

2020 ROPA Conference Address  
John Michael Smith, ROPA President

Good afternoon to some of you, good morning to the rest of you! Today I welcome you all to the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Regional Orchestra Players' Association. ROPA is made up of 91 member orchestras, representing nearly 6,000 musicians. I'd like to thank the Executive Board of ROPA, the delegates, orchestra musicians, Local officers, AFM staff, and others in attendance at this online conference.

Along with all our colleagues in the other player conferences; ICSOM, OCSM, TMA, and RMA, ROPA shares in the pain and anxiety of the current work stoppage caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In early March our orchestra, opera, and ballet worlds came to a screeching halt with cancellations, postponements, and declarations of force majeure ending our seasons. ROPA's plight is further exacerbated by being primarily per-service orchestras, often with little or no guaranteed services, health insurance, or other benefits. Many of our musicians play in more than one orchestra, and do other free-lance gigs such as theater, recording, church jobs, performing with smaller opera and ballet companies, choral societies, summer camps and festivals, etc. All of that work has disappeared.

Many of our organizations rose to the occasion and with government help were able to offer full or partial compensation to our musicians for the remainder of the season; and some did not. We are right here in this room today, anxiously wondering what will come next. When will we play again? Do our organizations have an awareness of our value, and the gifts that we might bring to a very

different kind of season in the coming months? In most cases this is all yet to be revealed.

What is certain is that electronic media will play a vital role in keeping our organizations vital in our communities, and provide a way to continue to make that connection. I am so impressed with the intelligence, spirit, and hard work of our own ROPA media committee and our ICSOM media committee colleagues with whom we have worked together in recent weeks. I can't say enough about AFM SSD Director and Special Counsel Rochelle Skolnick and AFM Director of Symphonic Media Debbie Newmark; we are truly blessed with great talent, tenacity, and leadership. We are facing a multi-employer group that has continuously tested us in so many ways for many years for the use of electronic media that should be mutually beneficial. There will be much work in the coming weeks to put together a new IMA side letter agreement for this COVID-19 time to get us back to providing music for our communities. As RMA President Marc Sazer mentioned in his address at the ICSOM Conference a couple of weeks ago, "we are all recording musicians now".

The recent murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis, the community in which I live, shocked the world in its brutality and blatant disregard for the rights and life of a Black man. This horrific incident is not an isolated occurrence, but one that plays out regularly in our nation. ROPA is angered and saddened that we as an organization and the classical music organizations we perform with have not done enough to create equity in our field and promote a diverse and inclusive workplace for all.

- ROPA will encourage training in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusiveness for everyone in our organizations.

- ROPA will continue to strive to support audition and tenure processes that make auditions and hiring into orchestral jobs “implicit bias proof”.
- ROPA will encourage performance and programming practices that provide a safe and welcoming space for all musicians of color, and audiences that embrace all the diverse cultures in our communities.
- ROPA will build on our promise to provide harassment-free ROPA meetings and conferences and work towards building an inclusive environment for our members which is safe for all.

The systemic racism and white privilege that permeates our society must change. We hear the wake-up call. There is a wave of activism and change in our communities now; let’s go with it and make it happen.

Only a little over half of ROPA’s orchestras are in the AFM-EPF; however, there is a large number of ROPA musicians who receive or have received pension contributions through any number of gigs over the years. The \$17 million payment that the Fund will receive as a result of the recent class action settlement will be a huge help; especially at this time when there are practically no contributions coming in. Let’s move forward, and let’s hope some new legislation, such as the current HEROES ACT will be passed that will help the multi-employer pensions that so many union workers look to for retirement income. And speaking of the HEROES Act, there is a new letter campaign to let your congress people know you support additional pandemic relief for musicians and artists out of work, and support for National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities.

It has been so important to keep the lines of communication open and flowing during this strange time. One can feel a bit isolated in what sometimes seems like

a long stay-cation, or practice retirement. I so look forward to the weekly visits on Mondays with our SSD staff Rochelle and Debbie, the Canadian SSD staff of Bernard LeBlanc and Richard Sandals, and my fellow symphonic player conference leaders Meredith, Paul Austin, and Bob Fraser, President of OCSM. These meetings help me keep track of what day of the week it is, keeps us on point with what is going on in our respective orchestral worlds, and provides us a reminder that we have many common issues that benefit us all by being shared. Tuesdays are our weekly meeting of the Player Conferences Council: Meredith, Tony, Marc, Bob, and myself; they will all be addressing you at this conference in the next few days. We share each other's ideas and concerns, laughs and cries. Both of these weekly meetings have been happening regularly since mid-March. This is a great bunch, who really care about what we can do to provide help and resources for all of our orchestras.

A final note: I urge all of us to be flexible and kind to one another in this age of anxiety. We all want to get back to what we do best; which is playing music for our communities, and playing with our colleagues in our orchestras. Thank you for the opportunity to address you all today. Let's have a great conference online!  
We Are Stronger Together!