

# Musicians left unpaid in wake of canceled concerts in Newport series

By Keith Powers / Special to The Journal

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Approximately 100 musicians, who had signed a performance contract, were left unpaid for several weeks of service, and without employment for the remaining four concerts that were canceled.

The inaugural Newport Contemporary Music Series was an avant-dream, a glittering set of concerts promising the music of — and even some personal appearances by — the modern era’s greatest composers: Philip Glass, André Previn, Pierre Boulez, Howard Shore, John Williams.

The series, the brainchild of 25-year-old Portsmouth native Paul Van Anglen, opened July 1 with a world premiere by Previn. It was scheduled to present nine concerts through Aug. 12, before it came to a crashing halt before the July 28 concert.

By the July 22 concert, only a few orchestra members had been paid. During rehearsals leading up to the July 28 concert, the musicians confronted Van Anglen, demanding answers.

Soon afterward, Van Anglen pulled the plug. “It has been a serious struggle to obtain funding for the Series,” he wrote in an email to the musicians on July 27. “There have been pledged donors who did not follow through on their promises.”

Approximately 100 musicians, who had signed a performance contract with Van Anglen, were left without pay for several weeks of service, and without employment for the remaining four concerts that were canceled.

Although the musicians signed a performance contract with Van Anglen’s 501(c)(3) organization, Newport Contemporary Arts Inc., Van Anglen did not sign a contract with the musicians union. Van Anglen and Harris Shilakowsky — the violinist who served as concertmaster and personnel manager — both insist that union officials were kept in the loop. Van Anglen said that “they [union officials] did not inform us that it [a contract] was needed.”

Union officials told a different story. “We were bypassed, and left in the dark,” said Ed Plunkett, vice president of the Providence Federation of Musicians. “There was no contact whatsoever from the festival management about a contract. It’s our jurisdiction, and there should have been a contract filed.

“Harris inquired about wage scales and compensation, but that was it. If he had said what was going on, our local officers would have had a keener interest. Since they never filed a union contract, we can’t do very much,” said Plunkett.

The union said it is limited in its options to advocate for its unpaid members.

Bob Couture, vice president of the Boston Musicians Association (AFM Local 9-535), said, “It’s really complicated by the fact that there is no contract with the union. I did browse the contract with the musicians, and it’s a real contract. There are state laws about timely payment — either at the performance, or no longer than eight days after the last service.”

Another official, John “Bebo” Shiu, wrote in an email that “as a director of AFM Local 9-535, I know that a majority of the Newport Contemporary Music Series orchestral musicians have drafted and have sent a signed letter to the board of directors of Newport Contemporary Arts Inc. We trust that their board of directors will carry out their fiduciary responsibility.”

None of the musicians themselves was willing to talk on the record about the cancellation.

“I think it’s important that the musicians don’t get smeared on this,” Couture said. “They were doing their job.”

Van Anglen wrote in an email before the series began that “of course fundraising was extremely difficult. But through a lot of work seeking people out, I was able to put this together.”

But Van Anglen has acknowledged that he took on too many responsibilities himself, while continuing to say that the failure came from donors who backed out.

Van Anglen wrote in a July 29 email that “we have no intention of not paying the remaining musicians who have not been compensated. Additionally, I have already started issuing refunds for all the remaining concerts.”

And he is not backing down on his idea of presenting the remaining concerts.

“I am lucky to say that some people have come forward to help keep us going,” he wrote on Aug. 11, “and re-scheduling what was canceled, the Howard Shore [concert] through the John Williams Tribute, all on one weekend.”

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