

Senza Sordino

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Haven't We Won These Battles?

by Julie Ayer

Observing the so-called “war on women” occurring in national politics recently, I am struck by the irony of assuming battles fought decades ago are behind us. Those of us who lived through the fight for equal rights for women, and succeeded in no small measure, are appalled at the rhetoric from some politicians threatening the erosion and possible reversal of some of those rights. I’m afraid the lessons for this generation of both men and women are that one cannot take anything for granted, and the rights gained by our predecessors are more easily lost than preserved.

These thoughts lead me to reflect on parallel struggles that occurred in our industry. The birth of ICSOM coincided with the historic civil rights movements of the 1960s, but true equal rights for women in orchestras did not begin then. Conductors retained power to hire and fire until the audition process was reformed in the early 1970s through negotiations to guarantee participation of musician committees.

The use of screens changed everything. When musicians took control of their destiny, including a voice in the audition process, “the other half of humanity” were taking blind auditions and winning them. They did not have to share the regrets of musicians of previous generations, including Elsa Hilger, assistant principal cellist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, who said during the tenure of conductor Eugene Ormandy (1936–1976), “I would have been principal, but my pants weren’t long enough.”

The Code of Ethical Practices for National and International Auditions was unanimously approved in 1984 by ICSOM, the Major Orchestra Managers Conference, and the AFM. It is not a contract but is to be used as a guideline. However, it does articulate that “[t]here should be no discrimination on the basis of race, sex, age, creed, national origin, religion or sexual preference.”

Women’s dressing rooms were non-existent in the pre-ICSOM era, at home or on tours, and men’s facilities were barely adequate. The Minnesota Orchestra’s women’s dressing room in Orchestra Hall is still lacking, in spite of two remodel/expansions in the past 38 years.

After all these years, both the men’s and the women’s dressing rooms are finally slated to be expanded during the planned Orchestra Hall remodel of 2012–2013.

Even the mere fact of pregnancy in the workplace was frowned upon, and women were threatened with firing, as described by Russell Brodine’s memoir *Fiddle and Fight*: “When [St. Louis Symphony] Manager Zalken presented the 1962–1963 contracts to the musicians, there was one clause in the women’s contracts that had *not* been agreed to by either the Orchestra Committee or the Union.” The so-called pregnancy clause contained language such as “audience distraction” and “if the pregnancy is visually apparent or causes interference to render proper services, then this contract may be terminated.” The clause disappeared after an orchestra meeting at which men and women alike were outraged and objected to such discriminatory contractual language. “I read that clause over three times; each time it sounded more disgusting.” At the orchestra meeting to discuss this, Brodine said, “figuratively speaking, this contract is always with us... but I’ll be goddamned, if it’s such a good contract that anyone should have to take it to bed with them.”

Sixteen years after this incident, in 1978, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act was passed to protect women from discrimination in the workplace. At the 1980 ICSOM Conference, for the first time, women held their own session, discussing concerns specifically related to their professional lives and their status as symphony musicians. Topics included improved contract language for maternity and paternity leave, child care, tours, auditions, and committee representation.

When I interviewed I. Philip Sipser, ICSOM’s first counsel, in 2000, he could not emphasize strongly enough how important it was to stay within the AFM, even during a time when both the locals and the AFM were not particularly helpful to orchestra musicians, to say the least. “The symphony field is the only field in which the lawyer does not represent the entire union, only some of its members, completely unique in labor history... and here was a group of rank-and-file who organized themselves, kept the movement alive, retained counsel, fought a three-front battle against the AFM, locals and management... and lived to tell about it.”

If this is not inspiration enough to steel us for more battles ahead, it is also a cautionary tale. Union bashing seems to be the way of the world in 2012. Within our workplace across this country, orchestras have become a diverse and thriving environment of dignity and equal rights for all members. Collective bargaining is our way of
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Progress Through the Years

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life, and without the union protections, most of these gains would not have been possible. The historic grassroots labor movement *within* the musicians union fifty years ago, along with the unprecedented government-sponsored symphony grant program of 1966, transformed the lives of symphony musicians, students, teachers, managers and all those who are touched by great music.

By 1965, many ICSOM orchestras had gained the right to ratify their master agreements, coinciding with the extraordinary Ford Foundation Symphony Program of 1966. It established an unprecedented \$80.2 million matching-grant endowment plan, to be distributed to 61 orchestras—and all but a handful succeeded in reaching that goal. The guiding light of the Symphony Program was W. McNeil Lowry. The *New York Times*, on April 9, 2012, had this to say about Lowry: “[T]he nation’s unofficial mentor in chief during much of the 1950s and ’60s, a cultural figure of remarkable influence who was virtually unknown to most of the public. . . . By 1962 Mr. Lowry expanded its arts programs with \$6.1 million in grants to nine nonprofit repertory theaters, and later with stipends to writers, filmmakers, art schools, music conservatories and dance organizations.”

The Ford Foundation grants, growing local subsidies, and the establishment of the principle of federal support attest to the gradual emergence of the American symphony orchestra from its own economic “Dark Ages.”

—W. McNeil Lowry, *Monthly Labor Review*, May 1966

The following are excerpts from the Congressional Record of the 92nd Congress, First Session, October 19, 1971, read into the Record by Senator Jacob Javits and Representative John Brademas, December 2, 1971:

MANIFESTO FOR THE ARTS

The standard of living in this country cannot be measured by dollars alone—nor in miles of concrete highways and numbers of automobiles, nor by the gross national product. More important than these material or statistical factors are the values we cherish and the way we live. Deep in every community, in every family, is a hunger for what enriches life. . . .

...

The arts are an essential part of our common heritage and must be given a wholly new precedence that will bring them into wide use in our educational system and make possible new activity in our communities and in our homes. As a nation we must accord to the arts a place of honor.

...

So we ask for new legislation embodying a new national program for the arts designed to help pay for the public service and educational work of the arts.

...

What we ask is modest, when measured in terms of other federal projects. Above all, what we ask for is a wholly new precedence

for the arts and humanities—for that which gives our living richness and meaning.

Julie Ayer is a Minnesota Orchestra violinist and is the author of More Than Meets the Ear: How Symphony Musicians Made Labor History.

Sudden Hearing Loss

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As I write this column it has now been six weeks since the event took place. My hearing has pretty much returned to previous levels. I realize how truly fortunate I am to have recovered. Many who experience sudden hearing loss either lose their hearing permanently or recover less than 100% of their prior hearing ability.

For every patient who recovers at least some hearing after SHL there is another who is not as fortunate. Since mid-March I have encountered other ICSOM musicians affected by SHL. No doubt there are more across the AFM. Additional research needs to be done. Is there something about what we do as musicians or the environment in which we work that may contribute to a greater rate of SHL? We know that seeking medical treatment immediately dramatically increases full or partial hearing restoration. What else can we do to assist those who suffer sudden hearing loss permanently?

My first program back at work included Dvořák’s New World Symphony. Like many orchestral musicians, I first performed this piece in high school over thirty years ago. Yet, on that weekend, I couldn’t have been happier to perform it again. (I may have even had a tear or two in my eyes.) Realizing how close I came to losing it all reminded me just how much I enjoy being a musician. I have rediscovered the magic of beautiful music, the emotional interaction between musicians and audience that only happens during live performances, and the joy that comes with creating beautiful art one phrase at a time. When the pressures and stresses of being in an orchestra or committee responsibilities begin to overwhelm me, I hope to remember what happened to me. I hope to remember just how lucky I am to be in an ICSOM orchestra doing what I have loved to do ever since I first picked up a trumpet as a young boy.

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