

WHAT IS OUR ORCHESTRA'S FUTURE?

By Diane Dickson

One of our supporters who signed the musicians' letter of support this summer submitted an intriguing comment. It was, *"You cannot cut your way to success"* -Michael Kaiser, Former President, Kennedy Center for the Arts, also known as the "Turnaround King."

Curiosity led me to find out more about Michael Kaiser, the meaning of that quote, and why he is known as the "Turnaround King." I discovered Kaiser is currently Chair of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland and known for his ability to rebuild

flagging arts institutions. And he did indeed coin the phrase, "Arts organizations cannot cut their way to financial prosperity."

One of Kaiser's most recent "turnarounds" is the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Although it is a larger orchestra than ours, this is a story whose themes may resonate with our orchestra. And we have a personal connection. The chair of the Baltimore players' committee, Brian Prechtl, was a percussionist with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic for 14 years.

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, with an annual operating budget of over \$27 million and a 52-week season, has experienced ongoing

financial problems and contentious labor disputes. In 2019 Baltimore management, citing revenue losses of \$16 million over the past decade, said it was "not feasible to maintain their current business model." They proposed cutting 12 weeks of summer concerts, reducing the number of contract players, and cutting other key benefits such as sick days.

The musicians refused to agree to terms that would significantly impact their livelihoods, the artistic quality of the 104-yr.-old orchestra, and its ability to serve the community. As a result, management locked them out for 14 weeks in Summer 2019.

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After a group of supporters stepped forward to preserve musician salaries, a one-year agreement was brokered in September 2019. Although the agreement did not resolve the remaining questions on weeks and size of orchestra, it did include the establishment of a new standing board committee, the Vision Committee. Comprised of board, staff, musicians, and community members, its purpose was to foster a collaborative decision-making process to examine every aspect of the Baltimore Symphony.

The musicians and management agreed to invite speakers to share concerns and give advice. Michael Kaiser was invited to speak and was subsequently hired to craft a vision and draft a long-term plan. The vision and plan were embraced by the Vision Committee, approved by the Baltimore Symphony board, and inspired donors to contribute to a transformational fund. Within three months, nearly \$10 million has been raised to cover shortfalls for the current year and to forestall the use of next season's ticket money.

Kaiser's philosophy for success is "putting the art first." He says generating enthusiasm for the artistic product is the number one factor in driving contributed and earned income. "A lot of arts organizations find themselves so worried about making money and balancing the budget that they stop dreaming," said Kaiser.

As Brian Prechtel told me, "Michael Kaiser showed us how artistic goals are directly tied to long-term financial objectives. Programming has to be an enticing experience for both

audiences and donors." Kaiser's plan also included a series of recommendations to improve community engagement and the patron experience, board development, and the use of technology. The musicians supported the plan enthusiastically, and its adoption rallied a new spirit and understanding from the staff, board, and donor community regarding the role of artistic vision.

Ultimately, the plan resulted in positive outcomes for the Baltimore musicians. In August 2020 they negotiated a landmark five-year agreement that raised wages above pre-pandemic levels; and it maintained the full complement of musicians and season length. It also established a collaborative and inclusive relationship with board and management in the orchestra's decision-making process.

What can we learn from Baltimore's experience? After all, the specifics of any success story are unique to the city and people involved. Hiring a persuasive and effective consultant definitely jumpstarted their efforts. But like Baltimore, the Fort Wayne Philharmonic musicians grappled with proposals to reduce the operating budgets by cutting the size of the orchestra and the season. Both musician groups took a stand against diminishing their orchestra's artistic quality and service to the community, resulting in lengthy periods of no pay. And both groups accepted one-year agreements that enabled them to continue seeking better wages in negotiations for future seasons.

Brian Prechtel emphasized that Kaiser's desire to include musicians in the decision-

making process was key. He said including all the stakeholders and "putting their heads together" enabled their orchestra to move forward. Having played in the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, he says "there is so much love for the orchestra by the Fort Wayne community. It is absolutely possible to make your music grow and thrive."

Right now, the Philharmonic musicians are delighted to be back making music for the Fort Wayne community, and we thank all of our supporters who have acted on our behalf. It has been a difficult time for the whole organization, and having an agreement for the coming year is a mark of progress.

But as we look ahead, we wonder what the future holds for the Philharmonic when this agreement expires next year? Will the 33 weeks of the regular season be maintained? Will new concert series be created to attract new audiences and to generate new income? Will the orchestra be able to attract and retain top national talent?

The heart of the matter lies in the organization's artistic vision and goals. Our orchestra has a rich and storied cultural legacy, tracing its history to 1944. It is seen as an invaluable community asset, as evidenced by the passionate comments expressed by our audience members. Will the management and board of directors explore an artistic vision shared by all of its stakeholders? Can we envision a promising future and a new golden age for the orchestra?

DAVID REZITS

Interviewed by Dessie Arnold

David Rezits is a full-time cellist with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, having been a member of the orchestra since 1992. His parents were both professional musicians (piano and cello) and his father was on the faculty at Indiana University. Here is David's story:

I started playing the piano at age 6 studying with my father. I did not like it so the folks bought a half size cello and started me at age 7. I continued studying with my mom for the next 3 years until I got angry and body slammed my instrument breaking it in half...we then looked for another instructor.

Playing the cello was a struggle for the first 7 years. I did not enjoy it and did all I could to avoid practicing. I even went so far as to tighten my bow and rosin it to look like I had practiced after school. The turning point came when I attended National Music Camp at Interlochen, MI. Suddenly the cello became more of a social thing and I made lots of improvement there for the next 5 summers, attaining 1st chair in the World Youth Symphony Orchestra and winning the concerto competition my final year.

I just sort of fell into making music my livelihood. I had practiced so much in high school that having IU at my doorstep made attending there the logical choice, and the rest followed.

David is a man of many talents – he likes to cook, and in fact compiled and published a cookbook, Culinary Harmony: Favorite Recipes of the World's Finest Classical Musicians; he



is a seasoned traveler – having traveled all over the world; he is a nature lover and loves animals; he has organized benefit concerts and other activities to raise money for good causes, and has also recorded concerts and recitals for other musicians.

I asked him if I had left anything out that he would like to share.

I think you hit all the highlights... I do have an interest in helping to teach English as a second language to immigrants which I have done in the past. Also I am currently involved in restoring wetlands on some former farmland in Jay County that floods constantly. I purchased the property and am working with an organization called Friends of the Limberlost. I am a big pickleball player these days. I do tournaments around the country and have won quite a few medals over the past few years. I still enjoy watching and playing tennis, too.

Although I have traveled quite a bit and made money from it, my

primary overseas travel to different places was for experience and pleasure. I enjoyed helping out in places that may not have the level of playing and teaching that we have here in the States. I played in orchestras and taught in Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Israel, Czech Republic, China and Germany. I was particularly fond of my time in the Czech Republic having taught and played 8 summers there.

There are a number of places I have gone over the years unrelated to music. Mostly in Europe: England, Switzerland, Croatia, France, Ireland, Italy, Austria, Sweden, Norway, Slovenia and Holland. I can't say which is my favorite because they all have their charms. I do think for natural beauty, Norway and Switzerland were at the top. Australia, New Zealand, Africa and Hawaii are places I would like to visit.

Over the years, I have done fundraisers with my cookbook and music (benefit concerts) for different organizations like ACRES land trust.

Who are your top three favorite composers to listen to or to play?

That question reminds me of one professor at Indiana University who used to say “my favorite piece of music is the one I am playing at that moment.” I am not that sophisticated, but I try to just play music I like, not stuff I am not thrilled with. That said, I do enjoy extremely the chamber music of Brahms, symphonies of Sibelius and anything by Dvorak.

My favorite part of performing is the interaction with the other musicians (if you get along).

Performing with small ensembles, chamber orchestra, or the full orchestra – your favorite?

Again it is hard to say since there are things from all of those venues I enjoy.

Other instruments in the orchestra can be very loud and piercing. Do you ever have to

wear earplugs in order to protect your hearing while you play? Does that make it difficult to hear either yourself or the rest of the orchestra for ensemble purposes, and if so, how do you deal with that?

Does the Philharmonic do anything to help you protect your hearing in the full orchestral setting?

Good question and critical for professionals. I have always tried to protect my hearing. I used foam for many years and now have real good ear plugs – professionally fitted. It is harder to hear yourself but also I find I am calmer because you don’t have to worry when that sudden 4 trumpet chorus or cymbal crash shatters your ear drums. Up to this point other than providing basic foam plugs the Philharmonic has not done anything but the word out is that there will be an audiologist coming to provide professional plugs to the orchestra members.

Staying inspired as a musician is difficult especially after this pandemic. I like to hear the young talent perform and watch the young teachers of today. Smart people with good ideas and skills.

How often do you work on music that YOU want to play as opposed to what is on the next Phil concert or other gigs?

If I have another concert such as chamber music or solo, of course, I need to work on that...it does not happen too often. I have a piano trio in Indianapolis where I play, and before my father passed, we would perform together at various venues. In fact, we played around the country as a father/son chamber duo some years ago.

Is there anything else about your life or your music that you would like to share?

Nope.



Pictures of Philharmonic musicians from the 7/14 concert: Left photo-Alison Chorn, Kevin Kosnik and Kevin Piekarski Middle photo-Marcy Trentacosti, Deb Welter and Derek Reeves, Right photo-Dennis Fick and Anne Devine. (Courtesy of Bryan Gibson)

Our Players' Voice is published by the Fort Wayne Philharmonic Players' Association. For more information, visit our website at www.fwpmusicians.com. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).