

23 January 2015

Dear Pierian Board Members:

Jim asked me to prepare the following updates for you regarding the current status of HRO. Musically, I have little concern. The orchestra has continued to improve under Fed's leadership and while April's performance of Mahler 5 will certainly be our biggest challenge in my time with the orchestra, the length of that concert cycle and the head start on the music we got last semester gives me confidence that that performance, along with our upcoming concert with the Holden choirs on February 28, will be successful. In this letter, I want to primarily focus on outlining some key issues we're facing from an organizational standpoint and what actions we're taking so far to improve them. I look forward to hearing your feedback and suggestions on how we can work together to make the orchestra more successful.

**Concert Attendance** – While last year's performance of Verdi's requiem was a sellout due to our collaboration with the Holden choirs and its coincidence with Visitas weekend, concert attendance for the last year has been hovering around 50%. Most concerning, has been the drop in consignment ticket sales, which are sold by members of the orchestra and are exempt from the sizable cut taken by the Harvard Box Office. These are down roughly 30% from 2013. I attribute this difference to a highly aggressive ticket sales policy by our 2013 sales manager that our 2014 manager largely backed off on. Our new 2015 sales manager is the only member of the board not in the orchestra, which does present unique challenges in motivating sales; however, he also serves as the treasurer of the Eliot House Committee, which raises over \$30,000 a year in merchandise and ticket sales. While our consignment ticket sales opportunities will be limited for the next concert because the Holden choirs will receive half of the tickets, I look forward to working with him to aggressively promote ticket sales by members of the orchestra in April.

**Community Outreach** – Another way we hope to ultimately increase concert attendance is by increasing our footprint in the Cambridge and Boston area. Our new outreach director is contacting band and orchestra directors at local schools with the aim of sending small groups of HRO members to talk about the importance of music to their education at these schools and perform chamber music. In the process, they will promote the next HRO concert. When we next negotiate pricing with the Harvard Box Office, we will also attempt to add \$5 student rush tickets for local students to help fill empty seats and attract their higher paying parents.

**Digital Presence** – This year's board also includes some very computer-talented freshmen. Our new webmaster already has a new and massively improved draft website that should go live in the next couple of months. One of publicity managers is also designing an HRO smartphone app to go along with our plans to increase our social media presence. I have yet to see a draft of that; however, previous programming work by the same student has been impressive, so I'm looking forward to seeing what he comes up with.

**Freshmen Retention** – At the semester, we lost five members of the orchestra, four of whom are freshmen. Musically, we have offset these losses with a sudden influx of graduate students and undergraduates returning from study abroad; however, these losses have raised concerns about what we can do as an orchestra to improve continuity. After meeting with a number of freshmen,

the two main problems I have identified are (1) a lack of social cohesion and (2) the perceived divide between the musically serious students who take private lessons and may continue professionally or semi-professionally after college and those who were talented musicians in high school that want to keep playing in college while pursuing other endeavors.

To the first issue, I have appointed a new freshman class liaison to plan freshman-only social programming like trips to the BSO, dinners, and study breaks and make a more careful effort to coordinate a clear welcome strategy for freshmen, especially at the fall retreat. This year's Greenwood retreat was also marked by a bout of cold and inclement weather that made outdoor programming difficult and made it hard to bring the orchestra together due to the spread out nature of the facilities. For this reason, Fed and I are looking at possible alternative locations for next year that might offer a better experience for the freshmen. This could very well end up increasing our costs, especially given the rapid inflation in bus rental fees that we've seen over the last two years. I may ask the Pierians for support in this regard, but will keep you apprised once we know what the cost difference may be letter this semester.

To the second issue, Fed and I have discussed options like allowing some students to take the class for a letter grade that will require extensive negotiation with the administration. On a smaller scale, we are introducing seating auditions for Mahler 5 to encourage everyone to practice more and reward those students who are more committed. However, because HRO simply could not draw enough members to be a full symphony without accommodating both groups of students, this will likely be a continuing challenge in years to come.

**Finances** – Last school year, the orchestra ran sizable surplus, largely due to exceptional ticket sales in the fall, and while we continue to be solvent, we are largely kept afloat thanks to generous grants from Harvard and the Pierians and have so far been unable to invest more in the orchestra. We currently have a large inventory of HRO merchandise including hundreds, if not thousands of old CDs, which I hope to liquidate and reinvest in some of the initiatives outlined above. We are also making advertising revenue again after a couple of years without a competent ads manager. It currently only amounts to \$150 per cycle or so, but that should continue to increase as we build stronger relationships with local businesses.

With respect to HPF contributions to the orchestra, the previous administration budgeted \$5,000 for retreat and \$2,400 for coaches per concert cycle in the fall and \$2,500 in the spring, amounting to a total of \$14,800. If that's a surprise to you all, please let me know and we can discuss alternatives. I hope that HPF was involved in that part of the budgeting process, but that may have just been copy and pasted from the previous year without a second thought.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns regarding the above. If any of you would like to talk individually, my email is [aaronroper@college.harvard.edu](mailto:aaronroper@college.harvard.edu) and my phone number is 425-223-8634. I look forward to working with all of you and hope we have a productive year in store.

Sincerely,  
Aaron Roper  
President, HRO