

TESTIMONY TO THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL – BUDGET HEARING, APRIL 8, 2024

Good afternoon, my name is Jim Kelly and I am the President and CEO of the National Philharmonic. One of our most recent sell-out performances last year was a collaboration with NASA, of which I brought that collaboration with me today ...with the solar eclipse.

For nearly 40 years, NatPhil has been the premiere professional symphony orchestra headquartered in Montgomery County. Since 2005, we have performed in, and been a partner to, the Music Center at Strathmore. Our organization's vision is to share and amplify the power of music; besides our extensive concert programming, we perform concerts for all second graders in MCPS, have a Youth Mentorship Program for students to receive free private instruction, mentorship and performance opportunities, run a Summer Strings institute for talented middle and high school musicians, provide free concert admission to over 2,000 students per season, and partner with many diverse community organizations to expand access to classical music.

Past funding from the state arts council, and the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County has been used to transform our organization through an equity lens and bring diversity to our staff, our musicians and our programming. By implementing these changes, new patrons feel comfortable coming to our concerts, and our audience and donor base is evolving and new.

However, like many arts organizations across the country, and particularly orchestras, we find ourselves facing financial challenges. The recovery from Covid has been bumpy at best – our return to full performance seasons continues to be challenging. While our concert audiences are robust, donations and financial contributions have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. Lower ticket prices, to allow access for more patrons to our concerts, have resulted in lower earned income.

Running an orchestra requires much more union labor and production than other art forms. NatPhil's operating costs for necessary items such as concert production, union musician fees, concert hall overhead, and ticketing costs continue to rise, in fact, since 2020, these costs have risen an average of 20%. This year, to offset some of these challenges, our board made the difficult decision to cancel three spring concerts, recast our budget, and reduce our administrative staff.

I come before you today to respectfully ask that the council designate the National Philharmonic in the county budget for a one-time contribution of \$400,000. This investment in NatPhil's future will demonstrate civic pride in our organization and the determination to ensure its continued success. We will be able to stabilize the organization after 4 years of fluctuation and change. Particularly now, as we look to the 2024-2025 season, NatPhil will celebrate its 40th anniversary in the county, and the 40th and final year of our music director, Piotr Gajewski. With your support, NatPhil can be confident that we can continue to bring our excellent concerts, educational programming, and community events to everyone.

Please reference the County Executive's Office most recent study on NatPhil for additional information.

Thank you.