

April 4, 2024

To: Montgomery County Council

From: Erich Heckscher

Re: National Philharmonic

To Whom It May Concern:

I write as a longtime resident of Montgomery County, and a musician of the National Philharmonic Orchestra and member of the National Philharmonic Orchestra Committee. The Committee represents the musicians to the Association and negotiates our Collective Bargaining Agreement through the American Federation of Musicians. It is my intention to present factual and accurate testimony here, but if any of my details are slightly off, please forgive my inaccuracy.

You have received letters detailing National Philharmonic's contribution to Montgomery County culture through MCPS programs, our leading-edge diversity work, including the premier of Adolphus Hailstork's *A Knee on the Neck* oratorio after the death of George Floyd, and expanded diversity in programming, hiring and community outreach.

You are no doubt aware of NP's reorganization in 2018 and our aggressive modernization of our fundraising processes to significantly reinforce our State and County support with nonprofit fundraising. We are actively investing in new models of audience retention and donor-building, and supporting these efforts through private donations.

Orchestras nationwide are struggling to return to normal after the pandemic, where costs have increased but ticket sales have yet to catch up. NatPhil is no different, and as a small-budget regional orchestra in a major market shared with two major full-time orchestras, one, the BSO, sharing our home concert hall, we face particular struggles. It is this concert hall that I would like to focus on.

Strathmore Music Center is a jewel of North American concert halls. I've been to nearly all of them, and I would personally put it in the top five. We have performed there since its opening in 2005, and have come to be defined by it. There is simply no other venue that comes close. But Strathmore is expensive. We pay the same rate as the BSO; up to \$40,000 for a single day, which can only include a dress rehearsal and performance. While Strathmore has worked generously with us through the pandemic to resolve debt, they have so far been unwilling to agree to a sliding scale of costs that represents our size.

The sentence, "why don't we just play somewhere else?" has been uttered, and my heart sinks to even think of this. Strathmore offers a venue that can accommodate the thousands of 2nd graders that attend our annual MCPS concerts. It provides a unique concertgoing experience for our audience through a truly magical acoustic and visual environment. And it gives us access to a top-tier of solo artists like Gil Shaham, Sarah Chang and Midori that our audiences want to see. In our upcoming search for a new Music Director (conductor), it will attract a broader, more diverse group of candidates.

I fully support the \$300,000 earmark, and hope this can be considered as an in-perpetuity item.

Thank you.