

II. HEALTH AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

6. Support to orchestra musicians

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Greetings to my fellow delegates. I would like to give you a view of what social, psychological and financial support for musicians is like in North America.

Social support can be shown in a number of ways. There are the internal structures among the musicians – potluck suppers, after-concert get-togethers, retirement parties. I'm sure that every orchestra has a way to take care of musicians who are sick or suffering from a playing injury – sending cards, flowers or food, among other things. In the Arizona Opera Orchestra in the US, a cancer patient's colleagues bought her a freezer and stocked it with food. Another musician in that orchestra needed a bone marrow transplant, so her fellow musicians took turns staying in her home and caring for the house and pets. They also ran the jewellery business that she operates in her spare time. In the Erie Philharmonic, also in the US, a tympanist who was diagnosed with cancer quickly ran out of funds, so the musicians and management of his orchestra worked together to organize a fund-raiser in a park, complete with a picnic lunch and with music provided by groups from within the orchestra.

Social support can also be demonstrated by the clauses in an orchestra's collective agreement. The sling on my arm is not a prop for this talk. I am recovering from shoulder surgery, and I was able to make this trip because I have paid sick leave from my orchestra, cumulative from year to year. If necessary, I could be off work for a year. Of the twenty full-time orchestras in Canada that belong to the Organization of Canadian Symphony Musicians, or OCSM, some guarantee only 10 services of sick leave, and eleven do not have cumulative sick leave. More than half of the orchestras in the Regional Orchestras' Players' Association, in the US, have no paid sick leave whatsoever. If it had not happened that I needed surgery, I would have asked my orchestra for paid personal leave, which has been granted to me in the past so that I could attend union activities. We have 4 paid services a year for personal reasons; of the other OCSM orchestras, half have no paid personal leave, while the others have allowances ranging from three to 14 days. Had I not been lucky enough to have adequate sick leave, I might be tempted to return to work too early and risk reinjury. Nobody should have to make that decision. Personally, I would love to see benefits such as these standardized across the country. Furthermore, although my operation was paid for by Canada's health plan, I spent thousands of dollars on various treatments over the past two years so that I could keep playing. Again, I was lucky because some of that money was reimbursed because the members of my orchestra belong to a supplemental health insurance plan. Half of the OCSM orchestras have no such plan. In the United States, health-care insurance premiums are often used as bargaining chips during contract negotiations, and they're the first "perk" to fall by the wayside when money is tight. One should not have to trade away one's health in order to settle a contract.

Psychological support has been offered by several OCSM orchestra managements to the musicians. I know of two orchestras that experienced a great deal of divisiveness over either the actions or the dismissal of a music director. In each case, counselling sessions were offered to musicians to help them deal with the emotional fallout of these situations. The National Arts Centre Orchestra musicians were also offered counselling after an unsettling incident in which a disturbed audience member tried to jump onto the stage from a box in order to save Papageno during a performance of *The Magic Flute*. The Calgary Philharmonic had a resident psychologist for a time. He proved to be a meaningful and helpful resource for many of the musicians. He is a CPO board member and has a strong interest in the personal and psychological dynamics of orchestra musicians, and so he offered to consult with any musician free of charge to talk about issues either related to the orchestra or not.



Psychological support also comes from the local branches of our union. For example, Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians, in New York City, has created a Musicians' Assistance Program that offers counselling – both one-on-one and in groups – as well as information on all kinds of social services, including health insurance, food stamps and more. All services are free to Local 802 members. In Canada, Performing Arts Lodges have been created in six cities. These provide reduced-rent housing for artists of various disciplines as well as music, along with support ranging from providing drivers for medical appointments to providing rehearsal spaces.

Adequate financial support is a problem for many orchestras in the US and Canada. We don't have a long tradition of treating classical musicians as honoured members of society unless they are quite famous. Classical music is often seen as being meant for the elite, and there is not a widespread understanding that performing music is what we do as a profession and that we are worthy of salaries commensurate with the amount of training necessary to be a symphonic musician. The standing joke is that we are often thought to be musicians in our spare time because we love it, but that we must have a "real" job in order to make living. In an effort to combat this attitude, every North American orchestra has implemented plans for reaching out to new audiences, both adults and children, in an effort to show them that our concerts can be thrilling and fun as well as beautiful. Quite apart from the fact that people's lives can be enhanced by our music, it is our hope that with familiarity will come an appreciation of our worth.

Even some orchestras at the top of the financial ladder have been suffering great financial losses because of the recent recession, whether from lower returns on investments for their endowment funds or from fewer tickets being sold. For the orchestras with lower budgets, the problems are exacerbated, and Canadian orchestras especially are not known for paying a decent living wage. Only three of the twenty member orchestras of the Organization of Canadian Symphony Musicians pay a yearly salary that is even slightly higher than the median income for a family of four in that orchestra's province. Most of the OCSM orchestras pay salaries that are only 40 or 50% of the median family income. Victoria, British Columbia, is a rather expensive city in which to live. I once asked a musician in the Victoria Symphony how she and her colleagues managed to exist on such small salaries. She replied, "Oh, it's not too bad, but you try to marry someone with a job outside the orchestra, and you have to think twice about getting your teeth fixed or having children." Again, I would love to see standardized compensation across the country, with adjustments for the local cost of living.

Despite all this, we have come a long way in the past fifty years in terms of getting our musicians paid the salaries they deserve, but there are some instances in which musicians have needed extra help in emergency situations. One of the oldest orchestras in the US, the Honolulu Symphony, recently declared bankruptcy after 110 years of existence. Last year, the board of the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, or ICSOM, issued a Call to Action to help the musicians of the Honolulu Symphony after they had not been paid for many weeks. The result was that \$115,000 was sent to those musicians by members of ICSOM, OCSM and ROPA, which is the Regional Orchestras Players' Association in the US. As a clarinetist in the Honolulu Symphony put it, the amount of moral and financial support received during that crisis made a big difference in keeping hope alive. In other Calls to Action, \$100,000 was raised for the Jacksonville (Florida) Symphony, and \$130,000 for the Columbus (Ohio) Symphony.

As I write this, the musicians of the Detroit Symphony, long one of the top ten US orchestras in terms of prestige and salary, have been on strike for 20 long weeks, and the rest of their season has just been postponed. At issue is not just the proposed pay cuts, but the very nature of a symphonic musician's job, including tenure, peer review and paying new musicians a full salary. ICSOM issued another Call to Action last October, and an unprecedented \$280,000 has been raised to date. Symphonic colleagues all across North America have written letters of support and signed petitions to try to help the Detroit musicians. This is the very best example of musicians helping musicians – socially, psychologically and financially.