

# Community Service

**When furloughed federal employees faced tough times during the partial government shutdown in December and January, orchestras across the country stepped up with free tickets.**

by Nancy Malitz



Pablo Martinez Monsivais / AP



Pablo Martinez Monsivais / AP

Furloughed federal workers wait in line for free meals at Chef José Andrés' World Central Kitchen "emergency café" in Washington D.C., January 2019.

Mary Tuuk (at left), president and CEO of Michigan's Grand Rapids Symphony, was interviewed by Susan Shaw about the orchestra's free tickets on Day 28 of the government shutdown on local Channel 8 WOODTV.



Jeffrey Kaczmarek

As roughly 800,000 furloughed federal employees woke up on January 11 with the knowledge that they would not receive their paychecks, American orchestras large and small across the country had already begun springing into action with free ticket offers and outpourings of support. As the government shutdown stretched on—it lasted from December 22 to January 25, the longest in U.S. history—more and more orchestras rolled out a variety of ticket offers. “It was one of those great waves that sometimes happens,” says Martha Gilmer, CEO of the San Diego Symphony.

Among the very first orchestras to take action was Maine's Portland Symphony, which immediately offered up to five free tickets per person to its January 13 winter-themed concert featuring excerpts from Disney's *Frozen* and Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. Executive Director Carolyn Nishon says the offer prompted "a really amazing outpouring" of support from the public. "It

**"As a civic organization we are a place that people can come to, for all sorts of reasons," says Spokane Symphony Executive Director Jeff vom Saal.**



Natasha Neils

indicated to us just how much people saw the Portland Symphony as community-centered."

The Portland Symphony is the second-largest performing arts organization in Maine, and among the oldest, set to celebrate its centennial in 2024. More than half—65 percent—of the orchestra's mu-

sicians come from the Boston area, which is about two hours to the south. Among government workers affected were the employees at Maine's Acadia National Park on the Atlantic Coast, closed for the duration of the shutdown. Nishon says the orchestra wanted to offer something that would promise a respite for families: "We had some capacity in the hall for that Winter Wonderland concert, which promised a nice time together, with an instrument petting zoo and a chance for children to hop onto a podium with five musicians right there to teach them how to conduct, in addition to the afternoon concert." The response was so positive that the orchestra reinforced its message with other free ticket offers during the shutdown. And, Nishon says, as word spread, "we started getting some calls from other orchestras" about how it all went down.

By January 15, Scott Burditt, the principal horn and personnel manager of Maine's Bangor Symphony Orchestra, Portland's neighbor to the northeast, was also on the case. He sent a clipping about the Portland free-ticket offer to Brian Hinrichs, the Bangor Symphony's executive director, who took it to the board. "The feeling was unanimous that we should do this. It was a pretty easy conversation, frankly," Hinrichs says. When setting up



Nate Levesque

the free-ticket offers, "The only tricky question was how do we identify a federal worker, and we decided that we would be

heard about the Portland Symphony's free-ticket offer and passed a clipping about it to Executive Director Brian Hinrichs, who immediately took it to the orchestra's board.

**"The Grand Rapids Symphony loves to think of ourselves as the orchestra of the western Michigan community," says President and CEO Mary Tuuk. "With that comes responsibility—and also the privilege to give back in whatever way we can."**



pretty generous regarding the forms of identification that we would accept. We put it out to the public that we would take government-issued PIDs [personal identity verifications], federal facility smart cards, uniformed personnel common access cards, etc. The fact that we made the decision to do something like this got an enormously positive reception, with multiple calls for comment from the TV stations and the local newspaper." Bangor's per-service orchestra is not a full-time job for its musicians, as Burditt explained: "We're made up of music teachers, doctors, lawyers—one is a potter—from half a dozen surrounding communities. It's a la-



For its January 13 family concert at Merrill Auditorium, Maine's Portland Symphony offered free tickets to furloughed government employees.

**Virginia Symphony Orchestra bassist Tom Reel was an early influencer in the effort to let other orchestras know that the Virginia Symphony had begun offering free**



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contractors. Bassist Tom Reel, who was in the Air Force after graduating from the Air Force Academy in 1970, was an early influencer in the effort to let other orchestras know that the Virginia Symphony had begun offering free tickets to furloughed federal workers and their families, encouraging others to follow suit. “Almost everybody here knew somebody who was impacted by the shutdown,” says the orchestra’s president and CEO, Karen Philion. “The way Tom framed

bor of love. But I like to think that if some of the big orchestras are like oil tankers in the ocean, where it might take seven miles to make a turn, we can do it in less time.” In fact, several larger orchestras did jump in with free-ticket offers, as reporting for this article revealed.

The Virginia Symphony Orchestra’s four performance venues include Newport News and Norfolk, the vicinity of many shipbuilders and the nation’s largest naval base, home to 22,000 government workers and a large concentration of government

the suggestion, it made so much sense to everyone that we didn’t need to talk anybody into it. It was important for us to make it as easy as possible.” Because there are already significant numbers of military personnel who attend Virginia Symphony concerts, it was easy to spread the word, Philion says. Among the events with free tickets, the orchestra’s “Broadway A to Z” pops concert was the biggest draw.

**Spreading Goodwill**

Throughout the country, orchestras report

that the goodwill response on Facebook and television news was overwhelming, whether the number of tickets given away was in the hundreds or in the dozens. In western Michigan, Grand Rapids Symphony President and CEO Mary Tuuk was interviewed on Day 28 of the government shutdown for a three-and-a-half-minute segment on local Channel 8 WOODTV, which covers Grand Rapids, Holland, and Kalamazoo—a market area with a population of 1.3 million. The video’s life was extended onto the internet, where it ran at the top of several news stories, including a long list of free deals offered to the 6,000 furloughed workers in the area. In fact, the video remains online—with Tuuk’s in-person message: “The Grand Rapids Symphony loves to think of ourselves as the orchestra of the western Michigan community. With that comes responsibility—and also the privilege to give back in whatever way we can,” Tuuk says in the video.

In the Twin Cities, the Minnesota Orchestra gave away 317 tickets fairly quickly. Of no little tangential significance was the sense of goodwill that touched the orchestra internally, according to Associate Principal Horn Herb Winslow, who has been with the ensemble full time since 2005: “We went through this horrible lockout back in the 2012-14 era,” says Winslow, “and during that time we heard many encouraging stories from people about what our orchestra meant to them. It helped us to get through our tough times. Ever since then, we have worked hard to be part of the fabric of the community. And now here were people struggling again—they couldn’t afford to buy a ticket or even go to a movie to get away from their troubles for a couple of hours. So I thought that this was a time when we should step up. As it happened, a group of us had just met with the new president and CEO, Michelle Miller Burns, and she encouraged orchestra members who had ideas to come and talk to her. So, I thought, ‘What the heck, I’ll shoot her an email,’ and within a day she had gotten back to me and had people working on the idea through the weekend. What was interesting was how the offer caught on at Facebook, and how the community itself started chipping in with ideas, like, ‘If you know another government worker, maybe you can trade off babysitting nights,’ and other



The Georgia Symphony and Music Director Timothy Verville in performance. The orchestra made 115 tickets available to furloughed workers at the door, on a first-come, first-served basis, for its January 26 concert.

ideas about how things could happen at very little additional cost.”

The Minnesota Orchestra was among several larger orchestras that opted to offer affected federal employees (there are 17,000 in the Twin Cities) a pair of tickets to a concert of their choosing from pretty much anything available in the current season. That meant, for example, a chance to lock in two seats in mid-June for Music Director Osmo Vänskä conducting Mahler’s Symphony No. 10, as it’s being prepared for a recording.

Likewise, at the Nashville Symphony in April, one could obtain two tickets for Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero leading Bernstein’s “Kaddish” Symphony and Michael Torke’s *Adjustable Wrench*.

Or at the Des Moines Symphony in May, two for Bernstein’s Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* under Music Director Joseph Giunta.

Or, at the San Diego Symphony Orchestra in May, up to four tickets for the Saint-Saëns “Organ” Symphony helmed by Music Director Jahja Ling.

Or, at the Seattle Symphony in June, up to four seats for Debussy’s *Nocturnes* under Music Director Ludovic Morlot.



Minnesota Orchestra Associate Principal Horn Herb Winslow (at right in photo, next to colleague Brian Jensen) suggested the idea of offering free tickets to President and CEO Michelle Miller Burns (left), who mobilized staff to make it happen.



### Classics and More

The Spokane Symphony offered free tickets in January to a classical program of Dvořák and Rachmaninoff led by Music Director Eckart Preu, and also to a family show called *Cirque Zuma Zuma*, which is rather like an African-themed *Cirque du Soleil* with acrobats, tumbling, vocalists, percussion, and juggling. “It was actually a good thing for us to have both events going on,” says Executive Director Jeff vom Saal, who explains that it provided an opportunity to highlight the orchestra’s role as both performer and presenter. The Spokane Symphony performs at The Fox, an Art Deco theater that the orchestra owns and also operates as a performing arts center. “The two different ticket options

allowed us to underscore the notion that we at the Symphony are not so mysterious, not elitist, that we are in fact the exact opposite,” vom Saal says. “As a civic organization we are a place that people can come to, for all sorts of reasons.”

**“It was important to show that we could bring some joy in a time that was challenging for people,”**

**says Omaha Symphony President and CEO Jennifer Boomgaarden.**



The Omaha Symphony offered free tickets for January performances of *South Pacific* at the Holland Performing Arts Center with Music Theatre Wichita. Below: Principal Pops Conductor Ernest Richardson in rehearsal with Anne Horak, playing Nellie Forbush, and local seventh-graders Claire Graham Bajjnauth and Brodhi McClymont.



When the furloughs began in December, the Omaha Symphony was in the middle of a joint effort with Music Theatre Wichita, in nearby Kansas, to produce *South Pacific* in concert for Omaha audiences. “It was the perfect program to offer free tickets for,” says President and CEO Jennifer Boomgaarden. “We were using some of our local talent in the choral roles and more than 30 percent of what we do is community engagement, so it was important to show that we could bring some joy in a time that was challenging for people.” In addition to the post office and airport, Omaha is also home to a fully functioning Air Force base (home of the 55th Wing). “We do things with them on a regular basis,” Boomgaarden says. “I think the

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gratitude and appreciation we were hearing reaffirmed our core values." The orchestra's initial free-ticket offer, posted on Facebook, brought 4,167 impressions and comments praising the orchestra as "absolutely wonderful and so giving."

The Georgia Symphony Orchestra opted for a somewhat different approach to available tickets as a practical matter due to a second complication: a flooded concert hall. A recent deluge had forced the Marietta-based orchestra to move temporarily into a larger space. GSO Executive Direc-



Portland Symphony Orchestra Principal Horn Lauren Winter at an instrument petting zoo before the orchestra's January 13 family concert. The orchestra offered free tickets to furloughed federal workers for the concert, which featured excerpts from Disney's *Frozen* and Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*.

tor Susan Stensland immediately made 115 tickets available to furloughed workers at the door, on a first-come, first-served

basis, to its January 26 concert. "The tragedy that befell our own hall made it easier to serve them," says Music Director Timo-

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Music Director Osmo Vänskä conducts the Minnesota Orchestra. This winter, the orchestra offered free tickets for furloughed government workers for most concerts through the end of the season.

thy Verville. “We had quite a few takers. From the stage, one of the board members welcomed all to the concert hall, mentioning patrons and subscribers, and then how especially happy we were to have with us the furloughed workers, who got a special big round of applause.”

Marietta is part of a market area that serves government workers employed at the nation’s busiest international airport, and it’s also home to the Dobbins Air Reserve Base. “Almost every time you drive in that area, they’re practicing for flight maneuvers such as low entries, ‘touch and goes’ over the road, helicopter runs, things

**“The feeling was unanimous that we should do this,” says Bangor Symphony Executive Director Brian Hinrichs of the orchestra’s decision to offer free concert tickets during the government shutdown.**



like that,” Verville says. The January 26 concert program looked somewhat esoteric on paper—half Schubert, half Arvo Pärt, which Verville had arranged as paired pieces in a mirror formation. “It was one of those concerts where your executive director says, ‘Well ... okay ...’ and then it turns out to be great!,” recalls the delighted Verville. “GSO performances are very approachable for audiences, and I’m very pleased that we were able to provide this opportunity to remove a potential financial barrier.” **S**

NANCY MALITZ is the founding music critic of *USA Today*, an editor at *ClassicalVoiceAmerica.org*, and publisher of *ChicagoOntheAisle.com*. She has written about the arts and technology for the *New York Times* and *Opera News*, among other publications.



Monty Rand

Music Director Lucas Richman and the Bangor Symphony Orchestra in performance. The Bangor Symphony was one of many orchestras offering free tickets to furloughed government employees this winter.

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