

Symphonic Music in Central New York: A Time of Change and Uncertainty

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On Tuesday, April 5, 2011, the board of directors of the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra voted to file chapter 7 bankruptcy.¹ The decision was made exactly one week after a previous vote by the board of directors to suspend operations, as members of the orchestra, dressed in concert attire, waited outside the meeting room to hear the fate of central New York's largest cultural institution. Interim executive director Paul Brooks (see exhibit 1 for a leadership timeline) read a statement expressing great sadness at the board's failed attempts to "find any and every possible means to survive."² Brooks went on to state that the board couldn't support a 77-person, \$7 million orchestra on a \$5 million budget, and that any new symphonic organization wouldn't be saddled with "a union contract that restricts its ability to configure itself to fit the times."³ Following the announcement, a long period of change and uncertainty surrounding symphonic music in central New York began, and continues into the present.

National Landscape

Across the United States, the landscape of the symphony orchestra business is best described as inconsistent. Recent headlines highlight the financial challenges of orchestras in previously thriving arts communities including Philadelphia and Chicago.⁴ Further, musician lockouts (i.e. orchestra managers not allowing musicians to come to work) have recently occurred in Atlanta, Minnesota and Indianapolis.⁵ However, even in upstate New York, there continue to be success stories in the orchestra world. The Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO), for example, balanced their \$10.2 million budget for the 2011-2012 fiscal year, as they have done for seven out of the past eight years.⁶ Asked about the troubles of the orchestra business, BPO Music Director JoAnn Faletta said, "I look at these other orchestras that are in trouble and they always say it is financial. I think the financial part is a symptom, but the real problem is they lost their way. The boards are not providing the stewardship they need."⁷ Another example of this inconsistency is the past financial success and more recent struggles of another upstate orchestra – the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO). As recently as May 2011, reports from Rochester were very positive. The 2009-2010 season finished with a small surplus of \$2,416, and CEO Charles Owens said, "our musicians, conductors, and staff accepted enormous wage reductions with the knowledge that this was a necessary step toward stabilizing RPO's finances."⁸ However, this stabilization was short-lived. Recent reports indicate that the RPO faces a potential \$700,000 shortfall for the current fiscal year, set to end in August 2013.⁹ Further, on Wednesday, November 28th, 2012 the board of directors of the RPO voted to terminate the contract of music director Arild Remmereit amid a public feud between Remmereit and CEO Charles Owens. On January 14th, 2013 the musicians of the RPO and the

orchestra's management came to an agreement on a new, three-year contract. According to Wesley Nance, co-chairman of the musicians' negotiating committee, the agreement includes "painful concessions in the first two years, with restorations in years three and four."¹⁰

Structured as non-profit arts organizations under section 501(c)3 of the federal tax code, orchestras historically operate on very thin margins, which may explain their mercurial, and inconsistent, financial results. Revenue for an orchestra can usually be split into three main categories: earned income, unearned income, and investment income. Earned income refers largely to ticket sales – income derived from the presentation of concerts, hence "earned." Unearned income refers to donations, whether from individuals, corporations, or the government. Investment income refers to a percentage drawn annually from the orchestra's endowment fund.¹¹ All three of these revenue categories are subject to a number of factors that influence successful fundraising. Earned income, or ticket sales, is subject to artist availability, audience tastes, competition from other arts organizations, and even the weather (especially in climates affected by extreme weather patterns). Unearned income is dependent not only upon individual giving capacity, but also corporate profits and government subsidies, all of which tend to fluctuate with the economy. Investment income is dependent first upon a sizeable endowment, and second upon positive performance of those investments in the market. As of 1987, median distribution of these revenues among orchestras nationwide was 48% from ticket sales, 36% from private support (including individuals and corporations), 10% from the government and 6% from investment income.¹² By 2005 these figures had shifted slightly with 37% from ticket sales, 45% from private support, 5% from the government and 13% from investment income.¹³ In 2009, the SSO came close to these national averages, with 34% of their income coming from ticket sales, 57% from private and government gifts, and 9% from investment income.¹⁴

The cost structure of orchestras also varies widely from one institution to the next – however, certain patterns exist. Artistic expenses comprise the bulk of total expenses for the orchestra. These artistic expenses include payments to conductors, guest artists, and regular musicians.¹⁵ Most orchestras fall within one of two basic categories in terms of how they pay their regular (i.e. non-guest) musicians. Smaller-budget orchestras tend to pay musicians on a per-service basis, meaning that there is no weekly salary guarantee, but rather a payment for each rehearsal and concert at which the musicians perform. Mid-size and larger orchestras tend to pay on a salaried basis, offering a minimum weekly salary for each member of the orchestra. In most cases, per-service orchestras do not provide benefits such as health insurance, while salaried orchestras often do.¹⁶ These different pay scenarios play an important role in the cost structure of an orchestra. Per-service orchestras have high variable costs and low fixed costs, since they only pay musicians when specific services are performed. Salaried orchestras, on the other hand, have high fixed costs and lower variable costs, since they pay musicians a weekly guarantee that is not dependent on that week's level of activity. In times of economic hardship, the orchestras hardest hit tend to be those with salaried musicians, because they are unable to scale their expenses immediately in order to compensate for a lack of revenue.

Road to Crisis

In August 2009, Syracuse Symphony Orchestra (SSO) management and musicians reached a new contract agreement slated to be in effect from September 1, 2009 through August 31, 2012.¹⁷ The agreement included a wage freeze for the musicians for the first two years, followed by a 4.5% increase in wages during the third year. This increase would bring the base orchestra salary to \$35,657.60 per musician, per year at the start of the 2011-2012 season.¹⁸ The contract also called for an expansion of the SSO season to 40 weeks in duration starting in the 2010-2011 season, as well as a small bonus and the promise of the creation of a recording during the 2009-2010 season, compensation for which was to be paid in addition to the base salary.¹⁹ During the 2009-2010 season (the first season covered by the new agreement), SSO management approached the musician leadership on multiple occasions to discuss making changes to the newly ratified three-year agreement.²⁰ First, orchestra managers asked the musicians to allow a modification to the existing agreement by removing two weeks from the July 2010 season.²¹ Typically, the summer season consisted of outdoor concerts in various parks around Central New York. This concession held a value of \$142,000 in payroll expense, and musicians agreed to make the modification. The next request came later in the season, and was related to the upcoming 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 seasons. Managers asked musicians to approve the excising from the season of four additional weeks of work (resulting in salary reductions); the addition of a new, low-cost health insurance plan; and the elimination of the agreed-upon recording.²² The musicians of the orchestra also agreed to this modification to the contract²³, which saved an additional approximately \$280,000 in payroll expense.²⁴ The total tally of salary concessions by SSO musicians during this period, including reduction of weeks and loss of bonus and recording income, was \$580,000, according to interim executive director Paul Brooks.²⁵ When combined with reductions in benefits applied to the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 seasons, the total amount of concessions was \$722,000.²⁶ In addition, music director Daniel Hege volunteered to take a 14% pay cut (during the 2008-2009 season, Hege was paid \$125,000).²⁷

Contract modifications are common among orchestras with salaried musician employees, especially in times of economic challenges. In recent years many orchestral musicians around the country have agreed to contract modifications (commonly termed “reopeners”), including the orchestras of Atlanta, Baltimore, Florida and North Carolina, among many others.²⁸ One notable failed attempt at a contract modification occurred recently in Detroit, Michigan, where the musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra opted not to allow orchestra managers to modify their current contract. The resulting 27-week strike came to a conclusion on April 8, 2011 when musicians agreed to a pay cut shaving nearly 25% off of base salary (from \$104,650 to \$79,000), largely through a reduction in the number of work weeks (from 52 to 40 weeks) per year.²⁹

By January 2011, after the modified 2010-2011 season had gone into effect, Syracuse Symphony managers publicly indicated a need for additional revenue. “We really see ourselves, quite honestly, in a crisis situation,” said SSO board of trustees chair Rocco Mangano.³⁰ This announcement led to a public fundraising campaign branded by the SSO as “Keep the Music Playing.” Launched on January 26, 2011, the campaign’s goal was to raise a total of \$1.75 million, with an immediate need of \$375,000 by February 4th. Initial fundraising

efforts were successful, and on February 5th, 2011 the SSO announced that it had raised \$473,787 from 1,374 donations.³¹ However, during the month of March, fundraising slowed considerably. By March 26th, the SSO was \$100,847 short of meeting their March goal of an additional \$445,000.³² On Tuesday, March 29th, 2011, after failed negotiations with the orchestra's musicians, the SSO board of directors voted to cancel upcoming concerts and suspend operations.³³ Jon Garland, chairman of the musicians' negotiating committee, indicated that musicians rejected the latest proposal to cut an additional \$1.3 million in salary and benefits because it would be impossible to maintain a full orchestra with those demands.³⁴ Interim executive director Paul Brooks stated, "In order to be sustainable, we have to have in place a balanced budget for the next fiscal year. We have been unable to reach an agreement with the musicians through diligence on our part and on their part. In spite of our best efforts, we have come to the point where we are faced with no other choice but to suspend operations."³⁵ One week later, on Tuesday, April 5th, 2011, the SSO board of directors voted to file for chapter 7 bankruptcy protection.

Flash-forward twenty months later, former SSO orchestra committee chairman Jon Garland, along with three of his musician colleagues and five other members of the community, serves on the board of directors of the newly-formed Musical Associates of Central New York (MACNY). MACNY began presenting orchestral concerts in October 2012 and, on December 14, 2012, unveiled the new orchestra's name - Symphoria.³⁶ The formation of Symphoria came after months of conversations among various stakeholders in the community, including leaders from the business world, academia, and the public sector. Begun as a co-operative orchestra, of which the musicians are all part owners, Symphoria is the result of many months of community dialogue about the best business model for the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra's successor.

Rebuilding

Shortly after the bankruptcy, in May 2011, the musicians of the orchestra had formed a foundation with a catchy name – Symphony Syracuse (SS). Never intended to be the successor to the SSO, Symphony Syracuse was called a "lifeboat" organization by the musicians.³⁷ According to Jon Garland, "the musicians decided that 'Syracuse' needed to be in the title, and we liked the play on words." Indeed, concert presenters across the region had been in touch with the musicians of the orchestra, asking if they would perform their regular summer season in July 2011. Garland and the musicians voted to transfer \$25,000 from the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra Members Association (a separate 501(c)5 organization), and Symphony Syracuse was born. Additional start-up funding was obtained through the Syracuse Symphony Foundation (SSF), yet another non-profit foundation, separate from the former SSO, that held endowment funds previously earmarked for the SSO. During the summer of 2011, SSF granted \$38,000 to the newly formed Symphony Syracuse.³⁸ The ensemble, typically performing with former members of the SSO, played seven full orchestra concerts during the summer of 2011, including appearances in Syracuse (at the state fairgrounds on July 4th), Watertown, Hamilton, Fayetteville, Skaneateles, Inlet, and Rome.³⁹ Musicians doubled as staff members, with Garland taking the lead.

Meanwhile, administrators and faculty at Syracuse University were working on a new, permanent plan for an orchestra, under the name Syracuse Philharmonic (SP). At the core of the SP's strategy was a five-year plan with an escalation of activity during each year of the plan, working toward full-time employment for musicians by year three. From the beginning, however, the SP's plan did not gain the full support of the community – most notably the musicians of the former SSO. Many musicians had hoped to be consulted during the planning process for a new organization, but they were not. Typically, a start-up organization performing with per-service musicians would need to have an agreement with the local union (in this case, American Federation of Musicians Local 78) in order to perform concerts. “They don't seem to have a lot of interest in doing that so far,” SS chairman Jon Garland stated on September 26, 2011. “Without that, I'm not sure the Syracuse Phil is going to be presenting any concerts.”⁴⁰ Garland's prediction came true – the Syracuse Philharmonic never performed a concert, and by January 2012 the effort had folded.⁴¹

Parallel to efforts by Symphony Syracuse, the Syracuse Symphony Foundation, and the Syracuse Philharmonic, a group of arts, cultural and higher education institutions gathered together for a “Summit on the Symphony.”⁴² Organized by Hamilton College music faculty member Heather Buchman, the Summit included representatives from Cayuga Community College, Cornell University, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Ithaca College School of Music, Le Moyne College, Onondaga Community College, State University College at Oswego, Syracuse University, Syracuse Opera, Society for New Music, Syracuse Friends of Chamber Music, the Cultural Resources Council of Syracuse and Onondaga County, the Arts and Culture Leadership Alliance of Central New York and the Onondaga County Executive's office. Former musicians of the SSO also attended the Summit. All parties in attendance participated in open brainstorming about the future of symphonic music in Syracuse.

Once the efforts of the Syracuse Philharmonic had failed in January 2012, and following discussion at the Summit on the Symphony, it became clear to community leaders that a new effort was needed in order to resurrect symphonic music permanently. Symphony Syracuse continued to perform concerts during the winter of 2012, but musicians had never imagined that SS would be anything more than a temporary organization.⁴³ Thus, Robert Daino, CEO of WCNY (Central New York's public broadcasting station) assembled a team of board members to form yet another new organization. Daino had been a board member of the Syracuse Philharmonic and had a deep interest in preserving symphonic music for future generations of Central New Yorkers. After months of planning, recruiting, strategizing, and building consensus, the new organization, Musical Associates of Central New York (MACNY), was announced in September 2012. Board members include former SSO musicians, former board members of the Syracuse Philharmonic, and participants in the “Summit on the Symphony.” Robert Daino chairs the board and is joined by former SSO musicians Jon Garland, Victoria Krukowski, John Raschella and Sonya Williams; Ann Clarke, dean of Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts; Cayuga Community College president Dan Larson; Syracuse businessman David Colangelo; and Fritz Messere, dean of the School of Communication, Media and the Arts at State University College of Oswego.⁴⁴ See exhibit 2 for a listing of recent MACNY-presented concerts, featuring many former members of the SSO, as well as frequent performers with

Symphony Syracuse.

Startup funding for MACNY came from a variety of sources, most prominent among them the Syracuse Symphony Foundation (SSF) and Onondaga County. SSF, holding \$7,230,435 in net assets as of 2010⁴⁵, had typically earmarked all donations for the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra. Founded in 1978 by board members of the SSO, the SSF began actively fundraising in 1999 when a campaign was launched to raise \$10 million for the purpose of providing steady investment income for the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra.⁴⁶ The eventual goal of the SSF was to provide roughly \$500,000 per year to the SSO (5% of their total fund balance). In 2006, the fundraising campaign concluded with \$6 million having been raised (see exhibit 3 for the recent giving history of the SSF to the SSO). With the SSO now dissolved, the SSF proceeded to assist by funding many of the concerts and activities of the temporary Symphony Syracuse, as well as the newly formed MACNY. The SSF also supported Syracuse Opera, helping to offset the cost of hiring local musicians to perform in their productions. Between September 2011 and August 2012, the SSF donated a total of \$30,000 to Syracuse Opera and \$130,000 to Symphony Syracuse to help bridge the gap while the formation of a new, permanent orchestra was underway. Since the inception of MACNY, the SSF has donated \$78,000 in startup funds and has committed another \$56,000 through calendar year 2012.⁴⁷

Onondaga County also has a long history of supporting the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra (see exhibit 4 for recent funding history). With the announcement of the formation of MACNY came the announcement that Onondaga County had granted the new organization \$40,000 in the first of three monthly installments to support MACNY and their new orchestra, Symphoria, for a total of \$120,000.⁴⁸ These three installments came with the condition that the new organization must perform concerts as publicized, and the county planned to monitor attendance to ensure proper stewardship of the dollars.

According to Jon Garland, former member of the SSO French horn section, former SSO orchestra committee chairman, president of Symphony Syracuse and current board member of MACNY, the most daunting challenge for the new organization is fundraising capacity.⁴⁹ Currently, MACNY is operating with a bare bones staff, including Garland in the dual roles of executive director and general manager, and fellow musicians as personnel manager, stage manager and librarian. A new marketing director (a non member of the co-op) has been hired, and plans are underway to hire a professional operations manager to handle the day-to-day activities of the new orchestra. MACNY is estimating an eventual annual budget of \$1.5 to 2 million. At the time of its demise, the SSO was operating on a budget of \$6.9 million. MACNY plans to operate on a limited budget by forming a co-operative agreement with a core group of musicians. Essentially, the arrangement ensures that bills and obligations are met, and musicians receive compensation only after those other expenses are paid. According to Garland, this was the best option to ensure that MACNY is never in a position of promising concerts that do not occur (as the former SSO had done when it shut down prior to the end of the 2010-2011 season). With core musicians receiving little compensation for their work, Garland is also concerned about long-term musician investment in the new organization.

Other orchestras have adopted the co-op model in the past, and though there are other musician-governed orchestras, only one other musician-owned orchestra exists in the United States. The Louisiana Philharmonic, based in New Orleans, is a musician-owned and operated orchestra. The orchestra presents a 36-week season each year and, in 2010, ran a small deficit on a \$4.8 million budget.⁵⁰ Founded by the musicians of the former New Orleans Symphony in 1991, the Louisiana Philharmonic gave its first performance on November 23rd of that year. The Associated Press reported in 1991, “The musicians...are donating their time until the orchestra makes enough for them to pay themselves. They’re also working behind the scenes, as administrators, typists, graphic artists, telephone solicitors, poster hangers and whatever else it takes.”⁵¹ Flash-forward to 2012 - a recent audition notice for the position of Associate Concertmaster with the Louisiana Philharmonic lists a salary of \$26,230, plus instrument insurance, health insurance, life insurance, disability insurance, and a contribution to the American Federation of Musicians’ pension plan.⁵²

The built-in flexibility of a co-operative orchestra means that there will seldom, if ever, be a cash flow problem. In essence, such an orchestra will pay its variable expenses (i.e. venue rental, guest artist fees, marketing costs, and other overhead) prior to paying fixed costs (i.e. musician salaries). Instead of scaling the number of performances to match anticipated revenue, as a per-service orchestra does, a co-operative orchestra can essentially perform as often as they like without a set, fixed expense for each performance.

However, there is risk involved with the co-operative model. At some point the musicians will need to make a living, and they may decide to take their services elsewhere. The power of suppliers (i.e. musicians) may come into play, and the musicians may elect to supply their talent to other orchestras who guarantee a minimum salary. Buyer power is weakened if MACNY is working to attract the same musicians as orchestras in Rochester and Buffalo, but isn’t paying a comparable wage. Rivalry is also a concern, albeit not a strong one. Unlike many industries, most symphony orchestras do not have direct competitors in the same market. However, indirect competitors do exist, and in Syracuse, there are plenty to choose from. Following the demise of the SSO, Richard Moseson, music director of the Syracuse Friends of Chamber Music, said, “We’re stricken with what has happened to the symphony, but it has benefited our organization.”⁵³ Indeed, symphonic offerings in Syracuse will compete with other cultural offerings, including chamber music, musical theatre, ballet, and other performing arts enterprises. Competition also exists in the form of other regional orchestras, especially those in a position to serve central New York markets. Historically, the SSO derived a considerable amount of revenue from “fee” concerts – those performed for a presenting organization that sells tickets themselves and pays the orchestra a flat fee. Geneva Concerts, one such presenting organization based in Geneva, New York, has historically presented at least one annual concert by the SSO. However, since the orchestra’s bankruptcy, Geneva Concerts has presented the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra repeatedly.⁵⁴ A new organization will need to start from scratch, rebuilding relationships with presenters such as Geneva Concerts, in order to compete with organizations such as the RPO.

The Musical Associates of Central New York – MACNY – has opted for flexibility in choosing the

structure of Symphoria. The elimination of a guaranteed weekly salary for its musicians, at least at first, will allow the new organization to move forward quickly, present a number of concerts and gain a foothold in the community. Challenges remain, including competition from other arts and cultural institutions, as well as internal buy-in and external support from those who feel betrayed by the demise of the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra. As the nationwide downward trend in revenue from ticket sales continues, the organization's capacity to raise funds from individuals, corporations, foundations and the government will play an important role in the new organization's continued success.

Exhibit 1 – Syracuse Symphony Orchestra leadership timeline

Year	Artistic	Executive
1999	Daniel Hege named Music Director	Trey Devey named Executive Director
May 2002		Devey accepts position with Florida Philharmonic Orchestra
June 2002		Jeffry Comanici named Executive Director
April 2006		Comanici accepts position with Syracuse University
July 2006		Karen Gahl-Mills named Executive Director
January 2010		Gahl-Mills accepts position with Cuyahoga Arts and Culture
January 2010		Edward Kochian named Interim Executive Director
July 2010		Kochian retires
September 2010		Paul Brooks named Interim Executive Director

Source: Syracuse Post-Standard

Exhibit 2 - Concerts presented to date by Musical Associates of Central New York

Description	Date	Location
Masterworks Concert	10/26/12	Rome, NY
Masterworks Concert	10/27/12	Syracuse, NY
Family Concert	10/27/12	Syracuse, NY
Paul Taylor Dance Company	11/3/12	Syracuse, NY
Education Concert	11/9/12	Syracuse, NY
Education Concert	11/14/12	Fulton, NY
Masterworks Concert	11/15/12	Clinton, NY
Masterworks Concert	11/17/12	Oswego, NY
Chamber Music Concert	11/25/12	Syracuse, NY
Nutcracker with Syracuse City Ballet	12/1/12	Syracuse, NY
Hamilton College Oratorio	12/4/12	Clinton, NY
Handel's Messiah	12/9/12	Syracuse, NY
Holiday Pops	12/5/12	Jamestown, NY
Holiday Pops	12/10/12	Herkimer, NY
Holiday Pops	12/11/12	Rome, NY
Holiday Pops	12/14/12	Syracuse, NY

Holiday Pops	12/16/12	Oswego, NY
Holiday Pops	12/17/12	Cortland, NY
Casual Concert	1/20/13	Syracuse, NY

Source: Garland, Jon. Personal interview. 16 Nov. 2012.

Exhibit 3 – Grants from Syracuse Symphony Foundation to Syracuse Symphony Orchestra (2008-2010)

Tax Year	Amount
2008	\$407,367
2009	\$185,221*
2010	\$197,373

Source: Syracuse Symphony Foundation Tax Returns, 2008-2010

*in 2009, the SSF also loaned the SSO \$380,005, as well as redirecting gifts to the SSO

Exhibit 4 – Grants budgeted by Onondaga County Legislature for Syracuse Symphony Orchestra (2009-2011)

Budget Year	Amount
2009	\$404,465
2010	\$404,465
2011	\$204,465*

Source: Onondaga County Annual Budgets, 2009-2011

*SSO declared bankruptcy partway through 2011 budget year

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²² Garland, Jon. Personal interview. 16 Nov. 2012.

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