


Field Notes: True Stories from the Lives of Classical Musicians



Immigration Issues

This concert was almost derailed because of the US's current immigration issues. Our conductor this evening, Lavard Skou Larsen, was going to bring his own orchestra, the Salzburg Soloists, to the US for a tour. The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra was hooking onto the tour in between his other performances so he could come conduct us. In July of this year, his manager contacted me and said his tour was postponed and I needed to apply for a visa for him. My learning curve has been inordinately steep with the formation of ROCO in every area possible from artistic programming to fund raising to marketing, but I knew that dealing with immigration was going to be even more difficult. I found out that not only was the Immigration office about to double their fees for visa applications, but also the deadline for the increase was the following week and my whole family was heading out on a two-week vacation! Luckily, Tasha Brian in ROCO's office was able to quickly learn the visa application process, gather the required items and save ROCO the extra fees.

What we did not realize was that EVERY orchestra had applied before that deadline, creating a huge backlog of visa applications. As our concert date drew nearer, I began to get nervous and phoned immigration. After sitting on the phone for quite a long time, I reached an agent who told me there was a two to three month delay in the decision process due to the amount of applications. This would have put Lavard's acceptance date into January, two months after his performance date this November! In order to expedite the visa process we would have to pay a fee of \$1000. As my head swirled with potential solutions, I logged onto an orchestra list-serve to which I belong through the national orchestra membership group called American Symphony Orchestra League. I quickly wrote to all Executive Directors to say that if they were in the queue for visas, the timing would be an extra two months or more.

Luckily, ASOL monitors this discussion group and I was contacted by our representative in Washington about ROCO's situation. She explained there was an expedited application that would not incur the extra \$1000 fee if the organization can prove great financial loss. The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra's concerts cost over \$40,000 each and when you add production costs, it increases to over \$60,000. If we would have had to cancel this opening concert, one third of our season and almost one fifth of our budget would have been lost. I outlined this possibility to Immigration and received an expedited acceptance two days later. I am thankful we have someone in Washington who knows the process for new groups like us.

Even now there is a ban on the travel and use of rare wood from Brazil used in string players' bows that delays and sometimes prevents musicians from traveling abroad. I hear stories almost weekly from other Executive Directors of orchestras around the nation sending mass emails to ask if a last-minute American can substitute for a performer from abroad that could not get his or her visa processed. The good news is that on Wednesday, October 24th, Rep. Howard Berman (R-CA) and Sens. John Kerry (D-MA) and Orrin Hatch (R-UT) introduced a bill entitled the Arts Require Timely Service - or ARTS Act - to streamline the visa process for guest artists. They know this is not an immigration issue, but an arts related concern.

I share this story with you as an example of how far our policies as a nation can extend into everyday lives and have consequences far beyond what one imagines when reading the stories in the paper. We are thankful we can bring Lavard here this evening to collaborate with ROCO, sharing his extensive knowledge of Mozart and Villa Lobos with us. The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra looks forward to bringing into our Houston community even more artists from around the nation and the world in the coming seasons.

-- Alecia

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FIELD NOTES

from our website at

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Recorded at KUHf studios, ROCO launches FIELD NOTES, podcasts of true stories from the lives of classical musicians. All musicians have funny and fantastic gig stories from their travels over the years, and ROCO is no different. We love to share our stories with our audiences and answer your questions, and you can find both in our programs when you attend one of our concerts. We have gathered stories and questions from past programs for your enjoyment here. You can listen to the podcast, or read the story in pdf format.