

Spring  
2020

REGIONAL ORCHESTRA PLAYERS' ASSOCIATION

# The Leading Tone

## Notes from the President

by John Michael Smith, ROPA President

It seems like a dream – Thursday, March 12, exactly two months to the day as I write this. I had just played my first rehearsal for a new opera, *Edward Tulane*. I had been rehabbing my shoulder after rotator cuff surgery five months earlier, and was so happy to be back with my colleagues at Minnesota Opera... and then everything changed. One thing after another was postponed or cancelled, to the point where there was little left. Then stay-at-home orders from the governor – schools and businesses closed, worship services and meetings moving to online conferencing and day after day of staying home. Things have changed; some say permanently.

The days seem to begin and end online. On Mondays I participate in weekly online conferences with members of Symphonic Services Division in both the US and Canada, as well as the leaders of the other symphonic player conferences, ICSOM and OCSM. It's one of the ways I know it's Monday. The first week of shutdown, a side letter agreement was created to modify terms in the Integrated Media Agreement with the Employers Electronic Media Association, which many of our orchestras rely on to do their live recording, streaming and promotional and media education work. Within a week that was further modified with a memorandum of understanding to allow for even more flexibility in keeping our orchestras, opera and ballet companies present in our communities. Many thanks to SSD Director Rochelle Skolnick and Director of Symphonic Electronic Media Debbie Newmark, who have taken the brunt of



ROPA President  
John Michael Smith

these modifications, and are now handling the deluge of agreements that need to be created, edited and approved.

Tuesdays I find myself meeting with the Player Conferences Council: the leaders of all the AFM Player Conferences. We usually meet only occasionally, but weekly now

that so much is changing day to day. I look forward to these meetings to keep on top on what is happening around the music business: symphonic, theater and recording.

It was great to hear from so many ROPA orchestra delegates as we gathered reports of postponements, cancellations and how our orchestras were dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. Some reported their orchestras would continue to pay their musicians partially or in full for the rest of the season. Others reported that they were being cancelled with little or no compensation by *force majeure*, or simply that there was no money for musicians, and there was every response in between. The government relief has arrived to many in a couple of waves, and that is certainly helpful. Many have applied for unemployment for the first time in their careers. The rules and eligibility differ in every state and locality. Locals and orchestra committees have stepped up to be a resource, as has ROPA (COVID-19 Resources for ROPA Musicians, on ropaweb.org) and the AFM, with a COVID-19 resources page on their website. You can find CORONAVIRUS RESOURCES in the Symphonic Services Division Resource Center in the Document Library on the AFM website. Many ROPA Executive Board Members-at-Large have reached out to the delegates either by phone or email, or with online conferences. I hope that these calls and meetings are welcome, reassuring and helpful.

The new theme in the past week or so has been “So how do we start up again?” The answers to that question change daily; it will likely be a while before that path unveils itself. There has been much discus-

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## The Leading Tone

### Volume 35, Issue 3

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*The Leading Tone* is the official newsletter of the Regional Orchestra Players Association, a conference of the American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada, and is published quarterly. Unauthorized reproduction of any part of *The Leading Tone* is strictly prohibited.

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#### Subscriptions

\$8.00 per year payable to  
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- The list is open to musicians in ROPA member orchestras, and AFM Local officers for those orchestras.

## A Report on SphinxConnect 2020: Vision

by John Michael Smith, ROPA President

AFM, ROPA and ICSOM leaders were invited to attend the 23rd annual Sphinx Competition and SphinxConnect conference in Detroit this past winter. The Sphinx Organization is a social justice organization, founded in 1997, dedicated to transforming lives through the power of diversity in the arts, and specifically classical music for black and Latinx musicians. SphinxConnect began with Sphinx Orchestral Partners Auditions on Wednesday, February 5 and continued through the Sphinx Competition senior division finals performance with the Sphinx Symphony Orchestra on Saturday evening February 8 at Orchestra Hall in Detroit. This year's conference was titled SphinxConnect 2020: Vision.

This conference is presented as the epicenter for artists and leaders in diversity, equity and inclusiveness (DEI), and it certainly lives up to that claim! I was joined by my colleagues from ICSOM, Chair Meredith Snow and President Paul Austin, as well as Symphonic Services Division Director and AFM Special Counsel Rochelle Skolnick. Together and separately we attended many guest presenter sessions, mostly offered at three different sessions per hour. Together we attended a meeting with Sphinx LEAD (Leaders in Excellence, Arts & Diversity), a new two-year program for arts management leaders of color, and a meeting with the leaders of the National Alliance for Audition Support, which provides mentorship, audition prep, financial support and audition previews to black and Latinx musicians.

Here is a sample of some of the presentations that I attended:

Ways to Optimize Performance Under Pressure – led by *Noa Kageyama*, a performance psychologist and creator of the “Bulletproof Musician” website.

Picture Perfect? – people of color are often included in print materials and online, but what happens if what is advertised is different than fact; what happens when you're the person

who is always featured in the picture? *Weston Sprott*, facilitator; panelists *Aretina Hamilton*, *Devin Hinzo* and *Ahmad Mayes*.

Fit as a Fiddle – players' physical health, music making and movement. *Pamela Frank*, violinist and *Howard Nelson*, physical therapist.

Consensus 2.0 = Fuhgetabout It – keeping your organization focused and building consensus without making consensus becoming the goal in itself. *Paul W. Hogle*, facilitator; *Tre Devey*, *Alberto Suarez*, *Louise Toppin*.

Your Guide to Evergreen Programming – we have lamented the lack of representation on our stages, but how does programming affect our mission and connection to the community? *Garrett McQueen*, facilitator; *Lara Downes*, *Lena Fankhauser* and *Stephen Wogaman*.

NAAS Roundtable - *Bill Neri* Facilitator; *Jonathan Colbert*, *Michael Fuller*, *Alex Gonzalez*, *Meredith Riley* and *Erica Snowden-Rodriguez*.

Behind the Screen – the audition experience from both sides of the screen; the auditioner and the audition committee. *Michael Morgan*, facilitator; *Susie Park*, *Kenneth Thompkins*.

Conducting Change: a guide to relevant programming – a conductors panel to discuss leading change through programming. *Titus Underwood*, facilitator; *Carlos Botero*, *Rodrick Cox*, *Tito Muñoz*, *Eugene Rogers*.

Music Director's log: Empowering Change Through Leadership and Example – supporting DEI on the podium. *Marin Alsop* and *Joseph Young*, co-facilitators; *Camille Delaney-McNeil*.

From the Source – conservatory students share their experiences and solutions in DEI work. *Jacqueline Jove*, facilitator, *Marquis Bradley* (Cleveland Institute), *Rayna Campbell* (Manhattan School), *Ehren L. Valmé* (The Julliard School).

## PPP vs. Unemployment: What's Right for Me?

By Naomi Bendsdorf Frisch, Delegate-at-Large to the AFM Convention; Attorney at Illinois Advocates, LLC

Though ROPA orchestra musicians are used to “driving for dollars” and earning money from many different sources, we are now faced with an unprecedented lack of work and a heightened need to find alternate sources of income. The Federal Government has offered some relief in the form of stimulus money, expanded unemployment benefits and low-interest forgivable loans. I am sure many ROPA musicians are wondering which federal assistance programs are right for them. While the answer depends on a musician’s own state unemployment laws, the information below is intended to describe some of the basics of what should be available during this difficult time.

### Unemployment

Now through July 31, 2020, individuals who qualify for unemployment benefits can receive \$600 *per week* in Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation under Section 2104 of the newly-passed CARES Act. This is in addition to any weekly benefits available under each state’s regular unemployment insurance program. For many, such weekly payments would be a significant help. For example, here in Illinois, if a musician qualifies for the maximum weekly benefit of \$484 and stopped working on March 13, 2020, that musician could receive \$21,680 in unemployment benefits by the end of July. This is more than many ROPA orchestras pay annually! Of course, this is probably an extreme example, but the point is that Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation is real money that should not be left on the table. Even if a musician, under their state’s unemployment law, would not otherwise qualify for unemployment benefits, the CARES Act also provides for Pandemic Unemployment Insurance, which allows freelancers and self-employed individuals to collect enough state benefits to qualify for the additional \$600 a week in Pandemic Unemployment Compensation.

However, it is important to know the rules in your state for what happens if you earn wages while receiving unemployment. Here in Illinois, unemployed individuals can earn some wages while receiving unemployment benefits, but the amount of wages earned and the length of time over which the wages are earned can affect benefit amounts and eligibility. Many orchestras have received PPP funding and are paying musicians for concert cycles that were cancelled. If you receive these wages, they may disqualify you either temporarily or permanently from receiving the Pandemic Unemployment Compensation. I strongly recommend visiting your state’s unemployment agency’s website to learn more about how this works in your state.

### Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans

*Speaking of PPP...* Under the CARES Act, businesses of all sizes, including self-employed individuals and sole proprietors, are eligible for low-interest, forgivable loans to assist with payroll costs. This program, called the Paycheck Protection Program, or PPP, is an alternative to unemployment insurance for musicians who earn the majority of their money outside of orchestra work. PPP loans can be taken to cover not only lost wages, but healthcare costs, self-employment taxes and retirement contributions. As long as the loan is mostly used to pay yourself your regular wages and cover regularly documented expenses associated with your “business” such as rent and utilities, the loan is forgivable and does not have to be paid back, except for any accrued interest at 1%. If a musician’s ROPA orchestra is just a small part of their income and the rest comes from things like private teaching (not for an institution), weddings or other self-created performances, the PPP loan program might be more beneficial than unemployment.

An individual cannot receive both PPP funds and unemployment insurance *based on the same lost work*. However, depending on your state’s unemployment laws, it may be possible to earn unemployment benefits based on your ROPA orchestra W2 wages and receive a PPP loan based on your true self-employment work. But, if you include money earned from ROPA orchestras and other similar work in the payroll calculation required for the PPP loan application, you will not be able to collect unemployment based on those same wages.

On the other hand, the work you believe is “self-employment” might actually qualify you for regular unemployment benefits in your state. Over the last several weeks, I have counseled many Chicago-area musicians on their unemployment applications. Many of them have been surprised to find that they do in fact qualify for regular benefits. Here in Illinois, the definition of “employment” is much broader for purposes of unemployment benefits than it is for things like eligibility for minimum wage or overtime payments. This has made it easier for musicians to start receiving their Pandemic Unemployment Assistance.

Whatever you are doing to sustain yourself and your families through this time of uncertainty, hang in there! ROPA is here for you should you need assistance with your orchestra or if you just need to talk. We are stronger together!

(SphinxConnect, continued from page 2)

Sphinx Lead is a two-year professional empowerment program designed to evolve arts leadership. Ten black and Latinx leaders are chosen each year to be in the program that includes mentorship, networking, and leadership retreats at top institutions nationwide, and not just musical organizations. There is a total of 20 participants, with 10 new leaders coming into the program and 10 leaving the program every year. The organizations in which they are placed include Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute, Baltimore Symphony OrchKids, National Sawdust, Colburn School, PUBLIQuartet, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Wake Forest Community Youth Orchestra, New World Symphony, Opera America, Manhattan School of Music and many others.

The National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS) is a national initiative to increase diversity in American orchestras. It does so by offering black and Latinx musicians a combination of mentoring, audition preparation, financial support and audition previews. From the launch of NAAS in 2018 to today, 25 NAAS musicians have won 31 audition/placements with orchestras and ensembles. NAAS has awarded over 260 grants totaling more than \$254,000 to NAAS artists. These grants are available for audition preparations and travel, and for instru-

ment purchase and repair. There are currently 74 NAAS Orchestra Partners, of which 43 are AFM Player Conference orchestras, and of these orchestras, 16 are ROPA orchestras.

Another program that is held at the annual SphinxConnect are the Sphinx Orchestral Partners Auditions (SOPA). This program is created to provide opportunity for placement of black and Latinx musicians in American orchestras, by playing auditions for SOPA partner orchestra representatives. Fifty-two musicians were selected from 111 applicants to participate in this year's audition. Several of our AFM Player Conferences orchestra members served on audition juries for the participants. There were 37 Sphinx Orchestra Partners participating in the auditions, with 25 of them being ROPA, ICSOM or OCSM orchestras.

The highlight of SphinxConnect is the Sphinx Competition Finals Concert on Saturday night, in which three finalists in the senior division performed concerto movements with the Sphinx Symphony Orchestra. A jury chooses the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> prizes, and there is also an audience choice award. First prize (\$50,000) went to cellist Gabriel Martins; 2<sup>nd</sup> place (\$20,000) and Audience Choice Award (\$5,000) went to bassist Aaron Olguin and 3<sup>rd</sup>

prize went to violist Jordan Bak. There is also a junior division with the competition held on Friday. 1<sup>st</sup> Prize (\$10,000) was awarded to 14-year-old violinist Esme Arias-Kim. She also receives \$10,000 in performance opportunities with the Sphinx Soloist Program Partners. Cellist Brandon Leonard placed second and took home \$5,000 and violinist Sophia Ayer came in third and took home \$3,000. The concert concluded with *The American Rhapsody* by Sphinx founder Aaron Dworkin, former Dean of the University of Michigan School of Music, Theater and Dance. The piece is a collection of variations on an African Air by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and was narrated by Mr. Dworkin.

The Sphinx Organization receives major financial support from the Ford Foundation, the Fund II Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Knight Foundation and Bank of America. It is also supported by the New World Symphony, the League of American Orchestras and the annual host orchestra, the Detroit Symphony.

SphinxConnect is a premier showplace and experience, with the Sphinx Organization's vision and mission firmly in place: "We transform lives through the power of diversity in the arts." I encourage ROPA musicians to check it out!

Do you have news about your orchestra?

An article to submit?

A letter to the editor?

We'd love to have you contribute  
to *The Leading Tone*!

Submit articles to Sharon Jones at  
bellsauf@gmail.com

*The Leading Tone* is the official voice of ROPA and reflects ROPA policy. However, we do appreciate and encourage the contribution of articles and letters by others. These submissions may cover topics on which ROPA has no official position; the opinions expressed therein are solely those of the author(s) and not necessarily of ROPA, its officers or members.

## Earplugs: Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?

By Heather Malyuk, AuD

Recently I had the pleasure of working with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Opera House Orchestra in London, where I demonstrated a new, self-tunable hearing protection system called the 3DME. This system works with an app and allows the wearer to tune the earpieces to create a more natural, usable sound quality. Sounds great, right? Here's the catch: The system uses earpieces with a cable attached to a discrete power pack worn on the body. In London, most musicians loved the 3DME and inquired about how quickly they could begin using them. However, orchestras in the USA have responded to the new system with less enthusiasm, but not because of sound quality. In fact, most musicians who hear the system love it, but they are cautious about two things: 1) most colleagues are not wearing it yet, and 2) they are wary of looking like their colleagues in the rock/jazz/pop side of the industry. Explaining a new style of hearing protection to classical musicians has opened my eyes to the expectations and acceptance rate of hearing protection devices worn by the orchestral community.

Before the mid-1980s, earplugs were rarely utilized by musicians. Earplugs themselves were patented in 1864; however, the standard foam earplugs one might wear for Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" were not created until the 1970s. Foam earplugs, deeply inserted to fill the ear canals entirely, can offer the most attenuation of sound. It is quite common to think that more attenuation equals safer hearing but this is not necessarily the case. Certainly, attenuation is necessary to protect hearing, but orchestral musicians experience a different type of sound exposure than factory workers; one that is more dynamic and requires the wearer of earplugs to be able to *hear the music*. It was this line of thinking that led Elmer Carson and Mead Killion to develop the uniform-attenuation filter used in custom

musicians' earplugs. Released in 1988, they are still considered the gold standard for orchestras today.

Historically speaking, the military was the primary leader in developing hearing protection devices. Even today, substantial funding for hearing loss prevention research and development comes from the military. The music industry, however, is not far behind in terms of development, at least in marketing. You cannot Google "earplugs" without finding 20 different options, all with the label



"musicians' earplugs." It should be noted that the term "musician" is abused in marketing when referring to the sound quality of earplugs. Options of passive or active hearing protection can be differentiated as follows: passive encompasses everything from earmuffs to the classic custom, filtered earplugs, while active hearing protection works off of a battery and circuit and will fluctuate attenuation based on the musician's environment (like the Etymotic MusicPro), or the musicians can self-tune the active earplugs (like the ASI Audio 3DME).

An unanswered question in the orchestral industry is this: if we were able to ear train to earplugs, or if we were able to wear earplugs that we could tune ourselves, would we wear them? Since the introduction of "musicians' earplugs"

over 30 years ago, I would argue that the acceptance rate has been rather low. Is it because of sound quality? I am unsure. A large portion of my work is conducting onsite hearing wellness residencies with orchestras and it never ceases to amaze me how many of the players have never tried custom "musicians' earplugs." Beyond that, even fewer have had a hearing evaluation, even if they have been fit for custom earplugs. Many of these individuals are experiencing music-induced hearing disorders which could have been avoided by proper use of hearing protection and annual hearing evaluations. It seems that the acceptance rate of the new 3DME may be low because no one else is wearing the system yet, so perhaps sound quality is not the only barrier to use of hearing protection on stage. I find that musicians are shy regarding the "look" of hearing protection, but will gladly wear orange foam earplugs in their ears or around their necks during loud repertoire. I have also noticed that if some musicians in an orchestra begin wearing a certain type of hearing protection, others will follow suit. Musicians should not sacrifice their hearing and their sound quality while waiting for someone else to lead the charge.

What does the future hold? My hope is this: annual care of hearing through education, evaluations, earwax removal and individualized care, with a higher acceptance rate of hearing protection devices in our community.

*Dr. Heather Malyuk is a music audiologist who owns and directs Soundcheck Audiology, a mobile, concierge wellness practice specializing in onsite hearing wellness programs for orchestras. When not on the road, she is an active researcher with Gateway Biotechnology at Northeast Ohio Medical University where she is studying the effects of sound exposure on professional musicians. For more information, visit [www.soundcheckaudiology.com](http://www.soundcheckaudiology.com)*

## Stories from the (Other) Front Line: Freelancing with a Baby

By Casey Bozell, Delegate, Portland Opera Orchestra

*Author's note: This piece is intended as just a window into a freelancer-with-newborn life. While there are recurring themes through these anecdotes, there is no political agenda attached.*

### October 2017

I'm one of five finalists for concertmaster in a local orchestra. It's my trial concert. We're playing the second movement of the New World Symphony, and I feel an unmistakable flutter in my belly. I have felt my kiddo move for the first time. And she keeps moving, through the pretty English horn solo at the beginning, through the minor section in the middle (where I am consequently grinning like an idiot) and through my solo with the principal cellist, making it a weirdly beautiful juxtaposition of bonding with my unborn child and struggling to keep my concentration. I tell no one there that I'm pregnant outside of the few friends I have in the orchestra. I don't tell the conductor. I don't tell the executive director. At the time, it doesn't seem like the best business strategy.

### January 2018

I'm in the hospital, being induced. My good friend and colleague is conducting and producing a college opera production this weekend, and he's hired me to be the concertmaster. Seemed like a totally safe idea, as my due date is over a month away. (My baby had other plans.) The first rehearsal is Wednesday.

It's currently Tuesday. I get in touch with him, and his partner promises he'll call around to find a replacement for me. Later that evening, as the labor starts to get underway, and therefore more difficult, I

get a text from him: "Sorry about this, but I think everyone in the Portland Metro Area now knows you're having a baby."

I laugh, and also muse about the fact that he may have told a great number of people I wasn't anticipating knowing this information.

### February 2018

It's been three weeks since I touched the violin. I get a last-minute ask from a colleague who conducts a semi-professional orchestra nearby. He needs a ringer for a concert next week. It's a movie music concert, and seems like a great way to ease back in the game. I play the concert four weeks postpartum. I forget to bring a seat cushion.

I told the conductor in passing that I had a baby. He had no idea I was even pregnant.

### April 2018

I'm back in the opera pit, mercifully sitting next to a stand partner who has three children of her own. She's more than willing to swap baby stories. Management has set up a private room so I can pump during intermission. It's five floors above the pit. The elevator takes forever, and I give up on it after the first night and just run up the five flights of stairs. This allows me a precious extra three minutes of pumping time. Every performance I pump until the I hear the five-minute call, and I run back down the stairs to the pit to dive into the second act of *Rigoletto*. The opening measures my mind is elsewhere; I'm always mentally calculating if I managed to produce enough for my baby's next feeding, and

always mildly worrying that I smell of sour milk and sweat. We're a fragrance-free environment, after all.

### May 2018

My husband throws his back out to the point of immobility. We spend most of the night in an ER, and we manage to get him back in bed at home. I am now suddenly in charge of all of the middle of the night wakings, of which there are still many. The next morning I receive a call from the orchestra where I felt my daughter's kicks for the first time: I've won the job. They want me to play a concerto with the orchestra in September. I have this entire conversation sitting in my living room, breastfeeding. I've had two hours of sleep in the last twenty-four. I spend a great deal of mental energy trying to adjust my voice so I sound like the opposite of that reality.

### September 2018

After a brief post-rehearsal conversation with the conductor of this orchestra, I mention that I have to get going back to my family, and for the first time I mention to him the existence of my child. He pauses, staring at me for a couple seconds. His face is hard to read. He then nods, slowly, and simply asks, "How old?"

"Eight months."

He nods again. The next few seconds seem like an eternity as I see him carefully forming his next sentence.

"Mine are 2 and 5. You're... doing a lot right now."



Regional Orchestra Players' Association

(Notes continued from page 1)

sion with the beginnings of returning to performing in Europe and Asia. I've recently been included, along with our SSD group, in a workgroup put together by the International Federation of Musicians (FIM), which is sharing what is being planned abroad, as they are beginning to re-open. SSD is also beginning to gather information to offer guidance to our orchestras as they plan for returning to work. One of the most important things for us to remember is that safety protocols require bargaining before any resumption of work can occur. Literally a matter of life and death, return-to-work conditions must be agreed upon and obligations binding upon the employer. The safety protocols must be consistent with science

and orders from the relevant government agencies. No one should be required to return to work if they believe that doing so would put their health at risk, and musicians should not be asked to sign a liability waiver as a condition of returning to work. Additionally, there must be some sort of equitable rotation of work if return to work requires smaller ensembles, so that the burden and benefit of performing do not fall only upon a few.

There WILL be a 37<sup>th</sup> annual ROPA Conference, though we don't know yet whether it will be in Orange County on July 28-30, or in your own home on your computer. We expect to be able to make that determination soon, and will an-

nounce the decision on the ROPA email lists and in our conference materials mailing to delegates. Please be patient, and please don't buy your plane ticket yet! As the decision to hold the conference in Orange County is going to be so late, we have moved the hotel room reservation cut-off date back as far as possible so that there will still be time to get a room.

As we hear almost daily, we are all in this together, and we need each other to get through it, though not too close! As I have closed many of my messages on the ROPA email lists:

Stay Calm, Carry On and Wash Your Hands!

## SAVE THE DATE! 2020 ROPA Conference

**Tuesday, July 28th – Thursday, July 30th**

**Negotiating Orchestras Workshop: Monday, July 27th**

Hilton Orange County/Costa Mesa Hotel, Orange County, CA

Hosts: AFM Local 7 Orange County Musicians' Union and the Pacific Symphony Orchestra

**The ROPA Conference Committee is in the process of planning an online conference in the likelihood that we will not have an in-person conference this summer. Please don't make airline reservations at this point!**

We plan to hold most of the conference sessions during the same time as scheduled, though we may move things around some. Confirmation of dates and times will be forthcoming.



Hilton Orange County/Costa Mesa Hotel, Orange County, CA. Photo credit: Mike Smith



A conference of the American Federation of Musicians, AFL-CIO

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