

## ICSOM: A Review

The International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians was formally established in 1962 in Chicago and Cleveland by delegates from US and Canadian orchestras. Dedicated to “the promotion of a better and more rewarding livelihood for the skilled orchestral performer and to the enrichment of the cultural life of our society,” ICSOM has held annual meetings at which delegates actively address issues that affect orchestra musicians.

ICSOM was the logical and inevitable outcome of a wave of militancy that swept through the ranks of orchestra musicians in the 1950s, characterized by anger and frustration growing from inadequate wages, exploitive working conditions, and tenuous job security—factors long a part of orchestra careers. The inferior standing of the classical musician in society, especially American society, has a long history. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the low esteem for orchestra musicians was reflected in wages and working conditions. The 1960 census ranked musicians and music teachers fortieth in annual income among forty-nine professions listed, earning an average \$4,757 annually as compared to the median income of \$6,778 for all professions and \$4,750 for all experienced male labor over 14 years of age.

Unfortunately, the organization most responsible for improving the musicians’ lot, the musicians’ union, was not providing the aggressive representation needed to produce change. Union negotiators, more familiar with popular music and the operation of commercial clubs for which the majority of union members worked, were unfamiliar with the realities of symphony finances and working conditions.

Thus finding it necessary to act directly on their own behalf, representatives of American and Canadian symphony and opera orchestras met four times in 1962 and 1963 to discuss common problems. During the course of those meetings they formally established the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, formulated a statement of purpose, drafted bylaws subsequently ratified by member orchestras, and articulated many goals to improve the profession. The success of this organization is evident through comparison:

- In 1962, most musicians in major symphony orchestras were employed little more than six months annually at a yearly salary that was barely a living wage, under \$5,000. By contrast, approximately one-third of the 51 ICSOM symphony orchestras listed on the 2010-2011 American Federation of Musicians (AFM) wage chart had year-round seasons, and the average season length of all 51 orchestras was over 40 weeks. Salaries, pensions, and insurance benefits have increased considerably over the last 40 years.
- Before ICSOM, only one orchestra (Boston) participated directly in the negotiation of its own contract. Orchestra members had no opportunity to approve the contracts negotiated for them by union representatives who, often being ill-informed about symphony orchestra matters, concluded agreements that incorporated token salary increases and minimal improvements in working conditions. No orchestra could hire its own attorney to participate in negotiations. Today most orchestras have bargaining representation, and may form committees, elect their own officers, and conduct their own affairs. AFM bylaws allow orchestras to retain legal counsel of choice. Contract ratification rights became a part of Federation bylaws in 1983.
- Before ICSOM, musicians had little job security and were subject to immediate and

arbitrary dismissal. Considerable improvements have been made in probation and tenure provisions over the years. Contract protections now exist against discrimination on the basis of among other things sex, race, age, and union activity.

- An ICSOM Emergency Relief Fund was established in 1965; this loan fund has grown to over \$357,800. An AFM Symphony-Opera Strike Fund was established in 1970 and has since disbursed over \$8.3 million to 53 different orchestras that were on strike or locked out.
- In 1962 the American Federation of Musicians, fearing dual unionism and dilution of its authority, was antagonistic to ICSOM, but it finally granted ICSOM official conference status in 1969. For years, presidential assistants with other duties part-time provided attention to symphony affairs. Fulfilling a goal long sought by ICSOM, the AFM created a full-time AFM Symphony Department (now the Symphonic Services Division) in 1982. In 1989 AFM bylaws were amended to give ICSOM and other player conferences non-voting representation at AFM conventions. Since the early 1970s ICSOM has been increasingly involved in negotiating Federation recording and media contracts, including an Audio-Internet Agreement, a Live Recording Agreement, and most recently an Integrated Media Agreement that covers several forms of electronic media in one agreement.
- Before ICSOM, communication between orchestras about their mutual concerns was random and informal. Now much exchange of information takes place at ICSOM's annual conference, which includes four days of workshops (plus a negotiating orchestra session the evening before the conference convenes), addresses by guest speakers, special reports, deliberation, and recommendations for action by ICSOM's governing board. ICSOM's official newsletter, *Senza Sordino*, publishes negotiation news and articles of general interest, reaching not only member orchestras but also orchestra managers and board members, local unions, foreign orchestras, critics, libraries, music schools, and many government and arts organizations across the country. Interim bulletins are issued when rapid dissemination of information to members is necessary. The ICSOM wage chart, originally printed in *Senza Sordino*, is now published annually by the AFM; the current wage chart provides information on over 70 collective bargaining issues. A directory of names, addresses, and phone numbers of musicians in all member orchestras was first published in 1972; e-mail addresses were added in 1998. ICSOM also maintains and moderates an online discussion group list (Orchestra-L) open to any AFM member; an online forum to facilitate rapid online communication between the ICSOM governing board and delegates and orchestra committee chairs (Delegate-L); and a website ([www.icsom.org](http://www.icsom.org)) with extensive information including settlement bulletins, governing board and conference minutes, the delegate manual, and reference material.

To provide exchange of information on the qualifications of conductors, ICSOM instituted a conductor evaluation program in 1967. Today this program provides computerized tabulation of musicians' appraisals of nearly 600 conductors.

Since 1968, ICSOM has retained its own legal counsel to advise it on the national level and to be at the disposal of orchestras at the local level. ICSOM has been fortunate to have had the counsel of the distinguished I. Philip Sipser, Leonard Leibowitz, and Liza Hirsch Medina for many years. Leonard Leibowitz, who served as ICSOM counsel for more than 30 years, stepped down from

that position in 2010. ICSOM's interim counsel for the 2009-10 season was Michael G Okun, of Patterson Harkavy LLC, in Raleigh, NC and continues as Special Counsel to the Board in 2010-11. Following the 2010 ICSOM Conference, Susan Martin of Martin & Bonnett, PLLC, in Phoenix, AZ, was named ICSOM General Counsel.

Since 1976, ICSOM has been actively involved in programs that assist talented minority-group instrumentalists. Since 2003, ICSOM has provided scholarship awards in the amount of \$500 to each of nine senior semi-finalists in the Sphinx Competition, a program of the Sphinx Music Assistance Fund.

ICSOM is at the forefront of addressing job-related health problems. A major survey of medical problems in ICSOM orchestras was undertaken in 1986. Results were released as an ICSOM publication, *The Musicians' Survival Manual: A Guide to Preventing and Treating Instrumentalists*, written by Richard Norris, M. D., and edited by Deborah Torch. Long out of print, an updated, downloadable version by Dr Norris now is available online, at [www.musiciansurvivalmanual.com](http://www.musiciansurvivalmanual.com).

ICSOM provides information to help orchestras on strike or locked out, but it has also worked to alleviate adversarial attitudes between managers and musicians and to inform orchestras about the advantages and problems of joint committees of musicians, managers and trustees. Many musicians now participate more fully in affairs of their orchestras, especially in the selection of music directors and managers. An example of cooperation on the national level is the code of ethical audition practices, formulated and approved in 1984 by ICSOM and the Major Orchestra Managers Conference.

Today ICSOM is a family of 51 member orchestras that vary greatly in size and budget. The largest and smallest orchestras may be very different in many ways, yet they meet and work together in an organization whose existence is predicated on principles of solidarity, team effort, and mutual support. Solving new problems and reaching new goals can only be accomplished, as in the past, through cooperative effort, with ICSOM providing the means for exchanging ideas and the ways to implement them.

The dynamics and values of ICSOM parallel those of musicians in its individual orchestras: no member is unimportant, and none can stand alone. No member orchestra can afford to isolate itself or remain aloof from the united efforts of the others and expect to succeed in the long run. The many improvements orchestras have achieved over the last forty years have not been won by the enterprise of individual orchestras working alone, but on the combined knowledge, strength and unity of the whole. The same solidarity that helped achieve the many gains of the past is required to both defend them and to win new ones.

ICSOM is a volunteer organization supported entirely by a voluntary dues structure. The quality of services it can offer is directly proportional to the involvement of its membership. It will falter in direct proportion to apathy and complacency; it will flourish in direct proportion to enthusiasm and dedicated participation.

**This summary is adapted from an article which originally appeared in *Senza Sordino* in 1982 and is periodically updated for the *ICSOM Directory* and *ICSOM Delegate Manual*.**