

From: Dieneke Johnson

Re: National Philharmonic

Some of you may remember me from years past, since I have been a Board Member for all but the first year of this orchestra's existence, which translates to 38 years of service. My daughter was 17 years old at the time, and an avid music student in Gaithersburg High School. She went on to get a degree in music performance from Carnegie Mellon, followed by a masters degree in arts management. For the last 25 plus years she has been working for a software company that specializes in non-profits. A nice full circle. And yes, she is a donor.

When my parents were still living, in Georgia, they would time their visits to see me and my kids to coincide with a concert by what were the precursors of National Philharmonic, prior to the residency at the Music Center at Strathmore. Those concerts were always the highlights of their trips, which took them 2 days each way.

You may remember when we introduced the All Kids All Free All the Time program. Not only have I brought roughly twenty kids (from ages 10 - 18) to our concerts over the years, at least one is near the end of his studies in Music Education at Towson University, and was an intern with our Chorale while at Northwood High School. Almost all the kids were from immigrant and minority families, and likely would not have had such a transformative concert experience otherwise.

Today, I want to support our President/CEO Jim Kelly's request for a \$300,000 line item in the county budget dedicated to the National Philharmonic. NatPhil has been in the county for nearly 40 years, performing since 2005 at Strathmore as a partner. Besides its extensive concert programming, NatPhil presents concerts for all second graders in MCPS, has a Youth Mentorship Program for students to receive private instruction and performance opportunities, runs a Summer Strings institute for talented middle and high school musicians, provides free concert admission to over 2,000 students per season, and partners with many diverse community organizations to expand access to classical music. Its reach in the county is deep and wide. All the orchestra musicians are local, with the vast majority from Montgomery County, making their living here and contributing to the education of Montgomery County youth. A NatPhil group even performed at Leisure World, where I live now.

Like many arts organizations across the country, and particularly orchestras, NatPhil finds itself currently facing financial challenges. The recovery from Covid has been bumpy at best – the return to full seasons of in-person concerts continues to be challenging. While concert audiences are robust, donations and financial contributions have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

In contrast, the NatPhil's operating costs for necessary items such as concert production, union fees, rent, and ticketing costs have risen an average of 20% since 2020. This year, to offset some of these challenges, the board of directors made the difficult decision to cancel two spring concerts, recast the budget, and reduce the administrative staff.

The NatPhil is a treasure in Montgomery County. I want to add my voice to those who want to see it supported through a direct line item of \$300,000 in the county budget.

As we look to the 2024-2025 season, NatPhil will be celebrating its 40th anniversary in the county, and the 40th year of music director, Piotr Gajewski. With line item funding, NatPhil can be confident that it has the full support of county leadership as it continues to bring excellent concerts, educational programming, and community events to everyone.

Respectfully submitted,

Dieneke Johnson