

It's a Dry Heat.....

As most of you know, either from keeping up with the turmoil for many years here in Phoenix, or from just beginning to read and hear about our recent issues, The Phoenix Symphony has once again struggled to make progress. We continue to see this city grow to the 5th largest in the nation and our symphony is still 40th or below on the wage scale of the ICSOM orchestras.

Some Background:

This group of musicians has struggled since 1984 to make meaningful progress toward moving up the ICSOM salary ladder. We have not even maintained a cost of living standard over the past 25 years. We have opened our contract to givebacks and cuts at least 5 times in the last 25 years, and due to the recent cuts, our salary is going in reverse faster than many of our peers. Our last contract attempted to address the promise made by Michael Christie, our music director, when he spoke to the press upon arriving in Phoenix. He clearly said his goal was to get the musicians to a salary of \$50K as soon as possible. Our management stated that one of their main goals was to raise the musicians' salaries, and often repeated, as part of an ongoing vision statement, that they wanted us to become on par with L.A. and S.F. in the next 25 years. As we computed in 2005, during our last contract negotiations, that would mean beginning in 2006 we would need an 8.8% raise **each season for 25 years** to reach S.F., assuming they receive a 4% raise each year. Not surprisingly, we were not able to get an 8.8% raise for any season in that contract but we did get a respectable commitment of growth. We went from \$34,156 in 2005 to \$45,567 in 2011, a reasonable 5% avg. raise each season. We now retreat to a base wage of \$35,000 for the 09/10 season, which remains frozen through the 10/11 season, and so the cycle begins anew.

2008-2009 Season:

If you have kept up with the press coming out of Phoenix recently, you know there has been an unusual amount of unrest within our organization. There have been several NLRB charges brought to the management from our union, Local 586, on behalf of the players, some NLRB charges from players individually, and we have players filing law suits against our board and mgt. It is clear that there is something drastically wrong here and it must be addressed in some manner.

To help guide our musicians through this difficult dilemma we invited Bruce Ridge to come to Phoenix and address our musicians. When invited months ago, we had no idea that Bruce would arrive within days of our musicians getting notice that our management was requesting a meeting "to address the financial challenges that face the Symphony due to the collapse of the economy". He walked into the most troubling time our musicians have ever faced, as we were presented with proposals of either a \$28,000 base wage for 09/10 for 28 non-consecutive weeks (down from \$40,900 08/09 for 40 weeks), or a player reduction from 76 to 50, and an attitude of "take it or bankruptcy".

As you would expect, Bruce provided a wonderful sounding board for our musicians, was able to impart and compare our situation to many that he has faced before, and met with a former president of our board, our CEO and MD. We asked Bruce to address the musicians in a full orchestra meeting. It was fabulous that we had the largest meeting in recent times with 86% of our members in attendance. Bruce was able to give us hope that the symphony business is still thriving in many places, and that we too can improve our own situation and thrive, regardless of our history, and mistakes made on all sides. In addition, Bruce attended a negotiation meeting where the musicians presented their first offer of a solution to our management for solving the temporary economic conditions that faced our organization. Unfortunately, our board and management gave us false hopes of a quick resolution at that brief meeting, most likely because they did not want to appear unreasonable to an outsider. Regardless, it was quite a boost to have Bruce see and understand our situation first hand, and we hope he can return soon.

Concessions:

The process of maintaining a full time orchestra here in Phoenix became a far greater struggle than necessary. It began with a simple Power Point presentation by 3 board members explaining that, due to the “economic collapse” we were no longer a \$12 million organization, but an \$8 million organization, therefore it was mandatory that the musicians simply remove \$2 million from their budget line to match the \$2 million being cut from the production/guest artist/staff budget line. To do this we were presented with new, severe restructuring models possibly returning to the 1960’s schedule of night and weekend rehearsals and concerts. It seemed to our committee that we were not being brought in to bargain as reasonable people that have a desire to solve a communal problem, but as a group of musicians that were secondary to the life of The Phoenix Symphony Association. As it turned out after much struggle and a visit from Peter Pastreich, we were able to continue to be a full time orchestra and accepted a 17% aggregate cut over the next three seasons. If you wish for greater detail, I refer you to the ICSOM bulletin submitted following negotiations.

2009-2010 and beyond:

We have much to do at this time. We are optimistic about our future, and refuse to give up the quest for a healthy relationship with our management, our board, and each other. There are more and more musicians stepping up and getting involved with the growing realization that we all must do more than just show up prepared to make music. When will our salary grow out of the basement group of symphonies? Must the wonderful weather be the major factor for staying here? Well, at least it’s a dry heat.....

Submitted by, Chuck Berginc, Principal Trumpet, Orchestra Committee Chairman