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Donor Stories

Bequests Help Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra Play On

By Nicole Cunningham

The Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra is playing on a very high note these days. Of the 18 other full-time, professional orchestras in the United States, the ISO is one of the only orchestras with a balanced budget. How?

With great effect, it takes 87 gifted musicians, thousands of loyal concertgoers, and successful drives to bring ticket holders into a more intimate rapport with the orchestra, through various charitable giving vehicles.

Fred and Jane Schlegel are two longtime patrons of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. They have been attending symphony concerts for 35 years. They are captivated by the orchestra's energy, manifestly brought forth by the many world-renowned conductors that have led the group.

The most recent installment to the conductor's podium is Mario Venzago, who in the Schlegels' estimation, has brought a new verve to the concert going experience.

Fred Schlegel, a partner at the law firm of Baker and Daniels, said, "Mario brings both quality and excitement. His positive contribution is beyond question."

The Schlegels are more than audience members, however. Through the years, they've volunteered and held leadership positions with the symphony. In addition to their volunteerism, they have made and pledged many charitable gifts to the orchestra. Among them, Mr. Schlegel has given a life insurance policy to the orchestra, and he and his wife together will leave bequests to the symphony in their wills. The Schlegels have also set up a charitable remainder trust—meaning that whatever is left of a trust set up in their wills after bequests are made, will be divided up and given to several local charities, including the ISO, the Indianapolis Opera, the Indiana Repertory Theater, and the Festival Music Society.

Bob Swaney knows the Schlegels well. He works in the development office of the ISO, helping to facilitate those charitable gifts the symphony needs to keep going. He says the Indianapolis Symphony sets itself apart from other orchestras insofar as one third of the operating budget comes from charitable gifts.

"We are in the smallest market among the 18 professional orchestras in the U.S., and it takes a lot of creativity year after year to balance those budgets," Swaney said.

"Philanthropy is huge. Most of those other full time orchestras don't rely on charitable gifts nearly much as we do."

Perhaps one reason the orchestra has maintained such success with sustaining the endowment is the variety of ways the public can make gifts.

"We own the hall and the building, so there are naming opportunities for structural items like rooms and other things along those lines. Even the box office lobby has a name."



Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra

Swaney says an extremely intriguing option to many donors involves having a more personal connection to the orchestra. This can be accomplished by endowing one of the orchestra chairs. In fact, 18 of the orchestra's 87 chairs are endowed.

The Schlegels' planned gifts will endow the chair now occupied by principal violist Michael Strauss.

Said Mr. Schlegel, "He's a very enjoyable performer. His musical skills are fantastic. His ever-present enthusiasm is engaging. He also has a great sense of humor."

Swaney says that some people have an existing relationship with the musician, but it's not unusual for donors to endow chairs occupied with musicians with whom they've had no prior contact.

"If the donor doesn't know the musician, perhaps that person played the French horn, so he/she would want to be associated with the French horn player."

"Music is a wonderful, comfortable remembrance," added Swaney. "Coming to hear the orchestra helps that surface again. When a naming opportunity comes along, donors can reconnect to something from 40 or 50 years ago."

Some symphony donors prefer to take a more behind the scenes approach to giving, choosing not to have their names added to programs or publicly displayed plaques. The ISO staff respects these donors' wishes to remain private, but always understands why others like to be recognized.

Swaney said, "People like to connect themselves publicly to the institution and it may potentially encourage others to give. People want to be associated with a winner. People see it as strong motivator."

The ISO has found that focusing on a small number of planned giving vehicles works best.

Swaney said, "Most people are comfortable with putting a bequest in their wills. The big task at hand is getting people to write a will."

Mr. Schlegel has advice for anyone who has given even the slightest thought to leaving a charitable gift or bequest to the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra.

"Just do it! Do it if you like Indianapolis or the ISO or both," said Schlegel.

"I view this as much a gift to the city as a gift to the ISO. Indianapolis without the ISO just wouldn't be the same."

LEAVE A LEGACY® wishes to thank the *Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra*, for sharing this story.