

## The New Work of Orchestras

The following speech was delivered by **Jesse Rosen**, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras, on Thursday, May 28, 2015 at the League's Conference in Cleveland, Ohio.



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“The best thing about the good old days is that they’re gone.” That’s what bandleader Stan Kenton liked to say: “The best thing about the good old days is that they’re gone.”

The good old days are gone, but there are good new days ahead, and that is what I am going to talk about for a few minutes this afternoon in keeping with our Conference theme, “The New Work of Orchestras.”

Most of us would agree that today’s environment is profoundly different from the one that gave rise to the modern American orchestra. Thankfully, we have settled the debate—clinging to the past is not an option; change is necessary.

The imperatives for the performing arts in the twenty-first century are coming into focus. The battles between “protect and preserve” versus “embrace the future” are giving way to a more holistic view, one that fuses excellence and engagement; that understands repertoire as a continuum of new and old, a point on a spectrum of genres; and that defines purpose as both fostering creativity and creating community value.

Today’s world requires us to think anew about our work, our practices and priorities, the knowledge we need, and the new skills and talent we must acquire. As orchestras pivot and ask *how* to change, rather than *should* we change, the hard questions are what to keep, what to discard, what to change, and what to invent.

I would not presume to answer those questions. That is your work, not the League’s, and you will and should form your own answers.

I am, however, going to offer my view of ten areas that I believe define the critical work—the key issues—that orchestras must address today and in the future. While I hope you will seriously consider this list, it’s just my opinion. It’s a conversation starter, not the Ten Commandments.

In fact, I hope you will make your own Top Ten List of what *you* think should define the critical work ahead. With David Letterman gone, we’ll just have to do it ourselves.

So here we go, Jesse’s Top Ten, all equally important.

**Number Ten:** Design the organizations that serve the music and missions of today. Some clever person once said if you find yourself continually looking for “out-of-the-box” solutions, maybe you are in the wrong box. Perhaps the box we designed in those good old days is the wrong box for today’s realities.

I’m sure everyone has noticed how museums are using technology and interactive features to transform the experience of the viewer. That didn’t just happen. Museums realized that curators were not usually the most qualified professionals to do the new work of engaging the public. So they created a new senior-level staff function with the requisite skills for the engagement work. Orchestras need to keep asking if we have the skill sets and organizational roles necessary to do today’s work. Does our current notion of the role of the music director still serve our needs? Or, for that matter, the role of our musicians? If the answer is no, then it’s time to clarify what today’s needs are and begin to create the roles to meet them.

**Number Nine:** Build organizational cultures that promote trust, transparency, and collaboration. Let’s face it, our orchestras are not known for high marks in “gets along well with others.” Yes, it’s true, there are far fewer strikes and lockouts than the media would have us believe. But avoiding a work stoppage is hardly an indicator of a healthy culture. More to the point would be to ask if our relationships, inside and outside our institutions, are durable enough to navigate competing priorities and adapt to a period of rapid, profound, and continuing change. The recent contract settlements at the Utah Symphony and Minnesota Orchestra, to say nothing of their remarkable touring, are just two recent examples of orchestras that have been working hard to build trusting, transparent relationships all the time, not just during negotiations. They have committed themselves to strong organizational cultures.

**Number Eight:** Invest in developing and retaining all your talent. This is something the League has taken on as a core commitment and will continue to invest in heavily. But we can’t do it alone. The talent is in your orchestras. Research shows that 90 percent of professional development happens on the job. Imagine 1,400 orchestras optimized for talent development. We all know the Jim Collins mantra: “Get the right people on the bus in the right seats,” but helping those people to grow and flourish, and to stay with you, is just as important. I know this is especially hard for smaller-budget orchestras where advancement opportunities are few, and professional HR guidance difficult to access. But I’ve seen it done. Just talk to Barbara Zach, executive director at the Lincoln’s Symphony in Nebraska with a staff of just four. She encouraged her board to raise the funds to cover her own professional development as well as to allow a leave for one of her four staff members to pursue an important growth opportunity.

**Number Seven:** Take governance seriously and engage the board in the work that matters. Governing is a job, and the board is ultimately and legally responsible for the fate of the organization. Yes, board members are volunteers but they must take every opportunity to grow their capacity for effective governance. And that means making the effort to learn how to govern well. I wouldn’t say that’s easy. But I would say there are many resources to help you, including the resources at the League, which include seminars, diagnostic tools, e-books, peer group meetings, and even grants for consultants. Strong boards equal healthy orchestras. It’s that simple. And by the way, just like there is new work for orchestras, there is new work for boards. A cornerstone of that new work is for boards to work on what really matters. *Don’t*

be the board that Dick Chait, Harvard's governance guru, describes like this: "Nonprofit boards are often little more than a collection of high-powered people engaged in low-level activities."

**Number Six:** Integrate community engagement in all activity; it's a value, not a program. Orchestras are successfully shifting their missions to face out outward toward their communities, stressing the value they contribute, and they are developing the practices that support these new roles. "Community engagement," though, is a problematic term. We often use it to describe ancillary activity that often has little or nothing to do with the orchestra in its essential form, giving concerts of classical music in its main series. We have a big problem if we don't also consider engaging the community on the main stage, with our main series. Fortunately, recent research offers a rich vocabulary for describing the individual and social benefits of going to concerts; we should use it. And we should have confidence that our canon, just like Shakespeare, speaks to a broad public. But we need to find the connecting points for some current audiences and certainly for our future audiences. I will always have vivid memories of a season-opening concert in Memphis. Mei Ann Chen, the orchestra's music director and newly minted U.S. citizen, reflected from the stage on what it meant to become an American citizen, and her belief that it was hopefulness that most described the America spirit, and how that informed her choice of works for the evening's program. Or learning about Cincinnati's One City One Symphony project that next year celebrates the 150th anniversary of the 13th Amendment with four commissions, each setting poems of Maya Angelou, to be performed on their subscription series. Or Michael Morgan, three nights following the presidential election, explaining from the Oakland stage to thunderous applause how nothing less than American democracy had shaped his choices for the opening-night concert.

**Number Five:** Prioritize diversity. Orchestras come up in lots of important conversations in high places. Unfortunately, not always in ways we would like. Most recently, First Lady Michelle Obama had this to say: "There are so many kids in this country who look at places like museums and concert halls and other cultural centers and they think to themselves, well, that's not a place for me, for someone who looks like me, for someone who comes from my neighborhood." We've come to know some things about tackling this complex issue. First, it's a leadership issue. The CEO, board chair, musician leadership, and music director must own and lead this work. And it's long-term work. The Houston Symphony's game-changing Community-Embedded Musician Program came after years of false starts. And it only got traction after they began disciplined and sustained conversations with folks outside their organizations from Houston's diverse communities.

**Number Four:** Advocate with and for your arts community, especially smaller, community-based organizations. There is another conversation going on nationally in the philanthropic community about equity. As our population has continued to diversify, so have arts organizations, with many new ones representing the cultures of diverse communities. Influential voices are arguing for a more equitable allocation of philanthropic dollars—a Robin Hood approach: take from the "rich" canonic art forms like the symphony, ballet, and opera, and give to the smaller, community-based, and diverse art forms. I know this is also playing out in some of your communities with the re-allocation of community arts fund dollars away from you and instead toward smaller, more diverse groups. This is a false choice, particularly as

orchestras are increasingly partnering with other local cultural organizations to engage diverse audiences in music. Advocate for more support for *all*. We all need each other and must stand united.

**Number Three:** Be part of the solution to our nation's education equity crisis. Fixing our nation's public education system is not a silver bullet to solving issues of poverty and inequality, but few would dispute that this is an essential and urgent priority. The data prove that children in high-poverty schools have the least access to arts education. And decades of research have established that learning in the arts is key to student success in school, work, and life. As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said about arts education, "This is absolutely an equity issue and a civil rights issue." Orchestras can make a difference by becoming active stakeholders in the local and state education policy decisions that will determine the future of access to arts education for all students in every school.

**Number Two:** Run your businesses not just to last, but to be vibrant. Long-term financial commitments without sustainable sources of revenue are not a good idea. On the other hand, sustainability, in and of itself, is not a compelling or sufficient organizational imperative. More important would be the robust, vibrant, and sustained delivery of mission. For this we need not only balanced budgets, but ample working capital reserves, risk capital, and, for many of you, though definitely not all, endowments. And the work of achieving a capital structure that is right for your orchestra and where it wants to go must be addressed with transparency and all the stakeholders around the table.

**Number One:** Experiment, evaluate, and collaborate. Many of you are already deep into testing all kinds of new approaches to our work, especially the overarching need to develop audiences. Keep at it, and be sure you are clear about your goals and are evaluating your outcomes. It's the only way each orchestra can learn and that we as a field can collectively learn. Collaborate whenever you can. While solutions are local, many of you are confronting the same challenges. The recent spate of research on patrons, subscribers, concert formats, and churn, along with large-scale consortia, are accelerating progress in the field.

So that's it. My Top Ten list. I know what some of you are thinking. It's the P word, prescriptive. "Rosen's finally crossed the line. At some time in the tenure of League CEOs, usually after the five-year mark, they've seen it all and think they know better."

Well, I hope you can tell that my list is not so much a prescription as it is a setting forth of work already underway. It merits underscoring, though. We are in the midst of a big transition; we are moving from a transactional business principally concerned with producing concerts to a relational one concerned with creating value for our stakeholders and communities, through our performances. As we make this change, it's important to not be constrained by old or unexamined assumptions about how we organize and prioritize our work.

We have a wonderful board member at the League who caused quite a stir when he once suggested that all of the senior staff fire themselves and come back to work the next day with the wide-open eyes and inquisitive minds of brand-new employees, asking, "Is this really the best way to accomplish our goals?"

# League of American Orchestras

Notwithstanding the panic this caused as his suggestion quickly morphed through the grapevine into “our senior team had been summarily dismissed,” it’s an excellent thought experiment and discipline.

I have the good fortune to hear your concerts all across the country—in your halls, on tour, in your parks, and in your schools. It’s a joy. I am always amazed at the power of orchestral music to move people, the remarkable talent of the musicians on stage, and their generosity toward young people. The devotion, the hard and intelligent work of boards, staff, and volunteers, is staggering. And our youth orchestras vibrate with the energy of the next generation. It’s a privilege to work on your behalf, and all of us at the League are profoundly grateful for all you do for music.

Thank you.