

What can be done so people don't undervalue (they're not all street musicians or buskers)
nor overvalue (they're not all stars) musicians?
by Bruce Ridge (USA)

I'd like to begin by telling you just a little about the organization I represent, the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, or ICSOM. Our members are 4000 musicians in the 51 largest orchestras in the United States. If the "international" part of our name seems a misnomer, it is because when we were founded we were indeed international, having orchestras from Canada in our membership. But, in 1975, the Canadian Orchestras formed their own conference, and they are represented here in Berlin by my dear friend, Francine Schutzman.

ICSOM represents some of the most well-known orchestras in the world, such as the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony. But we also represent smaller orchestras that are some of the finest artistic institutions found anywhere, such as the San Antonio Symphony and the Oregon Symphony. While some of our orchestras are not international names, they are intrinsically linked with their cities, and they serve their communities through the highest level of public service. I am a member of the North Carolina Symphony, an orchestra that performs free concerts for 200,000 school children every year. In my role as ICSOM chairperson, I have traveled over 60,000 miles to hear our musicians perform, from Puerto Rico to Honolulu. It is indeed a great pleasure to be able to add to my travels this great gathering of musicians in Berlin, and it is an honor to be asked to speak with you today.

The topic I was asked to address is "What can be done so people don't undervalue or overvalue musicians?" I must say that, unfortunately, in the United States we need not concern ourselves with the issue of musicians being overvalued. The orchestras of America face a seemingly endless onslaught of negative prognostications, and for many musicians the struggle to spread a positive message of hope to our communities is as vital as the daily regimen we undertake to maintain our craft.

While there are many orchestras that are thriving, in other places we must be our own advocates. We face governments that seek to balance their budgets by slashing arts funding, despite the fact that every dollar invested in the arts returns seven dollars in revenue. The non-profit culture industry in the United States generates over \$166 billion every year, and provides 5.7 million jobs. Together we work to counteract a negative perception of the future of classical music.

Recently, one of our member orchestras, the Jacksonville Symphony, faced an egregious lockout by their management in a plan to reduce the size of that excellent orchestra into something that their board felt was "more manageable". This absurd position was taken by people who are supposedly stewards of the community in a city that has seen a 35% expansion of the economy in the past five years.

I am delighted to tell you that the lockout was not successful, and that the musicians are now back on stage. This was largely due to an unprecedented show of support by the musicians of North America who responded to a Call to Action issued from ICSOM by donating nearly \$100,000 to support the musicians. The support of the unified musicians across the continent made the lockout a national issue, and demonstrated that the positive message of the musicians within their community can overcome a negative message perpetrated by an underperforming management.

No sooner had the issue been resolved in Jacksonville than another crisis appeared, this time for the Columbus Symphony in the state of Ohio. There, the board and management proposed to resolve financial difficulties by eliminating 22 musicians.

The climate that leads to these incidents is one of historic record. For many years, a pervasive sense of doom has lingered over the orchestral industry in America, at times promulgated by the industry itself. When I first joined the Virginia Symphony in 1979, I was told that the audience for classical music would soon be dead. But now, nearly 30 years later, I see the same audiences I saw then. I see the old and the young, the well-dressed and the sartorially challenged. The negative pronouncements ignore the fact that in America we are seeing a rise in attendance, a rise in classical music downloads, and a proliferation of beautiful new concert halls. The artistic level of our orchestras, with budgets both large and small, has never been higher.

The venerable Wall Street Journal recently proclaimed "Contrary to the rumors, symphony orchestras have a bright future."



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But, why do these rumors persist at all? I have a newspaper article that asserts "25 Symphonies Doomed to Die." Disturbing news, to say the least. Until, that is, you realize that the article was published in 1970, and that all of the orchestras exist to this day. In fact, many have risen to illustrious heights.

One of our success stories is the Nashville Symphony, an orchestra that declared bankruptcy just 20 years ago. Today this orchestra is a model of excellence recognized throughout the world. The orchestra has just opened its new concert hall which is acknowledged by all as one of the finest on any continent. The community rose to save this orchestra. And now, the symphony has revitalized the historic downtown of Nashville, and brought international attention to the city through its award winning recordings.

There are many successes to celebrate. The Fort Worth Symphony is receiving rave reviews for a Carnegie Hall appearance, the Florida Orchestra is announcing gifts totaling over \$3 million, the Buffalo Philharmonic is aggressively building its endowment, the Oregon Symphony has seen a 20% increase in attendance, and the New York Philharmonic is receiving more press coverage than the Oscars. And yet, we still hear the incessant drum beat that professes that the arts are not sustainable in certain cities.

It seems to me that the arts are the only business that seeks to resolve financial difficulties by offering an inferior product to its public. Ballet companies turn to recorded music, and symphony boards propose a drastic reduction in the size of the orchestra. It is clearly a misguided approach.

I think it is less a question of whether musicians are overvalued or undervalued, but rather, how do we work to ensure that they are indeed valued? There are many ways to reach out to our communities and build the sense of family that should surround every orchestra in its city.

"Community" is a buzz word in the orchestra world today. We must strive to make sure that "community" refers not only to an investment in us, but that it also means that we musicians invest in our community. To establish indelibly the positive sense of community that our musicians seek to develop, musicians must learn to break the fourth wall.

In theater, the fourth wall is the imaginary wall between the stage and the audience, the other three walls being formed by the shell of the stage. The term has been adapted from the theater to include books, film, and television.

Musicians in symphony orchestras can adapt the term to serve a new purpose as well. All too often in our concert halls there seems to be a dividing line between the orchestra and the audience. To establish a closer relationship with our audiences, boards, and community leaders, orchestra musicians need to break that fourth wall. This would mean establishing a connection with the audience and inviting them into the community that surrounds every orchestra. And further, it would mean expanding that community to all constituents of our cities.

At a time of uncertainty in the world, where discord seems more valued than debate, where doctrines of fear and rhetoric of violence replace the inspirational words of hope that have, at moments of past crisis, led the citizens of the world to aspire to something greater than themselves, ...art (as Bernard Holland wrote) ...art is our fragile claim to control over our lives.

Everywhere we look there is evidence of the power of symphonic music. It is seen and heard through historical events. It was experienced internationally when Leonard Bernstein conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony here in this great city at the fallen Berlin Wall. It is heard on one of my favorite vinyl records; an amazing live recording by the Boston Symphony of Mozart's Requiem at a memorial mass for President Kennedy in January of 1964. I felt it on the lawn at Duke University immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, where thousands of people held candles as they listened reverently to their own symphony orchestra, a scene repeated throughout the world by hundreds of orchestras in hundreds of locations. It is felt in the response of our audiences and seen throughout our communities as we help attract businesses, educate our children, and spread the name of our great cities.

We must remember... this we did with our lives for a reason. While it is and has always been so in vogue for orchestral musicians to be cynical, it is not beyond us to continue to indulge in our dreams. The greatest musicians among us are those who are still inspired by the opportunity to inspire. Through

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uniting together and reaching out to our communities, we can and will ensure that the arts continue to thrive, and we will continue to enrich the lives of our audiences as we improve the livelihood of our colleagues, all while inspiring the next generation of musicians.

Wherever an orchestra is in trouble, let us all respond. Wherever a musician is in need, let us all respond. Wherever a negative image of the arts is produced, let us answer with a positive message of hope. Let our community of musicians serve as an example to those places across the globe that are aching to hear a positive message.

It is a right of the people that they not be deprived of hope. As they hear our music, let them also hear our voices.

While many of the issues that surround orchestras are indeed local issues, there is no doubting the power in collective good will. Let those of us in this room resolve to build an international network of support. Let us establish contacts and friendships that will allow us to shine an international spotlight that will serve as a beacon for the arts in every community across the world. We are the advocates for our art form, we are the advocates for our communities, and we are the advocates for our children. Through our music, we offer a message of hope that the world is longing to hear.

Thank you very much.