

2015 ROPA Report

Laura Winters, ROPA Delegate, Palm Beach Opera Orchestra

The 2015 Regional Orchestra Players' Association convention was held in Toledo, Ohio from July 26th to July 31st. It was my pleasure to attend the convention as the delegate for the Palm Beach Opera Orchestra and I would like to share with you some of the many highlights from the event. The first day of the conference was dedicated to negotiation workshops which was very relevant since our Orchestra will be negotiating a new contract this year. The following days included many guest speakers, breakout sessions, and workshops that highlighted the many accomplishments and challenges that our union faces today. One topic that stood out this year was the importance of strong membership and member engagement as unions struggle with the rise of right-to-work legislation. It is important to consider that even though we are in a right-to-work state we still have the right to collective bargaining and that it is our responsibility to build strong unions, engage our members, and educate rising members about the benefits and protections that the AFM provides. As we enter into negotiations this season please consider what a strong message it would send to management if 100% of our orchestra members were enrolled in the AFM, and if you are not already a member, please consider joining today.

The first day of the conference was dedicated to negotiating and how to prepare for our upcoming negotiations for a new collective bargaining agreement. The orchestra committee will be meeting this year to determine what changes and adjustments we would like to see in our contract. The second day of the conference featured the guest speaker, Jane Slaughter, the former Editor of Labor Notes. Her presentation, "Signs of Life on a Labor Movement Under Attack", emphasized the importance of strong membership as well as acting in solidarity with other local unions to form strong communities. Slaughter's speech was very inspiring to me personally because she was an energetic and engaging speaker. Although her experience and activism occurred outside the realm of music many of the issues and challenges that she discussed were very relevant to musicians and it is particularly important for musicians to build relationships within the community. Other speakers included Randy Whatley, president of Cypress Media, who presented on the topic of 'the Logistics of Advocacy', and Marc Folk, the executive director of the Ohio Citizens for the Arts.

During the Opera and Pit Orchestra Breakout Session I met with representatives from other pit orchestras. One issue that was brought up by several of the other representatives is an issue that we are dealing with this year: the reduction of services offered to musicians due to scheduling works that require smaller orchestras. Many of the orchestras are working on contracts that include a minimum service guarantee. The break out session is a wonderful opportunity to meet with other delegates from around the country and see the trends that are affecting other orchestras that are very similar to issues that we are facing. Other breakouts that I attended included a series presented by the Labor Studies Center and Wayne State University including: Building Solidarity through Member Engagement, Building New Member Activists, and Effective Communication.

Another important topic at the convention was Media Messaging and how to use Facebook and Twitter to mobilize communities. Karen Dixon has created a Facebook page and Twitter account for us at: Palm Beach Opera Orchestra Musicians on Facebook and PBO Musicians on Twitter. Please visit us at these accounts and help us to build our image in the community by sharing news and events about our members.

On the final day of the conference, Rochelle Skolnick, who is a lawyer for the Symphonic Services Division of the AFM and a former member of PBOO, presented a workshop on Disciplinary Investigations and Grievances. This was an interactive workshop in which participants acted out a fictional disciplinary scenario. It was a helpful way to learn about the protections that we have under our contract. We have the right to due process and progressive discipline and management is required to follow protocol when disciplining musicians. The Weingarten rights are an example of one of the protections for workers under a collective bargaining agreement. The Weingarten rights state that we have the right to have a union representative involved and any conversation or investigation that could affect discipline, non-renewal, or working conditions.

At the Ropa conference there were eight resolutions passed including one that supports the musicians of the Hartford Symphony as they continue in difficult and contentious negotiations with management. After the musicians had already made difficult concessions they were offered a contract that proposed cutting back services by about twenty five percent while at the same time the administration was getting a raise and adding an assistant conductor position. In addition, musicians were required to be available for services that would make holding a second job impossible. The Hartford Symphony situation is an example of a trend in which the orchestra board and the concert hall have merged. The group that is running the orchestra board also manages the concert venue. This trend was brought up during the negotiations workshop as a red flag. In the case of the Hartford Symphony it has been disastrous and has led to the musicians having the threat of a lock out. The resolution passed states that Ropa will support Hartford in their struggle against their management.

One other resolution passed involved classification of musicians in symphonic, opera and ballet orchestras as employees. While this issue does not affect the work we do for Palm Beach Opera, where we are already classified as employees, it is a relevant issue in South Florida. Recent guidelines issued by the Department of Labor in response to a growing number of misclassification complaints have ruled that orchestral musicians in opera, ballet and symphony orchestras should be classified as employees rather than independent contractors. The resolutions states that in cases where musicians are misclassified, we should encourage the employers to correct the misclassification, pay payroll taxes and grant employee status to the musicians.

It was a great pleasure to represent you at the convention this year. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet with orchestral musicians and to learn about our profession and to gain strategies to advance the causes of musicians. I look forward to working with all of you this season. Please contact me at lcwbsn@bellsouth.net or 561-427-3025 if you have any questions, or would like further information about the Ropa convention. Finally, if you are not currently a member of the American Federation of Musicians, now is the time to join as initiation fees will be waived during the current membership drive.

Laura Winters