which is the stage just before visible failures begin. On top of resolving assumptions, the library is simultaneously forced to manage the risk created when attention drops away from critical work—all in real time. As mentioned earlier, the library operates under hard, immovable deadlines in service of both the organization onstage and the work happening behind the scenes. Under duress, the solutions tend to look the same: more bodies, found quickly, pulled from the closest available pool, and justified by urgency. The goal in that moment isn't elegance, fairness, longevity, or parity. It's a single *idée fixe*: avoiding failure so the show can go on.

This is the environment in which library substitutes, interns, and additional staff positions are brought in (with varying compensation levels, if they are compensated at all) and end up carrying real responsibility. It's how people with experience, or people who need more of it, say yes to work that looks like opportunity even when it's really coverage. (There is no degree for performance librarianship. The only way to gain experience is to be in a library, learning the job by doing it.) Over time, unique, unpaid, or underpaid help gets framed as temporary, educational, or exceptional—even as it becomes routine and, eventually, a regular fixture in the library. I've seen this pattern up close, from more than one vantage point. Early-career library labor is often treated as a proving ground, where real responsibility is assigned without corresponding protection or pay, under the assumption that experience itself is compensation—it isn't. And the thing is, that logic doesn't magically disappear once someone has more experience or authority. It just gets normalized.

What matters here isn't intent, but repetition. When workarounds like these repeat, they stop being exceptions and start setting expectations—not because anyone formally decided to change the rules, but because the system quietly adjusted to what it was already relying on. Short-term fixes made under pressure become standing arrangements, and once that happens, the effects start shaping the structure itself. The workaround becomes the rule, showing up both in the CBA and in how its language is interpreted and applied. Compensation is where the "more bodies for less money" becomes impossible to pretend is harmless.

As everyone is aware, there's a difference between discretionary pay—overscale, premiums, negotiated extras—and base pay. Base pay is the floor. It's what the agreement guarantees to everyone it covers. Or does it? A quick look at library language in many CBAs, or at ICSOM wage

charts, shows that this base is not, in fact, guaranteed to all librarians. When musicians in the same bargaining unit (and more specifically, in the same section) are paid less than the guaranteed base pay, that isn't an individual agreement issue. That's a structural issue, and it's where the library's treatment inside the bargaining unit becomes impossible to ignore.

In many CBAs, librarians are technically included in the unit while being paid as a percentage of base scale, depending on the number of people in the section, rather than receiving the guaranteed base itself. This arrangement is often framed as a compromise, a way of "bringing the library in," but functionally, it creates a tiered system inside the unit: different base pay for the same work, limited or nonexistent access to overscale in some cases despite holding titles or endowed chairs, and a compensation ceiling that cannot be crossed no matter how much responsibility the job actually carries. The result isn't just lower pay. It's a structural divide. Librarians working side by side—performing the same core functions and carrying the same week-to-week responsibility—are compensated differently by design. Over time, that design difference morphs into a tiered system within the library itself—an internal hierarchy where people doing the same work are assigned different standing and base pay by structure.

Once that logic is accepted inside the bargaining unit at the library level, what started as a stress fracture in one section becomes a crack in the CBA itself, affecting not only the library but the entire bargaining unit. It establishes a precedent—in both function and interpretation—that base pay is negotiable by classification, that full participation in the unit can come with carve-outs, and that essential work can be discounted without technically violating the agreement, because the agreement already made room for it. At that point, the compensation floor isn't holding, and once that floor erodes, other protections tied to the CBA—including time off, overtime, relief, and sustainable scheduling—begin to erode alongside it.

This is how that erosion shows up in practice:

Substitutes and extras are paid below base scale—or brought in for a full week of work but paid only per service or per task, rather than being guaranteed a full week's base pay. Early career musicians—particularly at the conservatory level and beyond—are asked to perform covered work without pay, or for so-called "educational rates." "Pipeline" or "emerging" labels get attached to professional responsibility, offering a rationale for paying less for the same work.

Erosion doesn't stop at pay. In wind sections, weeks where a player is "not needed due to instrumentation" get counted as relief weeks (even though relief is clearly defined in the CBA), effectively conflating relief with rotation and denying players the contractual rest those weeks are meant to provide. Doubling clauses tell a similar story: Bargained protections get bypassed through individual agreements, where players are paid a small amount of overscale to cover doubling that the CBA explicitly defines and compensates at a higher rate. On paper, it looks like flexibility. In practice, it undercuts mandatory language and shifts cost and fatigue back onto the player.

There's a belief that workarounds are temporary. That's a fallacy. Discounted labor, blurred definitions, and one-off

"solutions" get repeated, relied on, and quietly absorbed into the system. Over time, reduced pay and reduced protections stop looking like exceptions and start functioning like categories. That's how precedent gets established. Not all at once, but through repetition that slowly reshapes what the agreement is understood to allow.

What becomes clear from these patterns is that what starts as bargained "solutions" for the library—more bodies doing the same work for less money, members of the same section not making guaranteed base pay, amended or reduced time off—doesn't stay in the library. It moves through the entire infrastructure of the bargaining agreement, pressing against other weak points in the contract. As pressure builds unevenly across the agreement, breaches begin to appear. Slowly at first, and often in places that are easy to miss. Systems rarely fail all at once. They fail the way levee systems do.

I recognize this is a lot to sit with. Systems are often invisible to the people least burdened by them, so it can feel uncomfortable when someone reveals how they're actually working (or in this case, not working). So what does repair actually require? Structural change. Precedent has to be interrupted where it first formed—and where it's still being reinforced. This means repairing the contract at the library level. It requires real language that reflects the work as it actually exists, names the labor the system already relies on quietly, creates protections around that labor, and makes them enforceable instead of optional.

Next up: Finishing the series—Re: Design



**Values to Policy** *continued from page 2*

This also means resisting apathy, burnout, and complacency. As time passes and as the urgency of one incident fades, it becomes easier to tell ourselves that these issues can wait. They cannot. If we act only when a crisis is upon us, we have already waited too long.

So here is my suggestion as we enter this next round of negotiations: In each of these areas, identify one thing that needs to change. One meaningful improvement in misconduct procedures. One meaningful improvement in auditions. One meaningful improvement in tenure. One meaningful improvement in culture and accountability.

Then do the work—speak to your colleagues, raise the issue in meetings, put it in surveys, lobby your negotiation committee, build support carefully and persistently.

This is not an all-or-nothing approach. A top-to-bottom rewrite may sound bold, but it can also overwhelm people, consume too much time, and invite dismissal of the entire effort because of disagreement with one piece of it. Real progress often depends on choosing the most consequential step, winning it, and building from there. Don't let perfection disrupt progress.

We cannot let this bargaining season pass us by. If we do, then when the next failure of policy, procedure, or culture confronts us, we will once again be left asking why we did nothing when we had the chance.





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