AGMA at the crossroads

Members must decide on the future of the Guild

by Sanford Wolff, National Executive Secretary

As we have reached the end of our 1987-88 fiscal year, I make this report to the membership.

Working for you has been satisfying and interesting. Working with your staff of employees has been encouraging and extremely gratifying — the staff is hard-working, efficient and dedicated.

My report, admittedly, contains unwelcome news, but I would be denying my responsibility if I failed to give you a true picture of where AGMA stands today and my assessment of its ability to serve you in the future.

As all of you realize, the cost of everything in recent years has increased drastically. AGMA will have a deficit of nearly $90,000 in this fiscal year (10/1/87 to 9/3/88). A major reason is an increase in our office rent. In the Guild’s previous offices, you paid $40,000 yearly. When your lease expired last year, the landlord notified the Board that if we wanted to remain, our rent would triple. After an intensive search, the staff found new, vastly improved offices for about the same rent we would have had to pay if we stayed at the old location. An added bonus: our new offices have enabled us to do more things to serve you, such as temporarily providing space for the Career Transition for Dancers Program, which is proving so beneficial to many of our members, and has already successfully assisted 71 of our members to find new jobs and careers at the end of their careers as dancers.

While increased rent has been a major factor in our alarmingly high deficit, it is not the only problem we have.

As you know, AGMA’s basic dues of $52 a year include $3,000 of term life insurance for each member — a benefit which I believe is unique among the performers’ unions and otherwise unheard of in the great majority of other unions. Every AGMA member who pays basic dues of $52 per year receives this insurance, regardless of sex, health, age or any other consideration. The premium for this coverage doubled on October 1, 1988, and now eats up more than half of your basic $52 annual dues.

When the Prudential Insurance Company told us that on October 1, 1988 our rate would go from $1.05 per member per month to $5.51, your Treasurer, Larry Davidson, searched the insurance industry and we were able to get group coverage for our members at $2.55. But putting the new policy in place will cost the union additional money in clerical and administrative work and postage.

Although AGMA is not required by the Constitution or By-Laws to provide this insurance coverage, your Board of Governors is dedicated to continue it, because we have de-

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termined that it would be virtually impossible for individual members to purchase personal insurance in this amount, even at a greatly increased premium. But as things now stand, we cannot continue to pay these life insurance premiums and operate the union, even at a reduced level of service.

We feel that we cannot reduce our service. In fact, I believe it is already inadequate and some of you have told me so. The services AGMA can provide today do not meet your professional needs. I’m not sure we have ever fully faced that fact, but the times we live in demand that we face it now.

While increased rent and life insurance premiums have hit us hardest, other costs have also risen: postage, paper, telephone, printing — all these have increased. Subsidies to the AGMA Relief Fund need to be maintained. Much of our office equipment is outmoded; it ought to be replaced.

These are just some of the things we must attend to if we are to furnish the services you expect, deserve, demand and sorely need. AGMA is a personal service organization; its members are its only source of funds. But its income no longer will cover even the most basic expenses — let alone the cost of new, expanded service.

Despite our continuing financial squeeze, AGMA provides more personal service to its members than virtually any other union, in or out of the performing arts. The degree of contact between our members and staff is unique in the union movement. Although we have fewer than 6,000 members, AGMA must nevertheless perform — and pay for — the same number of functions as does a union with a membership ten times as great. We presently negotiate in excess of 150 contracts in every region of the country: 55 in the field of Opera; 22 in Dance; 55 in Management; six Symphony; nine Concert Singer; seven Amateur Choruses where AGMA members augment the chorus.

More AGMA members are performing overseas under the protection of AGMA contracts than ever before. In the last 12 months alone, New York’s Metropolitan Opera Company went to Japan; the Houston Grand Opera has been to Scotland; the New York City Opera to Taiwan; Dance Theatre of Harlem to France and the USSR; the New York City Ballet and the American Ballet Theatre to Japan, Spain and Switzerland; Houston Opera to Japan and over 60 members toured Italy, Germany and France in a single production of Porgy and Bess. Other companies have been — or soon will be — in Italy, Germany, the Soviet Union — all under contracts which AGMA must negotiate. While this means more jobs and more money for our members, it also means more staff time and more resources expended by the union.

Because of one employer’s continued bending and breaking of the rules while on foreign tour, the members on tour have insisted that when touring next year, a staff member meet overseas with the company at least once during the tour when there is a need. They expressed the strong feeling that their total dues made them deserving of that service, and I agree. In addition, several hundred new AGMA jobs have been created as a result of recent successful organizing efforts — which must be continued and expanded. In Michigan, Ohio, California and elsewhere new companies have been signed to AGMA contracts. But this, too, takes time and money. In organizing the Cincinnati Ballet, for example, AGMA had to proceed legally through the Labor Board. Ordinarily, this would require engaging a local attorney, but in this case I represented AGMA to spare us that expense. Still, we incurred expenses — such as travel and housing — and if several of these situations occur simultaneously, which is entirely possible, we will have to pay for competent local representation in areas where we do not have it now.

Why is organizing so important to you, AGMA’s present members?

First, our members travel all over the country. They must be protected on the road. Permanent resident companies need protection, too. Hypothetically, if our members — choristers, dancers, soloists and staging personnel — working in Kansas City are covered by an AGMA contract, and artists working in St. Louis are not, we’re eventually going to have a problem with wages and working conditions in Kansas City. Also, managements from all over the country come to New York to audition both singers and dancers for their companies. It is important that those companies provide professional wages and conditions so that these artists, our members, when they relocate, are not asked to work for next to nothing.

Unlike many other labor organizations, AGMA has no local unions, with their own treasuries and staffs. Every AGMA contract must be negotiated, administered and paid for by the national union. As our business grows, as simulcasts on radio and television increase (together with our members’ earnings) AGMA members in Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Portland, Washington, D.C., Boston, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Houston, Dallas and other communities in which new companies are emerging, need greater services. Both those who live there, and those who pass through briefly, must be served by experienced professionals, often by attorneys.

For some unknown reason we have been fortunate in being able to retain several lawyers in cities all over the nation who are pre-eminent in the field of labor relations, and who have continued to serve you at fees much below their reg-

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The awful truth is that today we would find it difficult to find the wherewithal to finance a work stoppage — a strike — voted by our members. I admit it’s wrong, but the ability to bargain successfully is directly related to the ability of a union to support a strike to achieve those things a membership demands.

In my eight months of employment with you, I have tried to strengthen the relationship of the National Office not only with members in New York City, but in the rest of the nation. Here are some of the suggestions that have been made by members in Board meetings in my several visits to Houston, Chicago, San Francisco and Philadelphia:

1. Maintain and circulate a list of delegates nationwide, and set up a communication system among them — perhaps a newsletter to which they contribute and receive information to and from their counterparts.

2. Re-format the AGMazine so that it becomes a more vital publication, with news from all the members we represent throughout the country.

3. Hold Board of Governors meetings on a quarterly basis outside of New York while we continue a regular schedule of Board meetings in New York.

4. Increase the life insurance so that the benefit becomes more meaningful.

5. Assign the staff member responsible for negotiating contracts for a particular company to visit that company at least once each season.

6. Strengthen our contractual relationship with managers and agents so that a viable code of ethics will govern their relationship with our members.

7. Creatively extend and increase our work with those very small opera companies that provide our younger members with a stage on which to hone their skills before an audience.

8. Provide sufficient staff to monitor foreign companies appearing in the U.S. under substandard wages and working conditions when their appearances unfairly compete with our native American companies for the same audience. One example: the Royal Opera Company of Wales, which will appear at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

9. Increase the effectiveness of the AGMA Relief Fund (which relies solely on contributions, not dues income), so that its truly remarkable service can be more readily available.

A resolution of your Board of Governors directs me to prepare estimates of what it will cost to provide additional services to all our members, including additional staff on the West Coast and in the Central and Southern regions of the U.S. When I present that estimate to the Board, I will recommend that increases in the dues structure be presented to you for consideration and approval.

The proposal I make will be the result of careful study;
it will enable us to maintain the life insurance package you have told us that you want, and make realistic the possibility of increasing the $3,000 benefit. It will make it possible to maintain and increase essential services needed in today’s world; and it will propose an equitable sharing of the expense of doing business.

Career Transition for Dancers takes up residence at AGMA

Career Transition for Dancers, a program financed by Theatre Authority Funds of several performer unions, and formerly administered by The Actors’ Fund of America, is back in action and now operating out of AGMA’s New York office. The program is currently accepting new applicants.

It continues under the direction of Diane Goldman, a highly trained and experienced administrator, who holds an M.S.W. Degree in Clinical Social Work from New York University’s School of Social Work and a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology/Psychology, with honors in Sociology, from City University of New York. She also has special training in alcohol and substance abuse from the Alcoholism Council of Greater New York and certification from the New York City Central Labor Rehabilitation Council.

The physical toll on dancers is so great and the career span so short, that Career Transition for Dancers (CTFD) was created in 1985 by the performing arts unions — AGMA, Equity, AFTRA and SAG, to deal with the age-old question: Is there life after dance? The program helps professional dancers through the difficult period of retiring from dance and making a transition to a second career.

Under the leadership of Ms. Goldman, over 250 dancers (including 71 members of AGMA) have passed through the program since its inception, resulting in well over 100 new careers. In addition, more than 100 dancers currently are in school, working towards degrees or in survival jobs, while others are still dancing and planning for their future careers. Other participants, many of whom are members of multiple unions, have included 97 Equity members, 68 AFTRA members, 62 SAG members and 35 AGVA members. Union funding for the program to date exceeds $240,000.

With a staff of vocational counselors, social workers, consultants and administrative and clerical support, CTFD is able to offer a wide range of services that are free of charge, including psychological and vocational counseling, testing and assessment, financial grants, financial planning, internships, survival job guidance, facilitating permanent employment, support groups, career development workshops and special interest seminars.

A typical example of a dancer from CTFD is Ms. B. who, when she came to the program, was in her mid 40s. Her career in dance was over. She had started dancing as a child, and after dancing professionally for ten years she had reached an age where she could no longer meet the physical demands of her career. While in her 30s it became necessary for her to retire and leave the field. Before she came to the program, she had been surviving by taking whatever jobs she could find, but her hope was to return to the arts in some capacity. Through CTFD’s counseling, testing and support, she was able to focus on a new endeavor. The program assisted her with a grant for tuition and she is now pursuing a career in costume and set design while continuing to participate in CTFD’s group support program.

Mr. C came to CTFD with a different problem. He had started dancing at a young age and worked on Broadway as a dancer for 20 years. In his mid-30s he suffered a serious injury and was forced to abandon his career. When he came to the program, he was not interested in starting a new career, but needed to find immediate work to support himself financially. The program worked with him, provided tuition for him to attend Bartenders’ School and upon completion of the training, he found work as a bartender. He continued to attend CTFD seminars and workshops and, more recently, he started his own mail order business.

These are just two examples, but they show how CTFD addresses a specific need of a unique group of performers and enables them to continue as self-supporting, independent and contributing members of society.
The AGMA Relief Fund

CARING FOR AGMA MEMBERS WHEN NO ONE ELSE WILL

By Nedda Casei
President, AGMA
Chairman, AGMA Relief Fund

The Relief Fund — Compassionate safety net for every AGMA member. When disaster strikes your life — an illness or injury, a cancelled contract, a crisis; when aging ends your career, and you need help, the AGMA Relief Fund is there. Ready to take care of you when no one else will, with money to pay for medical care, rent, food and other necessities until you can return to work, with financial support in your retirement years.

Much as the Relief Fund does, it must do more. We are living longer. The high costs of care are growing higher. The chance to save for the future is slim. We must be prepared to spend at least $300,000 a year to help AGMA members in desperate need, to relieve the misery and pain that can come to any one of us.

This means that we must increase the AGMA Relief Fund to $3,000,000. Starting this month, we are launching a nationwide campaign to do just that. We are asking people who enjoy the classical performing arts to make generous gifts to the Fund. We are appealing to foundations and corporations who support opera, the dance and the concert world for substantial grants to help AGMA members who cannot help themselves.

We, the members of AGMA, must set the example. We can expect the support of others only if we do what we can to help ourselves. We must provide the challenge to give.

In the most human terms, let me tell you how urgent this matter is.

In New York City, an AGMA member was struck down by a heart attack which caused permanent mental and physical damage. Eight years of rehabilitation and nursing care were required. The Relief Fund paid for it. Cost: $37,500 a year.

In Chicago, an AGMA member developed a brain tumor which led to his becoming a quadriplegic — paralyzed from the neck down, almost blind and unable to speak. $5,700 was made available to meet his post-acute care needs, plus $289 a (continued on page 6)
month for his daily living requirements. Cost so far: $11,191.

In Los Angeles, an AGMA member was shot in the back by two children playing with a loaded revolver. She became permanently paralyzed; a wheelchair is her companion for the rest of her life. The Relief Fund provided money for her food, rent, utilities, transportation and telephone until she could make her own way back to singing. Cost: $20,000.

From coast to coast, unfortunate AGMA members in need whose careers have come to an end are receiving monthly assistance. Their age range is from 51 to 97. Cost: $5,846 per month, $70,153 per year.

Accidents, catastrophic illness, the impact of aging — NONE OF US IS IMMUNE. The costs involved are staggering. This is why the AGMA Relief Fund is so important. This is why the campaign to raise money for the Fund is so urgent.

In striving to meet our $3,000,000 goal over the next three years, we are asking generous donors to contribute two dollars to the AGMA Relief Fund for every dollar that we, the members of AGMA, give. Every membership meeting during the next six months will include special presentations on the AGMA Relief Fund and what you can do to help. I urge you to attend, and hear for yourself how much the fund raising campaign means to you.

Where else can you expect to obtain money for:
— Medical expenses — hospital and doctor bills, nursing, prescriptions.
— Special care for victims of deadly diseases, including AIDS.
— Career transition.
— Monthly assistance for the aged and disabled.
— Homemaker services — food preparation, housekeeping, bathing, dressing, activities of daily living.
— Essentials of living — rent, food, heat, electricity, telephone for artists in critical need.
— ... and much, much more.

The AGMA Relief Fund. Caring for classical performing artists, stage managers and directors, and choreographers when no one else will. Helping us when we cannot help ourselves. Please give your most generous support.

**Correction**

In error, several years ago, Bronx Opera was reportedly described as being on a “Black List.” That is not correct. As a matter of fact, there is no AGMA “Black List.”