

III. WORKING RELATIONSHIPS - WORKING CONDITIONS

7. Employment situations

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On behalf of the Regional Orchestra Players' Association (ROPA) I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. ROPA is a conference of the American Federation of Musicians' Union that represents 85 professional regional orchestras throughout the United States. These ensembles include symphonic, opera, ballet and chamber orchestras. The budget sizes of these orchestras range from \$500,000 to \$45 million. Salaries of the musician start at approximately \$2,000 and a few of the orchestras earn up to \$35,000. The majority of this work is performed without a minimum guarantee of employment. Most musicians in regional orchestras have very few benefits. The few orchestras that do offer health insurance usually contribute only partial coverage of the plan. Over the past ten years the insurance costs have far surpassed the wage increases, leaving musicians compensating for the difference.

It has been a very difficult time for regional symphony musicians in the United States. We started to see a pattern of downsizing a few years before the economic downturn. Once the financial crisis hit, there was a never-ending list of requests for contract re-openers as well as an increased number of contentious negotiations.

Regional Orchestras have seen a pattern that reduces the size of the ensemble through either eliminating positions or by declining to fill vacant positions. We have also witnessed a reduction in rehearsals for each concert set and or the actual number of performances given during each season. Many musicians have realized pay concessions of 10 to over 68 percent depending on the orchestra.

I believe that the contentious labour disputes experienced in our field is extremely dangerous during this fragile economic time. Last year my own orchestra, the New Mexico Symphony was locked out for three and half months. Since January 2010, this organization fights daily to recover from the confidence lost during the work stoppage. As a result, the musicians have been performing while payrolls have been 2 months or more behind. The Detroit Symphony has been on strike for 20 weeks; and as there are no signs that this will change anytime soon, I fear what their recovery path will find.

During my preparations for this panel discussion, I posted an inquiry to the ROPA Delegates about this session's topic. To my surprise a flurry of responses came in about the change in the musicians' morale and commitment to their organization.

One Delegate wrote,

"As the amount of work decreases and the personnel rotates more and more, there is less and less commitment to the organization. You start to get a 'take the money and off to the next gig' attitude. There is dwindling concern for the organization's health. Managements don't seem to understand how bad this type of erosion is."

Another response included this insight "Producing art has a large psychological and spiritual component: it is not factory work, or even merely craft. Morale and good will play an important role in achieving the desired artistic experience for all"--therefore the idea that all we need to do is to get the right personnel to show up at the right time sadly misses the larger picture of what is required for artistic success.

Another Delegate wrote that musicians are turning out for auditions in large numbers, but when they realize they cannot afford to work under the pay scale they either play a few concerts and leave or don't accept the position.

All of the comments I received included remarks about the decline in the artistic level as a result of the concessions the musicians have sustained.



Another commonality we have seen amongst ROPA orchestras is an increase in the anti union rhetoric from our boards and managements. Last summer one of our Regional Orchestras, the Richardson Symphony in Texas, was notified by their board of directors that the organization refused to negotiate a union contract. The musicians who did not sign the new non-union contract have all lost this work. This action is in line with the anti union tactics we have seen in the United States. The state of Wisconsin is being watched by all union workers as their Governor attempts to strip the bargaining rights of their public employees.

It is apparent to me that the orchestra musicians in the U.S. who have endured heavy handed negotiations tactics have been sent a message that they are all replaceable. Some of our orchestras who have once strived for excellence have now replaced vision with regressive actions.

Up until a few years ago, regional orchestras were built through vision and the recognized need to develop a strong core orchestra through increased compensation. The benefits presented to our communities and business leaders centered on transforming their city into a vibrant arts centre. I am bewildered at the vision that has been disseminated currently by some of our orchestral organizations that offers reduced community outreach, shrinks the artistic product and considers commitment to the musicians as a liability.

There are orchestras in the United States who are flourishing and they should be the example, not the exception. During past financial crises in the U.S., our society has called to the arts to help sustain the dignity and inner health of their citizens. We have not witnessed the same level of commitment to the arts and no one can be surprised when the majority of focus in our news gives question to the future existence of our organizations.

Granted, some orchestras have encountered true challenges; however the words of John F. Kennedy could have been extremely useful as strategies to address these challenges. He stated, "The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis'. One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger - but recognize the opportunity." The orchestras in the U.S. that are doing well have capitalized on their relevance and have created ownership from within their community. These are the stories we should relay as they are the proven solutions to moving our industry forward.