

May 27, 2015

RE: Support for SB441, modernizing the Oregon Cultural Trust

Dear Senator Johnson, Representative Gomberg and Committee Members,

On behalf of my organization, Chamber Music Northwest, and hundreds of small and mid-sized arts and cultural organizations throughout our state, I want to express our strong support for Senate Bill 441 modernizing the Oregon Cultural Trust.

I came to Oregon a decade ago after arts leadership in two states – Minnesota and Ohio – that are widely hailed as among the nation’s leaders in state support for the arts. I also served on boards and committees for several national arts organizations, and as vice chair of a major city’s arts allocation committee. Yet, I was simply astounded in my discovery of the Oregon Cultural Trust. Never had I encountered such a visionary and innovative way of allowing citizens and a state to provide greater support for vital arts and cultural opportunities for its citizens. Today, 14 years later, the Oregon Cultural Trust remains one of the nation’s most creative and pacesetter arts funding programs, and the envy of 49 other states.

Yet, as an Oregon arts leader since 2005, I have also been struck by how limited the Oregon Cultural Trust is in its grant making abilities. This is because the original legislation establishing the Trust severely limits both the Trust’s resources for administration and the amount that can be granted annually. As a result, each year, only a small number of arts and cultural organizations throughout the state can be awarded grants – with many grants going to the largest and best supported groups that can create the most competitive applications. Last year, of the 1,400 cultural nonprofit eligible for support from the Cultural Trust, just over \$600,000 was distributed statewide through competitive grants to 51 organizations – with grants starting at just \$5,000.

Chamber Music Northwest is a perfect example of this dichotomy of bold vision juxtaposed with modest means. We are a mid-sized arts organization with a \$1.6 million budget. Over the past 45 years, we have grown to become one of the nation’s leading chamber music festivals, and among Oregon’s largest classical music organizations. We’re relatively big compared to most arts organizations in the state. Yet, CMNW has received just one grant from the Oregon Cultural Trust since 2010 – a grant this season to support a major initiative for presenting new music – including two newly commissioned works from Oregon composers.

CMNW is not alone in this regard, for there are hundreds of arts and cultural organizations throughout every community, county and legislative district in the state that have received little or no support from the Trust. Many small and mid-sized arts and cultural organizations have never received any Trust support. It’s not because of a lack of vision or worthy programs and projects. It’s not because the Trust’s small staff don’t strive to reach every corner of our state. Rather, it’s because of a lack of resources.

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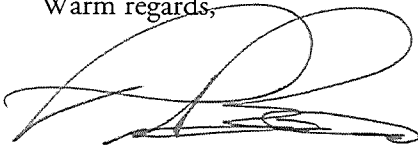
SB441 helps increase the Oregon Cultural Trust's impact by increasing the funds it has available to make grants. It makes small technical changes, giving the Trust board the authority to set amount of annual distributions, within a range; to dedicate greater resources to administration so the Trust can be more successful in raising funds; and to adjust how available funds are distributed among its competitive grant program, support for cultural coalitions, and grants to cultural partners.

While small, these changes will have a dramatic impact on the number and size of grants the Trust can award on an annual basis. It will mean more Trust support for small and mid-sized arts organizations that have visionary programs and projects to better serve their community. And, it will broaden the Trust's impact, creating increased arts and cultural access for Oregonians and Oregon communities in every corner of the state.

As an arts leader, a frequent participant in arts and cultural activities, a supporter of the Trust in every single year I have lived in Oregon (and at the maximum level), and as an Oregonian who is extremely proud of our state and its vision in creating the Oregon Cultural Trust, I urge you to support SB441 to create greater arts and cultural opportunities for our citizens.

Thank you for your support of SB441 and arts and culture throughout Oregon.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter J. Bilotta", with a large, stylized flourish extending from the end of the signature.

Peter J. Bilotta
Executive Director
Chamber Music Northwest