

2021 ROPA Conference Address

I'd like to welcome you all to the 38th Annual Conference of the Regional Orchestra Players' Association. Today, with the very recent addition of the Chicago Sinfonietta, ROPA is made up of 95 member orchestras, which includes 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 second virtual conference due to the coronavirus pandemic.

ROPA is dedicating this conference to the memory of Christopher Durham, a force in this organization, at the negotiation table, for the AFM, and a founder of ROPA. I know that Chris was very proud of this organization, which has grown greatly from the 13 orchestras who attended that first "Symposium" in September of 1984 in Columbus, Ohio. Chris served as a Member at Large in ROPA from 1985-89, and also served on the Core Orchestra Problems Committee.

When Chris passed in August, he was Chief Field Negotiator for Symphonic Services Division of the AFM. He first joined the AFM-SSD staff in 1989, later re-joined in 1995, and was named SSD Director in 2009. His union activism began much earlier, serving as one of the youngest elected AFM officers as Vice President of Local 103 in Columbus at age 25, while working as a violinist in the Columbus Symphony from 1979-91. Chris has served as a negotiator with so many ROPA and ICSOM orchestras through the years. Other ROPA founders who may be attending this conference today are Nathan Kahn and Jane Owen, both who are currently employed by the AFM-SSD as negotiators, with Nathan coming out of retirement to graciously cover for Chris.

I was a member of the Columbus Symphony when Chris arrived there, 19 years old and fresh from the Cleveland Institute of Music. He was a violinist in cowboy boots, and with an unmistakable attitude and swagger everyone knew he was there, and that he was not a person to put up with unfairness or lack of respect for musicians. Chris was a people person, and enjoyed striking up a conversation with anyone. He was very good at cultivating relationships, including long-time friendships with Fred Zenone of ICSOM, Lou Waldeck of AFM Symphonic Services, and Lenny Leibowitz, who was chief counsel for the Columbus Symphony musicians in their 1986 lockout. Those relationships proved to be some of the crucial connections that contributed to the eventual settlement. One of Chris' regular card buddies was the Personnel Manager of the Columbus Symphony, Imre Szekfu. They could get into heated confrontations when dealing with orchestra issues, and yet enjoy their time together playing cards.

Chris will be greatly missed as a regular presence at ROPA conferences, working with our orchestras, and as a resource for so many things in our orchestra/management relationships.

The COVID pandemic has wreaked havoc with our professional lives, our orchestral organizations and other employment, and our union. Some have decided to leave our orchestras and the profession to seek other employment, and many of our Locals have struggled financially with the lack of employment of our members. This past year, the ROPA Executive Board lowered the membership dues by about a third to soften the blow of this tough financial situation. And it may take a while time before we return to employment levels comparable to where we were in 2019.

To address this, the ROPA board has decided to further reduce our dues to 50% of the full rate for the next two years, with the expectation and hope that all our orchestras will be able to put themselves in good financial standing by the 40th annual Conference in 2023. ROPA-ERF annual dues will remain at the current \$100 per full-member orchestra. No late fees will be charged; but we encourage orchestras to keep up with timely payments with the lower rates, and those that have fallen behind in the past year will have a great opportunity to catch up. Most of our orchestras were able to make the full required payment this past year, and ROPA appreciates the sacrifices and challenge that may have come with doing so. The expense of putting on in-person conferences are a major portion of our annual budget, and now with having held two virtual conferences, we felt we would not be serving our organization's best interest by collecting full dues when we can't provide the complete ROPA conference experience. This reduction will also aid the Locals who cover delegates' conference expenses and those that pay the annual ROPA dues with an opportunity to recover and restore their financial health in the coming years.

Later today, and throughout this conference, we will share and discuss with you some of the experiences of two of our member orchestras who have suffered from the management mantra "Never waste a good pandemic" and used this dire time to try and reset the table in regards to the terms and guarantees of their past Collective Bargaining Agreements. Other orchestras have struggled as well, even some very high-profile organizations, such as The Metropolitan Opera. The majority of our orchestras have continued to remain visible and present in their communities; through smaller ensembles performing under COVID guidelines, a new wealth of online media through streaming, and to a lesser extent through archival TV and radio broadcasts. I was invited to attend and speak at the Fort Wayne

Philharmonic Musicians' May Day Rally. A public rally like that one is so important: it lets the community know that you will not go quietly into the night; and it allows the community to show the orchestra management that they respect and value the music-making by these musicians who perform in their community. To quote former ICSOM Chairperson Bruce Ridge "Through uniting together and reaching out to our communities, we can and will ensure that the Arts continue to thrive, and we will enrich the lives of our audiences while inspiring the next generation of musicians".

I often hear talk about getting things back to normal. However, in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusiveness, we have had our eyes opened over the past year to the systemic racism and white supremacy that have been a part of this country since its beginning, and is still with us every day; even with all the events, awareness, and focus that has called it out on an almost daily basis in the media. In this area, we shouldn't want to go back to normal; we should acknowledge the past, and move forward in a positive direction. This is an opportunity to change old ways and make a new start. The ROPA EDI Workgroup, which was created at last year's annual conference, is looking at ways our ROPA musicians can make a difference in our orchestras, organizations, and communities in moving in the right direction. Any musician in a ROPA orchestra is invited to attend these virtual meetings and be a part of making a difference.

ROPA continues to be the organization it was founded to be – a pool of collective knowledge and experience to be utilized as a resource for our member orchestras, player conferences, and the American Federation of Musicians. We are Stronger Together!

Thank you, and have an enjoyable and informative conference.