

**VERMONT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, VICTORIA YOUNG, BOARD CHAIR  
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
PREPARED REMARKS FOR MARCH 12, 2015 PUBLIC HEARING**

Thank you for providing us the opportunity to share reactions to the Joint Fiscal Office's reduction list. Much has apparently changed since Alan Jordan's testimony to your committee on January 29<sup>th</sup>. 2015 represents the 75<sup>th</sup> straight year that the Vermont Symphony Orchestra has received support through a direct appropriation. While I am not an economics historian, it is hard to conceive that the current climate is worse than any other time in the last three quarters of a century.

As reported in January, the VSO is grappling with the decreasing reliability and renewability of revenues from many sources. Corporate sponsorships are eroding as businesses shift support to areas that will better benefit their strategic growth. Our partner, Vermont State Colleges, intends to slash their commitment to the VSO next season by 50% because of financial challenges. Foundations are reducing or eliminating cultural support because of the increasing needs surrounding basic human services. Ticket sales and attendance are threatened by cheaper entertainment options and patrons' desires for greater variety. Indeed, we see approximately 10% of our operating revenue at serious risk in fiscal year 2016. With the potential loss of all or a significant portion of our appropriation, the VSO could be looking at upwards of a 20% reduction in revenue. Very little, if any, of these losses can be made up through "other funding sources."

Over the past decade, the VSO has re-tooled its expense budget to be as lean as possible. Administrative staffing is at a level similar to orchestras operating at two-thirds of our budget size. Musician complements are dictated by our repertoire selections; to pare further would effectively turn the VSO into a chamber orchestra. Expense pressures in areas outside of our control—insurance and transportation, to name just two—continue to increase.

The question posed is, how can the VSO adjust to these revenue reductions? Our answer is speculative and preliminary, but not overly dramatic. Depending on the final anticipated operating revenue figures, the VSO may be forced to cancel its popular eight-

concert Made in Vermont Music Festival tour that takes the Orchestra to rural communities like Derby Line, Johnson, and Bellows Falls. We may be forced to cancel the Holiday Pops concerts in Barre, Burlington, and Rutland. We may be forced to eliminate the Sunday Matinee Series in Rutland, and the Masterworks performance in Brattleboro. We might even be forced to reduce our core offering, the Masterworks series in Burlington, from five to four or three performances. It is likely we will be forced to reduce our SymphonyKids educational outreach programs across Vermont. What was once mostly paid for through school fees now relies more heavily on private contributions since school budgets and PTO groups have fewer resources for these vital and unique offerings.

These draconian cuts translate to less work that can be offered to our musicians. A smaller obligation to them will translate into less of a commitment from them. The quality of our artistic product will inevitably slip as New England's best freelance musicians accept engagements elsewhere. Fewer programs may also result in other layoffs. Each one of these painful actions will have the added negative effect of reducing tax revenue and decreasing economic activity in the communities where we perform and work. They will impact our community partners: the concert halls where we rehearse and perform—and the staff hired to work our events—the restaurants, hotels, gas stations, and retail stores our audiences and staff patronize. A “death spiral” is not out of the question here.

This is a critical juncture for the state of Vermont; those elected to serve it, and those who did the electing. The question is not how can we afford to make these small investments in culture for our state; the question is, how can we not make these investments? Vermont will cease to be Vermont without our strong statewide cultural gems: the Vermont Humanities Council, the Vermont Historical Society, the Vermont Arts Council, and the Vermont Symphony Orchestra. We sympathize with this committee's predicament and charge, but implore you to continue to invest in what works and inspires.

Thank you.