

# Senza Sordino

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## New Orleans: Blues in the Black

The long process of returning to work actually began during the failed 1987-88 season, when it became obvious that the planned season of 33 weeks would probably end early. Previous concessionary bargaining had resulted in mechanisms allowing the orchestra full access to all financial records of the Society. This made it possible for the musicians to make informed decisions about financial matters.

Before the cessation of operations during the 1987-88 season, the orchestra committee established two basic goals. First, we felt it was imperative that the musicians not be the apparent cause of a bankruptcy. Bankruptcy would have resulted in the loss of back wages owed us and cancellation of our health and welfare benefits. Second, it was obvious that new leadership would be necessary to establish credibility with the business community. Both of these goals required time to achieve. Therefore, we negotiated a deferred payment agreement providing for stiff interest penalties on any delayed wages.

By January 1988, there was no revenue to continue operations. Since we continued to report to work although 5 1/2 weeks behind in pay, the deferred payroll arrangement had positioned us so that the Society had to lock us out. Then, the issue of 19 weeks of unperformed services remained, presenting an obstacle in the minds of board members in discussions of reopening plans. The Society had debts of more than \$4 million and no assets. At that time, any legal victory on our part would have had immediate disastrous results.

On April 27, 1988, an agreement was reached calling for full payment of back wages plus interest, a cash settlement of \$1500 per musician, and continuation of benefits for orchestra members. During the ensuing months, our actions were predicated on doing nothing unless we could accurately predict the outcome. Both before April 27th and in the six months that followed, it was very difficult for the orchestra to maintain what appeared to be a passive stance. Protests and picket signs would have been a justifiable

expression of our anger and frustration. But the normal activities associated with a labor dispute would have impeded or perhaps even stopped the board reorganization which was in progress.

Following several early attempts at reorganization, a transition team consisting of board members, business and community leaders, and one member of the orchestra, was able to identify a new president for the Society. The Society's former debt was eradicated through private fundraising, negotiated settlements, and the sale of the Orpheum Theater to a group of anonymous buyers. A new board of directors is in place representing a broad, diverse group of business, community, university, and social leaders. A new executive director was chosen in February, and the management is being reorganized throughout. A Metropolitan Arts Foundation was recently formed to coordinate corporate fundraising for the arts. Its five-year goal of raising \$10 million is over 80% complete.

Obviously, the musicians suffered severe hardship and damage during this crisis, which began at least as early as 1983—damage which probably can never be rectified. However, some major achievements have resulted from the events of the past 15 months. We have a new board of directors and a new president, a totally new management staff in which we have confidence, the Society is in a debt-free position for the first time in ten years, and there is a good likelihood of achieving a balanced budget for the next three years. Further, the organization is operating within the previous scope of operations and its goals and mission are intact. For an organization that suffered a complete lack of credibility in its own and in the public's eyes, both locally and nationally, it has experienced a complete turnaround. It is indeed a new beginning. Many thanks to all ICSOM orchestras and to Local 174-496, who supported us throughout this long crisis.

*John Hall*  
*New Orleans Symphony ICSOM Delegate*

## August '89: Looking Ahead to Aspen

The theme of this year's ICSOM conference is "The Union." Many union officials will be present, and ICSOM delegates should be prepared to articulate what we as orchestras need from our national union. A panel of presidents of local unions will discuss what locals should do for their musicians and what musicians should do for their locals. There will be a report from the structure committee, established at the 1987 ICSOM conference to explore ways of achieving more effective representation within the AFM.

Orchestras interested in the upcoming recording negotiations should prepare their delegates with input to the conference and the

ICSOM media committee. There will be a report on the status of the proposed amalgamation of health care plans. An extensive series of workshops will delve into negotiations, pensions, committee administration, working with a board of directors, and accessing the AFM.

We will hold elections for the positions of the four members-at-large and for the remaining year of the secretary's term.

*Brad Buckley*  
*ICSOM Chairperson*

## S. F. Opera Takes a Stand

In the winter of 1988, I signed on for a stint on the San Francisco Opera Orchestra committee. In our first meeting of the year, we made a list of projects. I innocently mentioned that we hadn't had new stands since the 1940's. "Great!" said our chairman, Tim Wilson. "Why don't you work on that?" I then embarked on a journey into the unknown world of committee/management relations that two and a half years later would leave me with that mixture of success and gray hair that only other committee members can fully appreciate.

I informally polled the orchestra in our breaks and intermissions. Just what would the "perfect" music stand look like? The orchestra willingly came up with a long list of criteria. Most importantly, the light had to be bright but without glare. The stands had to be fully adjustable (our old stands required pliers to raise and lower). The desk needed to accommodate all sizes of music without casting shadows. A shelf for bows and miscellaneous articles was desirable. The base needed to be elevated somewhat in order to accommodate our strange electrical outlets. The stands should be heavy enough not to topple over, yet light enough to move around easily. The light fixture shouldn't obstruct our view of the podium.

Our first meeting with management was attended by Thomas Munn, our lighting director, and John Priest, our technical director. We didn't have to convince our management that we were in desperate need of new stands. Tom Munn was constantly complaining about the light spillage from our old stands into the audience and onto the stage. John Priest thought the stands were quite wonderful for the era in which they were made, but exploding light bulbs and rusted lug nuts kept his crew a little too much on edge. Tom Munn had found that the Met used stands made by Kliegl, the only manufacturer of heavy-duty music stands.

We wrote to Kliegl and requested information on the stand used at the Met. To our dismay, Kliegl no longer makes that particular stand. However, they do make two others, and our management purchased these for us to evaluate. The light fixtures were the same on both; the only real differences were the sizes of the desks and bow trays. One tray was attached, one moveable. Our shop modified one of our old stands and we now had three prototypes to try.

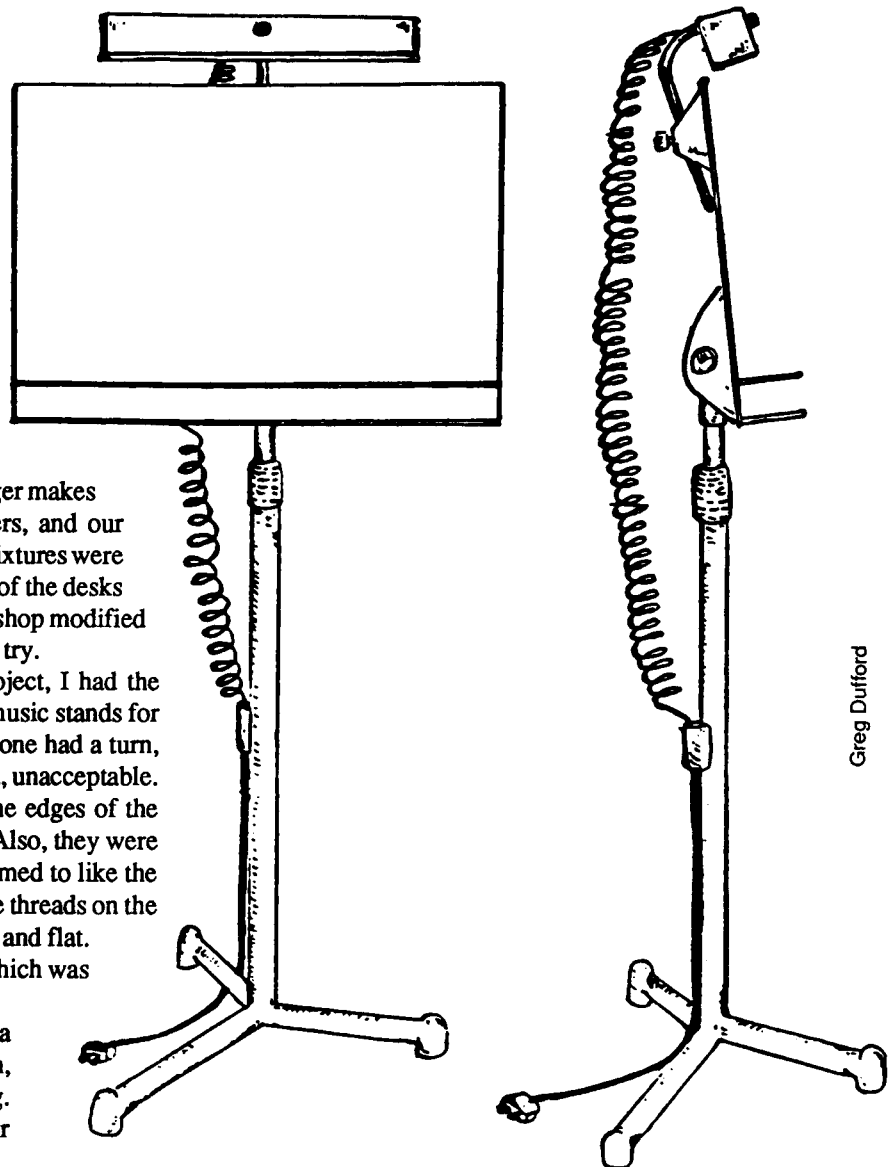
In the summer of 1986, still "in charge" of this project, I had the unenviable task of working out a rotation schedule for 3 music stands for 68 people over a 3-week period. Somehow, almost everyone had a turn, and we discovered that these stands were, for the most part, unacceptable. The light fixtures were too small (casting shadows on the edges of the music) and they were too high, impeding our sight lines. Also, they were extremely hot. One desk was too large. The orchestra seemed to like the fixed shelf or tray a little better than the moveable one. The threads on the poles stripped after two weeks and the base was too heavy and flat. The stands also had a funny smell (probably fresh paint) which was annoying. We presented our findings to management.

We came to the conclusion that we needed to make a stand that would be a composite of stands we had seen, enhanced by our own ideas. We came up with the following. The light fixture would have to be designed and built in our

shop. We would go with a wider and lower box which could be adjusted up and down. The light bulbs would be tubes (two, in case one burned out in a performance) and would be incandescent, not fluorescent. (Fluorescent tends to flicker and could not be counted on for special effects such as blackouts.) Tom Munn proposed that we have gels which would slide in and out under the light fixture to tone down any undue brightness. The electrical cords would also be out of the way. We liked the desk from Kliegl, except we made the shelf removable (in the shop only) and attached it from behind so no music could slip into it. Our shop rethreaded the microphone-like pole from Kliegl at the adjustment point to reinforce it. We used our old bases, as they fit our criteria.

By fall 1987, we had our prototype. The orchestra was satisfied except for the angle of the light fixture. John Priest came to the rescue and had the shop change the angle by 5 degrees. We were in business!

The shop worked during the off-season and by the fall of 1988, we finally had 100 brand-new, custom-made San Francisco Opera Orchestra music stands. They have held up beautifully this first



Greg Dufford

season, and for the first time in many years, we go home at night without eyestrain or headaches (at least not from the lights). Management claims the stands cost \$700.00 apiece and is looking for donors to contribute stands in exchange for having their names displayed on them.

In our first committee meeting of 1988, Tim again asked for a list of projects. Without thinking, I mentioned the deplorable condition of the archaic pit in which we work. Guess who is working on that project? I can already see my gray hair turning to white...

Joanne Eisler

Vice-chair, San Francisco Opera Orchestra Committee

## Settlement Summaries

**Minnesota:** ratified a 3-year agreement November 17, 1988, retroactive to October 1, 1988. Wages (were \$935 + \$25 EMG) will be \$955—975, 1,000—1025, 1,055—1090, all plus \$25 EMG. Over the 3-year contract, seniority pay changes from a maximum annual bonus of \$300 for 25 years of service to a weekly supplement, maximum of \$625 annually for 25 years of service. Pension increases from \$17,000 to \$23,000. Increases in life insurance, disability insurance, per diem, overtime, and small ensemble pay. Instrument insurance added. Improved procedures in demotions/seating changes favor musicians. Significant improvements in working conditions, tenure, and individual contract protection.

**New Orleans:** ratified a 2 1/2 year agreement on February 21, 1989. Musicians returned to work March 6, 1989. Wages (were \$543) go to \$560, 560, 588. Length of season (was 33 weeks in 87-88, of which only 14 took place) will be 12, 34, 34. One rotating week of vacation eliminated. The rest of the previous contract remains in effect.

**Baltimore:** ratified a 4-year agreement February 18, 1989. Wages (were \$770 + 0 EMG) will be \$795 + \$20 EMG—805 + 25 EMG, 845 + 30 EMG, 900 + 40 EMG—935 + 50 EMG, 975 + 50 EMG—1,040 + 0 EMG. Pension increases from \$14,400 to \$19,500. Life insurance doubled to \$50,000. Guaranteed relief (was 8 services per season) increases over the contract to 16 services for some players. Greater flexibility in scheduling.

## As We Go To Press

Denver Symphony, cancelled for the rest of this season, is employed for three weeks by Opera Colorado.

Eleven orchestras attended the negotiating orchestras meeting on April 10 in New York. Costs were shared by ICSOM and the AFM.

On April 14, there was a meeting in Chicago between representatives of ICSOM, orchestra managers, and physicians specializing in music medicine.

## Pit Players Produce Perfect Pitches

Life in the pit can be exciting. There's always the chance that a dagger may careen between you and your colleagues, and it sometimes does so during a *Carmen* performance. Or, one can be completely engrossed in *Falstaff* and have scenery raining on one's head and bass violin, as happened recently when a sound engineer failed to secure the stage on broadcast night.

Life in the pit is fraught with surprises, as our harpist Elizabeth Cifani can attest. While tuning for a performance of *Anna Bolena*, she noticed that two of her tuning pegs were suspiciously bent. As the evening unfolded, so did the fact that her instrument had sustained serious damage. A column had fallen on the harp during set changes from one opera to the next.

But life in the pit can be amusing. Until recently, the orchestra used comfortable old spring-back chairs dating from the 1920's. Unfortunately, the chairs were not kept in repair. One night, during the violin solo "Meditation" from *Thais*, a trombonist lost his chair-back (accompanied by a loud snap of steel and heavy wood hitting the floor), simultaneously falling backwards into the bells (which then dropped out of their perpendicular position, one after another) and the cymbals (adding a resounding crash). His feet went up and knocked his music stand forward into the horn section.

Much of an opera orchestra's rehearsal is for staging. One particularly arduous afternoon, our principal conductor Bruno Bartoletti clasped his head and cried, "Oh, God-issimo!" summing up the situation perfectly.

Of course, there is never enough room in a pit. Many orchestra members arrive early to stake out their territory (it being constantly rearranged). During *Salome*, which requires more players, one of the second violinists asked, "Would it add more space if I take off my watch?"

The latest problem we have to cope with is stage directors intruding in the pit. During *Salome*, the prompter, whose usual space was occupied by a stage prop, was seated right beside the conductor, distracting a section of the orchestra.

A dark, very coarse scrim over the pit is now used to cut out light from our music stands. Unfortunately, this also cuts our direct communication with the stage, and we have to rely completely on the conductor. Most conductors would say this is good, and most players would disagree, because sometimes the singers just don't follow the conductor!

We take pride in bearing a good deal of responsibility for the success of a production. Last year, we had a different conductor for each opera. Productions always overlap, and we can be rehearsing one opera and performing three others; hence the quip, "Same horse, different rider."

Love our literature we do: we'll take *Fidelio* any day over a Beethoven symphony! When we hear a great soprano, we're saying, "Now that's how I'd like to play my instrument!"

When the cue is given, one must play with all the alacrity and technical precision of the seasoned symphonic player, no matter what diversions are occurring in the pit. The opera orchestra, though only a part of a massive operation, is certainly one of the most efficient and excellent of the parts.

Carol Beck

Chicago Lyric Opera Orchestra ICSOM Delegate

## The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The recent prolonged strike of the Baltimore Symphony musicians contained elements which fall into each of the headlined categories, holding lessons for all symphony, opera, and ballet musicians, and perhaps their managements.

### The Good

The unity and sense of purpose of the musicians and their local union was remarkable. As you know, this was one of the longest strikes in symphony history, and it would not have been shocking to see the development of divisions, finger-pointing, and questions about why the strike was happening and whether the losses were worth the issues. But none of that happened. The musicians also displayed an all-too-rare faith in their committee, despite months of inactivity and dashed hopes after fruitless meetings, unproductive mediations, etc.

On the management side, there was, believe it or not, some good as well. At no time during the 5-month strike did management threaten to cancel the season. In fact, when the settlement finally came, the season resumed within a few days. Management also must be credited with having not resorted to the all-too-common tactic of cutting off the musicians' health insurance coverage, even though I am sure there was great pressure to do so by some elements of the board.

### The Bad

The importance of this strike was recognized by most symphony musicians around the country, as evidenced by the outpouring of letters and money to the BSO committee.

Unlike too many other situations, the BSO management was not in financial trouble—just the reverse. As most of you recall, the BSO had just completed one of the most extraordinary fundraising

drives in symphony history. In little over a year, they had raised approximately \$40 million for the endowment fund. Yet, while the offer to the musicians was not terrible, it was ordinary, and that was the point. If musicians are to be asked to make concessions and accept substandard contracts when the situation is bleak, then aren't they entitled to expect major and extraordinary gains when the picture is bright? This was especially true in Baltimore, where the orchestra had been forced by poor financial conditions to take substandard contracts for many years. Management's failure to recognize this fundamental principle was at the core of this unfortunate labor dispute.

### The Ugly

Perhaps the worst thing that happened during the strike was management's decision to reveal publicly the details of the off-the-record discussions which had been taking place between attorneys during the first couple of months after the strike began. Obviously, this desperate but foolhardy move resulted in a discontinuance of those talks, an angry backlash from the musicians, and undoubtedly, a prolongation of the strike. Off-the-record meetings are essential to the negotiating process. Very few settlements are achieved at the main bargaining table. There are virtually no circumstances under which the details of these discussions are to be made public—otherwise their value is lost, together with the best hope of settlement.

Much more needs to be said about this negotiation, and I am sure there will be further discussion at the ICSOM conference in August.

*Len Leibowitz*  
ICSOM Legal Counsel

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