

Houston Philosophical Society Dinner and Lecture

Cohen House, Rice University

February 20, 2020

After cocktails and dinner, President Browning offered members a chance to introduce their guests. He then called for a minute of silence for two members who have died recently, Charlie Burgess and Sam Todd.

The program, "**The Show Must Go On**," was presented by **Dean Dalton**, classical music commentator on Houston Public Media; **John Mangum**, the executive director and CEO of the Houston Symphony Orchestra; and **Robert Yekovich**, Dean of the Shepherd School of Music.

Mr. Mangum moved to Houston several years ago after time on the east and west coasts. He finds Houston friendly and open. The performing arts here rely on philanthropy from a wide variety of donors, who support the Alley, the ballet, the opera, period instrument groups, and the symphony.

Dr. Yekovich said that in the seventeen years he has been at the Shepherd School, he has seen a big increase in musical performances in Houston. Mr. Dalton agreed; he said thirty years ago there were no performances in churches, whereas now they are common. The Society for the Performing Arts, the Houston Harpsichord Society, and many others now provide musical entertainment in churches and museums.

There is synergy between the Shepherd School and the Houston Symphony. Rice faculty members and graduates make up about thirty percent of the symphony orchestra, perhaps creating a "Houston sound" because of their similar training, although auditions are anonymous.

In an effort to create outreach to the entire Houston community, the symphony makes its programs from three kinds of music: the classics, the pops, and new compositions. It does concerts that feature black and Latino music. It has "embedded" musicians who engage in community activities to explain, to "sell" music. Mr. Mangum sees this as a pipeline issue, a twenty- to thirty-year project. The time and money required to teach a child to play an instrument are difficult for poorer parents.

Rice invests in kids who are poor but talented. For students whose families earn less than \$80,000 per year, "Rice Investment" provides full tuition; and there is a sliding scale for those whose families make more but not enough to cover Rice's cost. String players mostly come from families with enough money to pay for their instruments and lessons. Singers, however, come from all across the financial spectrum., Rice music students are taught a wide array of skill sets: writing, speaking, and computer skills, besides making music well. The musical world is much broader than simply playing with an orchestra.

The Houston Symphony's budget is about \$35 million per year. Of that, one third comes from ticket sales and the rest from philanthropy and interest on its endowment. Foundations are big donors and predictable; individual donors need more attention. Rice finds donors who align with a proposed project, such as the new opera house.

The symphony's Jones Hall needs renovation or replacement; it is a "dry, unforgiving space." The players cannot hear each other on stage, and must rely on visual prompts to keep together. The symphony toured Europe in 2018, playing in great concert halls, where it was acclaimed for its work.

The orchestras that typically play in those concert halls are a bit lazier than Houston's, who are used to compensating for their inability to hear each other.

In response to questions, the speakers pointed out that music education is no longer a part of many elementary, middle, and high schools, and that organizations like the symphony and Shepherd School must take up the slack.

Houston has two university music schools: The Moore's School at the University of Houston is much larger than the Shepherd School and gives music education degrees, unlike Rice.

The symphony has no trouble getting great artists to come to Houston for performances; conductors, however, are not generally willing or able to appear here. They are normally required by their contracts to appear only at their own venues or in Europe or at a very few great American orchestras. Houston ranks somewhere between eighth and tenth best in the United States.

One member pointed out that though Texas schools don't teach music, their athletic programs provide for marching bands, so we get plenty of good brass players from athletics.