

Report on the 43rd Annual Regional Orchestra Players' Association (ROPA) Conference

Dallas, Texas — July 28–30
José Leonardi Moore, Delegate

The ROPA Conference opened with a welcome and opening session that brought together delegates from member orchestras across the country. The session began with roll call, providing an opportunity to recognize participating orchestras and delegates while highlighting the strength and diversity of the ROPA membership. Local 72-147 welcomed attendees, with President Stewart Williams sharing remarks on the importance of collaboration, solidarity, and building strong relationships within the regional orchestra community. The opening session concluded with ROPA President Steve Wade's report, which provided updates on organizational priorities, current initiatives, and the continued work of ROPA in supporting musicians, strengthening communication among member orchestras, and advancing the interests of regional orchestra professionals.

Keynote Speaker

Speaker: Lorraine Montemayor, Secretary-Treasurer, Texas AFL-CIO

Lorraine Montemayor, Secretary-Treasurer of the Texas AFL-CIO, brings extensive experience in labor organizing, leadership development, and member engagement to her statewide role. Prior to serving as Secretary-Treasurer, Montemayor worked as the organization's Training & Leadership Development Coordinator, where she developed programs to strengthen rank-and-file participation and prepare emerging labor leaders. Her background also includes experience as a union organizer, Political Director for the Dallas AFL-CIO, and active involvement in the Texas labor movement. In her current role, Montemayor continues to support the Texas AFL-CIO's efforts to strengthen organizing, expand member involvement, and build a more unified labor movement across the state. Her leadership represents a continued focus on education, advocacy, and developing the next generation of union leaders. Additional information is available at <https://texasaflcio.org>.

An Overview of Law in the Workplace

Speaker: Naomi Bensdorf

Naomi provided an overview of the legal framework affecting workplaces, including statutes, regulations, agency guidance, executive orders, and case law, while emphasizing that laws are constantly evolving and that courts play a critical role in interpreting their application. She reviewed key employment laws relevant to musicians and employers, including the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which protects employees' rights to organize and collectively bargain over wages, hours, and working conditions; Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits workplace discrimination, harassment, and retaliation; the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (PWFA); the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA); the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA); and wage and hour protections under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and related state laws.

The session also addressed the impact of executive orders and changing federal policies on workplaces, including Executive Order 11246, which established equal employment opportunity

requirements for federal contractors, as well as recent federal actions affecting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Naomi discussed how these changes may create new considerations for organizations, including orchestras that receive federal funding, particularly regarding programs such as diversity fellowships, audience development initiatives, and other efforts intended to expand access and representation. The presentation provided delegates with a broader understanding of the legal environment affecting labor relations, workplace policies, and collective bargaining, while highlighting the importance of staying informed as employment laws and interpretations continue to develop.

**Nathan Kahn Award
Recipient: Jane Owen**

The Nathan Kahn Award is presented annually in the conference host city to an individual or organization that demonstrates extraordinary commitment to union solidarity, diversity, and professionalism among orchestral musicians.

MAL Breakout Sessions

During the Member-at-Large (MAL) sessions, smaller groups of ROPA orchestras (my discussion group included 11 orchestras) met to share season highlights, organizational updates, financial circumstances, audition processes, and workplace concerns affecting their respective ensembles. These discussions provided a valuable opportunity for delegates to learn from one another, compare experiences, and gain insight into the challenges and successes of other regional orchestras across the country. Topics included addressing musician concerns, navigating administrative and artistic challenges, managing grievances, and discussing approaches to strengthening communication between musicians, leadership, and management.

The MAL sessions also created a collaborative environment where delegates could ask questions, exchange ideas, and explore possible strategies related to collective bargaining, contract negotiations, workplace policies, and improving working conditions. By sharing experiences and exploring potential solutions, participants gained a broader understanding of the issues facing ROPA orchestras and the various approaches being used to address them. These conversations reinforced the importance of solidarity, communication, and collective knowledge-sharing among member orchestras while providing delegates with practical perspectives and resources to bring back to their own organizations.

Standing Committee Reports

**ROPA EDI Workgroup
Speaker: Alana Wiesing**

The ROPA EDI Workgroup completed the tenure review guidelines and recommendations. These recommendations, developed by the ROPA EDI Workgroup—a committee of musicians representing ROPA orchestras across the United States—are designed to assist orchestras in creating and enhancing transparent, equitable, and constructive tenure review processes that clearly communicate expectations while promoting professional growth, meaningful dialogue,

and success for all musicians. The document is available on the ROPA website:
<https://ropaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/ROPA-tenure-review-recommendations-and-ideas.pdf>

Conductor Evaluation Bank
Speaker: Lisa Davis, CEB Administrator

The ROPA Conductor Evaluation Bank, administered by Lisa Davis, continues to provide ROPA member orchestras with a resource for gathering and sharing musician feedback on guest conductors. The program supports informed decision-making during conductor selection processes by encouraging consistent evaluations and preserving musician perspectives in a confidential format. Through the continued administration and development of the Conductor Evaluation Bank, ROPA strengthens communication, transparency, and musician involvement in the selection of artistic leadership.

Leading Tone
Speaker: Judy Naillon, Editor

The Leading Tone Newsletter, edited by Judy Naillon, continues to serve as ROPA's primary communication and educational publication, providing quarterly updates, member orchestra features, labor-related information, and resources for musicians and delegates. Through articles highlighting orchestra initiatives, community engagement, committee work, and issues affecting regional orchestras, the newsletter strengthens communication, encourages knowledge-sharing, and helps foster unity among ROPA member orchestras while supporting ROPA's mission of education, advocacy, and professional development.

Player Conference Reports

Theatre Musicians Association (TMA)
Speaker: Heather Boehm, President TMA

Over the past 12 months, the Theatre Musicians Association (TMA), led by Heather Boehm, has focused on supporting theater musicians through education, resource sharing, advocacy, and collaboration with AFM locals. Key areas of focus have included addressing the use of electronic replacement technology, promoting protections for live musicians, supporting touring musicians through data collection and feedback, and assisting locals with preparation for negotiations. TMA has expanded access to contract examples, bargaining resources, and industry information while encouraging modernization of agreements to address current issues such as digital performances, recording technology, remote conducting, and changing theater practices. The organization's efforts have helped inform discussions surrounding recent Broadway and touring agreements by providing member perspectives and supporting stronger coordination among AFM theater musicians nationwide.

International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM)
Speaker: Keith Carrick, Chair

The International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM), under the leadership of Keith Carrick, has continued to support professional orchestra musicians by strengthening communication among bargaining units, sharing contract information, and providing resources to assist musicians during negotiations. ICSOM helps member orchestras by providing wage and contract data, negotiation strategies, labor resources, and opportunities for collaboration among musicians. Key areas of focus have included addressing industry changes such as digital media, streaming, artificial intelligence, and evolving workplace practices while protecting musicians' employment standards and contractual rights. ICSOM has also emphasized education, effective musician governance, and stronger bargaining preparation through conferences, workshops, and information sharing. ICSOM continues to collaborate with other AFM player conferences on shared issues affecting musicians, including technology, compensation, and workplace protections. The relationship between ICSOM and ROPA remains valuable, with ICSOM providing resources and examples from larger symphony and opera orchestras while ROPA applies those lessons to regional orchestras with different financial and operational challenges. Together, these organizations continue promoting stronger bargaining units, improved contracts, and greater solidarity among AFM musicians.

Recording Musicians Association (RMA)
Speaker: Allen Fogel, President

The Recording Musicians Association (RMA), under the leadership of the newly appointed President Allen Fogel, as an AFM Player Conference representing recording musicians, has focused on strengthening contract protections, improving resources for bargaining efforts, and addressing the rapidly changing landscape of recorded music. RMA has supported musicians through discussions surrounding the Sound Recording Labor Agreement, streaming compensation, digital media, artificial intelligence, and the expansion of union-covered recording work. Recent priorities have included improving enforcement of recording contracts, protecting musicians' residual and royalty structures, increasing opportunities for AFM-covered film and television work, and developing strategies to organize emerging areas of the recording industry. RMA has also worked closely with AFM leadership on major media agreements, including efforts related to streaming residuals and protections for musicians in film and television recording. RMA provides expertise, research, and industry perspectives that assist AFM negotiators and local bargaining units. ROPA collaborates with RMA through the broader AFM Player Conference network, where both organizations share information, participate in discussions on common labor issues, and collaborate on challenges affecting professional musicians, including technology, digital distribution, compensation, and contract enforcement.

Organization of Canadian Symphony Musicians (OCSM)
Speaker: Bob Fraser, President

The Organization of Canadian Symphony Musicians (OCSM), led by President "Bob" Fraser, has continued to support Canadian symphony musicians by strengthening communication among orchestras, sharing information, and providing resources that assist local bargaining units in their

negotiations. OCSM plays an important role in helping musicians prepare for negotiations through the exchange of contract information, workplace practices, and industry trends. OCSM has focused on issues affecting professional orchestras, including sustainable funding, musician advocacy, digital media, streaming, recording rights, and the evolving challenges facing the orchestral profession. Through collaboration with the AFM, the Canadian Federation of Musicians, and other player conferences such as ICSOM, ROPA, and TMA, OCSM helps ensure that musicians have access to broader industry perspectives and shared solutions. The organization remains connected to larger AFM discussions involving technology, compensation, media rights, and working conditions. ROPA's connection with OCSM comes through this broader network of musician organizations, where regional and Canadian orchestras can exchange ideas, learn from different bargaining experiences, and strengthen advocacy efforts while recognizing that each organization serves its own unique membership and negotiating environment.

Freelance Musicians' Association (FMA)

Speaker: Nate Omdal, President

The Freelance Musicians' Association (FMA), led by President Nate Omdal, has focused on building a stronger voice and support system for freelance musicians within the American Federation of Musicians. FMA's major accomplishment has been the continued development of a formal structure for freelance musicians to participate in AFM discussions, share workplace concerns, and collaborate on solutions to challenges unique to independent and multi-employer musicians. FMA has also addressed issues affecting independent musicians, including the impact of changing technology, digital distribution, and evolving employment models in the music industry.

Connections that Count: Effective Networking Across Constituencies.

Speakers: Stewart Williams, President, AFM Local 72-147; Martine Elyse Philippe, Director of the Office of Arts and Culture, Dallas; Amy Bishop, Midday Host and Marketing Manager, WRR and KERA Dallas; Diana Ramirez, Executive Director, North Texas Area Labor Federation

The "Connections that Count: Effective Networking Across Constituencies" session highlighted the importance of building relationships beyond traditional bargaining structures and strengthening partnerships between musicians, labor organizations, arts leaders, and community stakeholders. Featuring Stewart Williams, President of AFM Local 72-147; Martine Elyse Philippe, Director of the Office of Arts and Culture in Dallas; Amy Bishop, Midday Host and Marketing Manager at WRR and KERA Dallas; and Diana Ramirez, Executive Director of the North Texas Area Labor Federation, the discussion focused on developing stronger networks that support musicians and the arts community. The session addressed strategies for increasing visibility, collaboration, and community support for musician's work. Topics included building relationships with civic organizations, strengthening labor solidarity, improving communication with community partners, and creating broader awareness of the role musicians play in cultural and economic development. The involvement of AFM Local 72-147 reflects the importance of local union leadership in connecting musicians with community and labor partners. ROPA's connection to these efforts is through the broader AFM network, where regional orchestras

benefit from shared strategies for advocacy, organizing, community engagement, and strengthening the public understanding of the value of professional musicians.

American Federation of Musicians President's Address
Speaker: Tino Gagliardi, President

The AFM Symphonic Services Division (SSD) has continued to play a critical role in supporting orchestra musicians, local unions, and bargaining committees throughout the United States and Canada. Under the leadership of AFM President Tino Gagliardi, SSD negotiators provided guidance, expertise, and resources to orchestra musicians navigating challenging negotiations and changing conditions within the symphonic field. President Gagliardi recognized and thanked the SSD negotiators for their dedication in guiding musicians through difficult times and assisting bargaining units as they worked to protect wages, benefits, job security, and working conditions. SSD's accomplishments include assisting locals and orchestra committees with contract preparation, negotiations, contract administration, organizing efforts, financial analysis, and access to industry standards and comparable agreements. Through its training and support programs, SSD helped provide the knowledge and tools necessary for musicians and negotiators to successfully navigate the bargaining process. SSD also maintains resources that support approximately 192 symphonic agreements throughout the United States and Canada, providing valuable contract information and comparison tools for bargaining units. ROPA continues to benefit from SSD's work through access to wage charts, contract resources, negotiation education, and professional guidance that assist regional orchestras in preparing for bargaining and strengthening their collective bargaining efforts. While SSD does not independently negotiate every agreement, its role as a resource and support division has been instrumental in helping AFM orchestras build stronger bargaining units and achieve successful outcomes at the local level.

AFM Organizing Update
Speaker: Gabe Kristal, International Director of AFM's Organizing Services Department

The AFM Organizing Update, presented by Gabe Kristal, International Director of the AFM's Organizing Services Department, highlighted the importance of both internal and external organizing in strengthening musician representation. Internal organizing focuses on building engagement, leadership, and solidarity among existing members, while external organizing helps musicians develop collective power and establish stronger bargaining units. The department provides resources, training, and guidance to help musicians organize, prepare for negotiations, and advocate for better working conditions. Examples discussed included the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra achieving a new collective bargaining agreement after nearly 15 years without one, demonstrating the impact of sustained organizing and musician unity. The session also highlighted efforts involving the Milwaukee Ballet, where organizing and community outreach helped identify donor support to help fund live musicians for future performances, demonstrating the importance of advocacy beyond traditional bargaining. Additionally, the successful organizing campaign at True Concord, which resulted in NLRB certification of the musicians' union, showed the impact of collective action and effective organizing strategies in creating a stronger voice for musicians in the workplace. The department is also working to create a network focused on musicians performing in Candlelight concerts and similar freelance

engagements, with the goal of identifying common concerns, increasing communication, and exploring ways to better support musicians working in these growing areas of the industry. While the Organizing Services Department does not directly negotiate contracts, its support helps musicians build the foundation necessary for successful bargaining efforts, stronger workplace representation, and sustainable careers. ROPA benefits from these organizing strategies by gaining tools to strengthen member involvement, develop effective committees, and prepare regional orchestras for future negotiations.

Legislative and Political Report
Speaker: Ben Kessler, AFM Director of Government Affairs

Ben Kessler highlighted the importance of the upcoming November elections and the impact that elected officials have on issues affecting musicians and the AFM. He emphasized the importance of supporting candidates who understand and stand with labor and music-related priorities. Kessler discussed ongoing efforts to prevent federal interference with states' ability to regulate artificial intelligence, noting that, at the time of the conference, there was still no federal ban in place. He also reviewed progress on meaningful legislation, including the TRAIN Act and the CLEAR Act, and encouraged musicians to build relationships with elected officials on both sides of the aisle to advocate for policies that support musicians and the future of the profession.

Kessler also addressed current political challenges facing the arts, including efforts by the Trump administration to eliminate federal support for arts endowments and concerns surrounding changes at the Kennedy Center, including the controversy over placing President Trump's name on the institution. He noted the importance of protecting federal arts funding and ensuring that major cultural institutions continue to provide opportunities for musicians. He highlighted that the National Symphony Orchestra and the Kennedy Center Opera House Orchestra continue to receive support to perform at the Kennedy Center and emphasized the importance of maintaining these institutions as vital parts of the nation's cultural landscape. Kessler also discussed ongoing concerns regarding visa processing delays for international artists, which can significantly impact touring musicians, guest artists, and cultural exchanges. He encouraged musicians to remain engaged politically and continue advocating for policies that protect the arts, support working musicians, and strengthen the labor movement.

The Power of Workers' Stories: Leveraging Member Personal Narratives
Speaker: Megan Elk, Director of Organizing and Communications, Chicago Federation of Musicians.

In The Power of Workers' Stories: Leveraging Member Personal Narratives, Megan Elk, Director of Organizing and Communications for the Chicago Federation of Musicians, emphasized that workers' personal stories are among the most powerful tools for building public support and advancing organizing efforts. As a singer-songwriter, union advocate, and member of the LGBTQ+ community she shared how her own experiences have shaped her commitment to telling authentic stories that resonate with the public. She encouraged delegates to use press releases, print and digital media, social media, interviews, press conferences, community events, and even picket lines to share compelling member narratives that highlight the importance of live musicians and the real impact of workplace issues. Megan also urged ROPA delegates to help amplify the ongoing struggles of the Chicago Sinfonietta by sharing their story on social media,

emphasizing that solidarity and public awareness can strengthen organizing campaigns and build broader community support for musicians.

Business Meeting

The conference business meeting included reports from the ROPA Executive Committee and official conference business. Vice President Amanda Swain, Secretary Karen Sandene, and Treasurer Rick Basehore presented updates on the organization's activities, records, and financial status, including the proposed budget. Delegates reviewed and approved the 2025 Conference minutes and considered resolutions presented by Alana Wiesing. The session provided delegates with the opportunity to conduct the association's official business, review ROPA's operations and finances, and discuss initiatives that will help guide the organization's priorities for the coming year.

Tools for Challenging Conversations

Speaker: Jessica Schmidt, Orchestrate Inclusion

Jessica Schmidt presented strategies for engaging in difficult workplace conversations through respectful and effective communication. She encouraged participants to consider their intent before initiating a conversation by reflecting on the purpose of the discussion, identifying assumptions they may be making, examining their attitude toward the conversation, considering whether the other person is aware of the issue, and recognizing their own needs and fears before entering into dialogue.

The session covered recognizing emotional reactions before responding, practicing active listening, asking curiosity-based questions, and understanding how differing perspectives can influence conversations. Schmidt emphasized the importance of approaching challenging discussions with preparation, self-awareness, and a willingness to understand another person's perspective.

A significant portion of the presentation focused on psychological safety, defined by Amy Edmondson (1999) as the shared belief that individuals will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Schmidt outlined the four stages of psychological safety—Inclusion Safety, Learner Safety, Contributor Safety, and Challenger Safety—and discussed how each stage supports healthy collaboration within organizations. She emphasized that psychological safety allows team members greater freedom to explore ideas, improve communication, engage in constructive discussions, and contribute more effectively.

Schmidt also discussed how different forms of power can influence workplace interactions and challenging conversations. She reviewed five types of power: Legitimate Power, based on a person's position or formal authority; Reward Power, the ability to provide or grant rewards; Coercive Power, the ability to threaten or impose consequences; Referent Power, the influence gained through personality, relationships, and trust; and Expert Power, which comes from being recognized as having important knowledge, skills, or experience. Understanding these power dynamics can help individuals recognize how authority, influence, and relationships shape communication and decision-making within an organization.

Participants also engaged in discussions and real-world scenarios to explore practical communication tools that can be applied in orchestra workplaces, committee discussions, and labor-management relationships.

Symphonic Services Division Focus

Speakers: Rochelle Skolnick, Director; Debbie Newark, Director of Symphonic Electronic Media; Laurence Hoffman, Wage Scales and Conditions Database Administrator

Rochelle Skolnick provided an overview of the Symphonic Services Division (SSD) and discussed the importance of membership dues in supporting the work of the Federation and its services to members. She reviewed the different types of dues, including one-time initiation fees, annual dues, and work dues, as well as how funds are distributed between Locals and the Federation. Skolnick also discussed changes approved at the recent AFM Convention, including an increase to the initiation fee and provisions allowing members who belong to more than one Local to receive reimbursement. She explained that Federation dues support essential services such as organizing, education, member support, communications, social media, staffing, and maintaining the infrastructure needed to serve musicians throughout the United States and Canada.

Skolnick also highlighted the many services SSD provides to ROPA orchestras and Locals, including support for contract negotiations through staff representatives and negotiators, financial analysis, database resources, electronic media support, training and education, and collaboration with the AFM's organizing department. SSD also works with various industry partners and organizations, including Sphinx Organization, Orchestra Canada, and New World Symphony, while maintaining relationships with international partners to strengthen support for professional musicians.

Debbie Newark, Director of Symphonic Electronic Media, discussed the Integrated Media Agreement (IMA), which has been in place since 2009. She reviewed the history and purpose of the agreement, which was created through the Symphony, Opera, and Ballet Employers Electronic Media Association (EMA), representing 127 orchestras. Newark noted that the current 2023 IMA will expire soon and that work is underway toward developing a new agreement addressing the evolving needs of electronic media in the symphonic field.

Laurence Hoffman, Wage Scales and Conditions Database Administrator, presented information about the annual wage charts completed by ROPA orchestras. He explained that these charts provide valuable information about compensation, working conditions, collective bargaining agreements, financial data, and management details across orchestras. The AFM-created Wage Chart Archive serves as a resource for musicians and Locals by providing updated information to help compare industry standards and support informed decision-making during negotiations.

Understanding Your Orchestra's Finances

Speaker: Rick Basehore, ROPA Treasurer and AFM/SSD Financial Analyst

Rick Basehore presented an overview of nonprofit financial statements and provided delegates with tools for better understanding the financial health of their orchestras. Using the 2024–2025 negotiations between the San Francisco Symphony and AFM Local 6 as a case study, he demonstrated the importance of carefully reviewing audited financial statements rather than relying solely on public statements. Basehore explained how management's portrayal of a significant operating deficit differed from the orchestra's overall financial position due to the exclusion of major sources of income from its calculations. He emphasized the importance of verifying financial claims through independent analysis and encouraged delegates to use financial statements to develop an informed perspective during negotiations.

The presentation also reviewed the core nonprofit accounting equation, $\text{Assets} = \text{Liabilities} + \text{Net Assets}$, and explained the distinctions between donor-restricted and unrestricted net assets. Basehore discussed how donor restrictions can limit the purpose, timing, or manner in which funds may be spent, while unrestricted assets may be used to support general operations. He also explained the differences between endowed and non-endowed donor-restricted funds and how state law and organizational spending policies affect the use of endowment assets. The session concluded with examples of successful negotiations from the Vancouver Symphony and Portland Symphony, illustrating how a strong understanding of financial data can contribute to positive bargaining outcomes.

Musicians Foundation

Speaker: Jeremy Morrow, Program Director

Jeremy Morrow introduced the Musicians Foundation and its mission to provide one-time financial assistance grants to professional musicians experiencing temporary financial hardship. He explained that eligible musicians from all musical genres may apply for assistance to help cover essential expenses during times of need. Delegates were encouraged to explore the Foundation's resources and share the Foundation's resources with colleagues who may benefit from them.

Orchestra Spotlights

Representatives from several orchestras shared updates on their organizations, recent initiatives, and current projects. Presentations highlighted the work of the musicians of Opera San José, the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, the Chicago Sinfonietta, Palm Beach Opera, and the Ocean City Pops Orchestra. Delegates were encouraged to review the organizations' reports, stay informed about their activities, and follow their work through organizational communications and social media.

Conclusion

This year's conference provided numerous opportunities for networking, collaboration, and professional development. Delegates participated in a diverse lineup of presentations covering topics such as communication strategies, psychological safety, orchestra finances, collective bargaining, electronic media, and the resources available through the AFM and the Symphonic Services Division. In addition to the educational sessions, attendees had the opportunity to strengthen relationships with colleagues from across North America during the Monday night mixer at City Tavern, the nightly hospitality suite, the New Delegate Meet and Greet, and the Local 72-147 dinner at Reunion Tower.

Delegates and guests raised \$1,983 in support of TEMPO during the conference. Additional takeaways included exploring the resources available through the Symphonic Services Division section of the AFM website, filing the multi-card rebate form for members who belong to three or more Locals, encouraging more regular orchestra meetings, and becoming more actively involved with Local union activities. These resources and discussions provide valuable tools that can strengthen communication, support effective bargaining, and promote collaboration within our orchestra and Local.

Overall, the conference reinforced the value of collaboration, education, and solidarity among regional orchestras. The information, resources, and professional relationships developed throughout the conference will continue to support our orchestra and Local as we prepare for future opportunities and challenges.

The 2027 ROPA Conference will be held in Chicago, Illinois, with dates to be announced.

For more information visit: <https://ropaweb.org/news/2026-annual-conference-july-29-31-dallas-tx/2026-documents-and-schedule>