

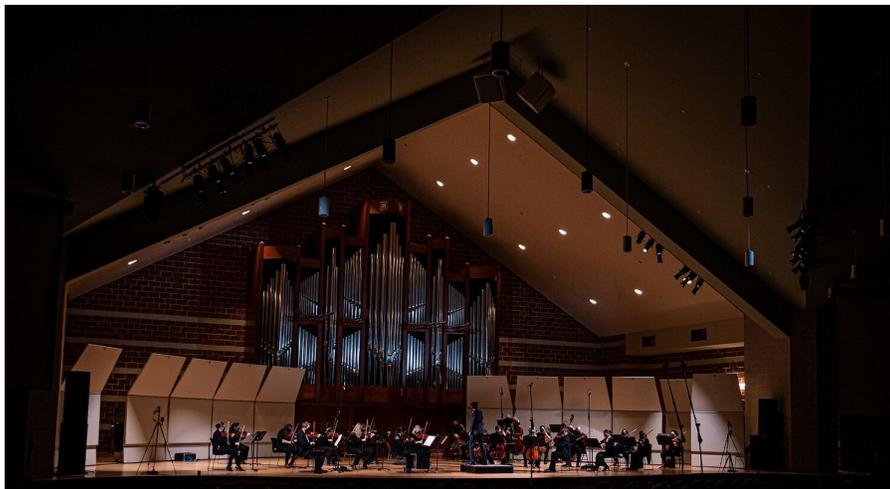
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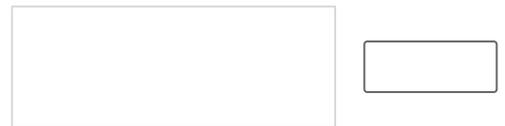


## In “Unconventional Times,” an Orchestra Aims to Get its Fundraising Back on Track

Mike Scutari



THE ILLINOIS PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA/PHOTO: IPO



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On March 7, the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra's board approved the organization's \$5.1 million "Campaign for the Future." Leaders sought to build on gifts received during the campaign's silent phase and a \$3 million gift from the now-defunct Davee Foundation that created the IPO's first-ever endowment. Under the plan, the public phase would kick off in May.

You can probably guess what happened next.

"Five days later, on March 12, we realized we had to cancel our concert for the following weekend," IPO Executive Director Christina Salerno told me. "And soon thereafter, we canceled all 2020 main stage subscription concerts." In mid-March, leadership officially postponed the campaign's public launch.

"Our first priority was the health and safety of our musicians, staff, supporters and audiences," Salerno said, "and in conversations with many of them, we discovered that many people close to the orchestra were interested to know how IPO was weathering the pandemic and what our plans were, not only for coming through the crisis, but also how we planned to grow our visibility and programs in the long term." And so the IPO continued with the silent phase, raising a total of \$1 million.

In mid-November, the IPO announced the [public phase of its campaign](#), with the goal of raising the remaining \$1 million to boost the orchestra's financial stability, support Salerno and Artistic Director Stilian Kirov's efforts to attract new, younger and more diverse audiences across the south and southwest



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Chicago suburbs, and expand the orchestra's equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives.

“As serious as the current worldwide situation is, we believe that music has an important place in this world and we did not want to let an entire year go by without working to secure our future,” Salerno said.

“November campaign announcements may be unconventional, but we live in unconventional times and we know that the people who have dedicated nearly half a century to ensuring the success of IPO deserve to know that we are still working on securing our future.”

### **Prelude to a lead gift**

The IPO's administrative offices are located in Park Forest, Illinois. Its concert venue is Trinity Christian College's Ozinga Chapel in nearby Palos Heights. Twenty miles to the north is Oak Brook, the former home of the [Davee Foundation](#). The name may not ring a bell, but the foundation was a big player in the state's education and performing arts ecosystems. In fact, according to Candid, the foundation was the fourth most generous institutional supporter of theater organizations from 2014 to 2018, allocating a total of \$23.5 million.

The foundation's namesake, Ken Davee, established the foundation with his wife Adeline Barry Davee in 1964. Adeline passed away in 1987; a year later, Ken married Ruth Dunbar Davee, who served on the foundation's board and as president after Ken's passing in 1998. Ruth passed away in 2011.

“Ruth Dunbar Davee was a longtime supporter of IPO,” Salerno told me. “The family foundation that carries her name, and that of her husband, Ken M. Davee, had been incredibly supportive of IPO for over two decades and IPO considered Mrs. Davee a great friend.”

In the fall of 2017, the foundation invited Salerno and Kirov to an annual stewardship meeting where the pair shared how the IPO had been growing and rolling out initiatives like “Classical Evolve,” an annual composition competition aimed at expanding the canon of classical music.

Board members “asked us many great questions probing our ideas and concepts,” Salerno said. “Not long after that meeting, we learned about the initial Davee endowment gift and the foundation’s hopes that the gift would help spur additional investment in the orchestra.” The foundation made the gift official in March 2018.

“The Davee Foundation has supported the IPO for 21 years,” former foundation Executive Administrator Craig Grannon told me. “In that time, we have been impressed by their improvement as an orchestra and their outreach to educating students to music. We feel that teaching children is an important aspect of their mission and wished to explicitly support that mission. We also wished to support the growth they have shown in their repertoire, especially under their last two music directors.”

### **Providing a “short-term cushion”**

The foundation closed on December 31, 2019, and was unable to offer direct support to organizations in the

early days of the pandemic. However, it did “set up quite a few endowments that will offer support during this time of crisis,” Grannon said, “and hopefully, help some of them survive with philanthropic support being more difficult to come by, currently.”

Grannon’s hope came to fruition at the IPO. “Receiving the initial gift in 2018 has definitely provided a bit of financial cushion” throughout the pandemic, Salerno said. “However, that cushion is intended to last us through five years of timing of campaign pledge gifts being realized.” Additionally, the IPO can no longer count on the Davee Foundation for an annual gift, so “a main focus right now is to not let our short-term cushion overshadow our long-term stability.”

To put the IPO’s “cushion” in a broader context, the orchestra seeded its endowment with the \$3 million Davee Foundation gift two years ago. Its 2020 budget was just over \$1 million; ticket revenues cover less than 30% percent of that amount. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, located 29 miles north of the IPO’s home theater in Palos Heights, had an endowment of [\\$314 million](#) as of October of last year, and an annual operating budget of [\\$75 million](#).

Other local supporters of the IPO include the Ozinga Foundation, Gerhard Manufacturing and Designing, Michuda Construction, Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelly Foundation, and the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

### **“Our pitch to donors is easier”**

A big question facing fundraisers in the early days of the pandemic was whether they should [keep the fundraising machinery humming](#) or take a breather.

The fact that IPO's supporters asked leadership to keep them in the loop aligns with what fundraisers told me in the spring and summer: **Don't make a tone-deaf pitch**, but don't vanish completely. Show them how the organization is staying relevant and engaged with the community.

"I am pleased to say that to date, we have continued to realize overwhelming support from individuals," Salerno told me. "People who have made pledges to the campaign, all of them significant to the individual donor, have upheld their commitments." She told me performing arts fundraisers should "be patient with donors and keep communicating with them about the art you are producing during this time."

"We actually think our pitch to donors is easier during this time," Salerno said. "Everyone misses quality social interactions and ways to connect with people on a personal level right now. Many people miss live music and live arts experiences—we hear this all the time." Classical music, in particular, "helps with all of what ails us as a society. **Music feeds the soul**, gives us a chance to unplug and let our minds wander."

Salerno encourages performing arts organizations to "try to make connections between the movies they watch at home and the designers, composers, visual artists, musicians, writers, choreographers and more who contributed to that one film." Echoing the sentiments of Educational Theatre Association's executive director Julie Cohen Theobald, who called school theater the "**beginning of the pipeline**" that funnels underrepresented students into a performing arts world, Salerno said that "arts groups are the pipeline to the film industry, to national arts groups, to

architecture, and even to marketing pitches from big corporations.”

It hasn't all been smooth sailing. Salerno has seen “a near-complete drop-off from corporate support during this time, with a few very notable exceptions that we are incredibly grateful to have maintained.” Her perspective won't come as a surprise to the 187 performing arts fundraising professionals who responded to an IP survey on [the state of the ecosystem](#). Eighty-one percent of respondents said that corporate giving was either decreasing (53%) or “about the same” (28%).

### **Ongoing EDI work**

The foundation's gift addressed another big issue for performing arts funders—helping “highbrow” organizations roll out more inclusive programming. This issue has been on philanthropy's radar for quite some time, with funders like the Andrew W. Mellon and Wallace foundations doling out [tens of millions of dollars](#) to help ballets, operas and orchestras attract younger and more diverse audiences. The pandemic and the death of George Floyd [accelerated this trend](#).

“Classical music as an art form has traditionally focused upon western European composers and has not embraced difference on stage or through audience development efforts,” Salerno said. “IPO aims to alter that traditional trajectory.”

When IPO launched its inaugural “Classical Evolve” competition in 2018, it received no female applicants and 50 male applicants. Salerno and her team started talking to female composers and others in the industry

to discover why **more women had not applied**, and learned that many women start composing later in life than their male counterparts. As a result, the IPO removed the age requirement from the application process. In the second year of the competition, it received three female finalists. One of them, Martha Horst, was eventually chosen as IPO's composer-in-residence for 2019-20.

All the while, Artistic Director Kirov has “made a point of expanding IPO repertoire to regularly include works by diverse and less well-known composers,” Salerno said, with an emphasis on female, African American and Bulgarian composers.

IPO also hired a consultant from Orchestrate Inclusion to help the orchestra on its path to fostering EDI across the organization and in partnership with the community.

After spearheading a series of focus groups and interviews, the consultant developed a 22-page report detailing the state of EDI at IPO and identifying a number of areas where the organization could encourage a more equitable and inclusive culture. The IPO went on to form a cross-functional, 21-person EDI team that meets virtually every one to two months and is working on a number of initiatives, including “establishing an EDI vision statement, addressing hiring practices, attending racial equity trainings, and finding ways to build internal consensus to elicit lasting change,” Salerno said.

In a fraught performing arts sector where fundraisers lean on performance metrics to “**make the case**” to **finicky donors** amidst a global pandemic, Salerno's

parting thoughts were refreshingly philosophical. “Art is all around us,” she said. “It is in the air we breathe, the gardens we walk through and the music we hear wafting around us. Art does not stop happening, but with support during this pandemic, it will again flourish in a way that can be enjoyed together.”

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