

WINTER 2026 NEWSLETTER

Grand Rapids Federation of Musicians/AFM Local 56

Presenting the 2026 AFM Local 56 Executive Board



Seated (left to right): Barbara Corbato, Christina Fong, Kevin Murphy, and Clara Schubilske.

Standing (left to right): Robert Johnson, Carsten Forester, Bennie Keys, Paul Austin, and Charles Johnson.

Photo Credit: Daniel Terpstra/Terpstra Photography

AFM Local 56 Membership Reaches 300+

We are thrilled to report that our ranks have grown tremendously, reaching over 300 musicians! A hearty welcome goes to these new and reinstated AFM Local 56 members.

*Alexander Alexiev, Kirk Barkel, Karen Beard, Nashoba Bos
Adnan Brown, Micah Carabellese, Darren Chan, Hyunwoo Chun
Melvin Clark, Lee Copenhaver, Erich Corfman
Martha Councell-Vargas, Ryan Egeler, Kaylee Erlewein
Ronald Evans, Edward Fedewa, Reed Fitzpatrick, Michael Giunta
Emily Grabinski, Adam Graham, Dan Graser, Jordan Hamilton
Ben Hare, Morgan Hare, Natalie Law, Octavius Hernandez
Shirley Kim, Hannah Macgillivray, Darryl Malone, David May
Nicole Minney, Ronaldo Nauman, Isaac Norris, Yukie Ota
Nicholas Palmer, Benjamin Penzner, Annie Pham, Esed Puric
James Ricotta, Craig Robinson, Greg Scheer, Timothy Scully
Renee Skerik, Anna Spix, Levee Stadel, Eden Stargardt
Nancy Steltmann, Heidi Sturniolo, Todd Sturniolo, Xavier Suarez
Maggie Thompson, Ching-Wen Tseng, Alicia Valoti, Nathan Walker
Sierra Watson, Kennen White, Alex Wilson
McCormack Wyn, Yu Xin, Josh Zallar, Evan Zegiel*

Our membership drive ends January 31st.
Visit our website for details GrandRapidsMusicians.org

CONGRATULATIONS TO CHRISTINA FONG 2025 "MUSICIAN OF THE YEAR"



We are pleased to present Christina Fong with the 2025 "Musician of the Year" award from AFM Local 56!

A member of our Local for 38 years, Christina joined the Grand Rapids Symphony in 1988 and was GRS Associate Concertmaster from 1996 to 2024. She remains a member of the GRS first violin section today.

Shown here receiving this award from Local 56 President Bennie Keys at our December board meeting, Christina is known for her tireless work for musicians. She has been a member of our Executive Board since 2017.

A specialist in new music, Christina has recorded over a dozen albums of rare works. She received a Fulbright Hayes grant to perform and teach in Belarus.

But Christina's activities go beyond the concert stage. She is a recognizable figure at rallies in our community, campaigning for human rights. In addition, Christina earned an MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from Western Michigan University. She works as a psychotherapist while pursuing a doctorate.

Our "Musician of the Year" award is presented annually to a member for their dedicated service to the Local and our community. Recent awardees include Kevin Dalton-Jones "Bujo" in 2024 and Dr James Sawyer in 2023.

Thank you, Christina, for bringing your energy, wisdom, and insight to Local 56!

MUSIC PERFORMANCE TRUST FUND BLACK HISTORY MONTH

We are thrilled to announce that Local 56 has been awarded eleven MPTF grants for live performances by our members during Black History Month.

The Local 56 bands who have received this MPTF funding include The Back Door Blues Band, Asamu Johnson & The Associates of the Blues, GR Just Us Band, Just Friends, and Murphy's Law.

The sponsors of these events during Black History Month are Alano Club of Kent County, Alano Club South of Kent County, The Candied Yam, Chicago Beef Joint, Dégagé, Grand Rapids Media Initiative & Film Incubator, Hero's Corner, Lead Exchange Network, and MVillage. Our website's concert calendar gives specific information about these concerts (days, times, and locations).

<https://grandrapidsmusicians.org/events/>

As a reminder, MPTF performances must be free and open to the general public. Applications are submitted to the MPTF by Local 56 Secretary-Treasurer Paul Austin at least one month before the event. Contact him for more information.

The MPTF season runs from May 2025 to April 2026, and Local 56 has been very fortunate to have received over thirty MPTF grants this year. In fact, we are extremely lucky in that these awards for Black History Month exceed our allotted funds for the year. Thank you very much, Music Performance Trust Fund!



OUR 2026 GRFM SCHOLARSHIPS

Three scholarships designed to further the musical education of deserving young musicians are offered through our program and are in memory of former AFM Local 56 members Robert Madura (GRS Principal Cellist), Thomas A. Erickson (GRS Assistant Principal Bassist), and Donald D. Armstrong (GRS Violinist).

The \$600 Madura String Scholarship is available to violinists, violists, cellists, and harpists, and the \$850 Erickson Scholarship is available to double bass players. Determined by audition, these scholarships are for musicians ages 15-21.

High school juniors may apply for the \$300 Armstrong Scholarship. Open to all instrumentalists, this award is based upon a recommendation from their school's music instructor.

These three awards may be used for summer study, either at a camp or privately, or for the purchase of an instrument or equipment. Applications must be submitted to our office no later than March 31st and will be available beginning February 1st on our website at <https://grandrapidsmusicians.org/resources/>

A special thank you goes to our Local 56 members who made a tax-deductible donation to the GRFM Scholarship Fund.

*2025 Madura Scholarship Winner
Alex Chung/Interlochen Art Camp
Intensive Viola Week*



*2025 Erickson Scholarship Winner
Iris Eppinga/Guarneri House
Purchase of a double bass*



MESSAGE FROM LOCAL 56 PRESIDENT BENNIE KEYS

Happy New Year, once again, and thanks for having confidence in my leadership by re-electing me to the office of President of Local 56. I will continue to serve the Local the best I can to keep us moving forward.

We still have a few days left in the membership drive, so invite your friends and students to join us as we continue to fight for the rights and needs of our Local 56 membership.

The Executive Board is working on several projects for the year, and we would welcome your ideas. Please feel free to come to our meetings and participate in the business of our Local. We look forward to seeing and hearing from you. We have a membership meeting coming up on February 23rd over Zoom. Plan on participating with your ideas! We are going to be showing how to make your Local membership more fruitful and meaningful, so Zoom in to both learn about this and share with us.

In conclusion, I would like to welcome all of our new and returning members to Local 56. Thanks to all of you for your membership.

In solidarity,
Bennie Keys
President, AFM Local 56!





NOTES FROM OUR SECRETARY-TREASURER PAUL AUSTIN

Our recent membership drive reminded me of when I joined the AFM in the 1980's. My horn professor was Principal Horn of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and he encouraged me to join so that he could recommend me for union jobs. He pointed out that belonging to the AFM would not guarantee me work, but it would make me eligible for work. So I took his advice and joined AFM Local 1/Cincinnati.

I was unsure as to what the AFM could do for me until two years later, when I filed a grievance as a member of another Local. That case took months, and it went all the way to arbitration. In the end, I won. However, without the Local covering the legal fees, I would not have been able to pay for the lawyer. As you would imagine, I am eternally grateful to the AFM for this benefit.

A number of musicians in our Local are also teachers, and I encourage them to follow the advice passed along to me by my former private teacher. Student members do not have to pay Federation or Local initiation fees to join, but they are responsible for annual membership dues: \$156.00. For more details, go to GrandRapidsMusicians.org and share this information with promising music students.

Next month's membership meeting will address the benefits of belonging to the AFM and Local 56. Please consider attending this Zoom meeting on Monday evening, February 23rd, at 7:00pm.

REMINDERS, IN BRIEF!

Just a few days remain in our membership drive for professional musicians in west, central, and northern Michigan to join/rejoin Local 56 without paying the initiation/reinstatement fees. This offer ends January 31st, so act now!

Our next membership meeting will be via Zoom on Monday, February 23rd, at 7:00pm. The topic "How To Get The Most From Your Local 56 Membership" will be addressed by our Executive Board members. The Zoom link for the meeting will be emailed to all Local 56 members that morning, and the meeting's Power-Point presentation will be available afterwards, upon request.

Applications for our 2026 GRFM Scholarships will be available beginning February 1st. The deadline to apply for our scholarships is March 31st. Details are available on our website at GrandRapidsMusicians.org

Donations to the GRFM Scholarship Fund are welcomed, and a Local 56 t-shirt will be given to those who donate at least \$20. Contact our office for more details: (616) 451-4374



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