Advocacy was a founding principle of the League of American Orchestras. In 1944, the need to create a broad-based constituency to repeal a 20 percent federal ticket tax levied amid World War II led orchestras of all sizes to band together in common cause. Establishing a unified voice, delivering compelling messages about the public impact of orchestras in communities, and developing coordinated advocacy strategies was then—as it is now—the key for being heard among the many competing policy priorities being considered in our nation’s capital.

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American Orchestras.org

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Collective Action

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But, thanks to collective action over the last 20 years, the context has substantially changed. Coordinated efforts by orches-
tras—in strategic partnership with the broader arts community and with support
from influential voices from the business

and civic sectors—have helped Congress to understand that there is a vocal constitu-
cy of public support for the essential work the NEA accomplishes in communi-
ties across the country.

One of the largest constituencies mobilized in opposition to the NEA was
led in the 1990s by the Christian Coalition,

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lasting memory is the moment when one of the most influential advocacy machines in Washington conceded defeat concerning the NEA. On September 25, 1998, the League faxed (handy little devices, weren’t they?) a report to our members describing the exact moment when the leader of the “Defunding the NEA” session announced, “We just got slam-dunked by advocates for the NEA.” The group would shift its focus to other policy priorities. The vice president for government affairs for the Heritage Foundation, a speaker at the session, explained that they “were not going to win the funding battle,” because there was no strong core of opposition to the NEA in Congress and many on the Hill had high regard for the agency.

Fast forward to today, when it is clear that challenges to funding the NEA persist, but it is also clear that continuous efforts by advocates to describe the public impact of NEA grants—and the impressively successful work by the agency to increase public understanding of what the NEA does—have ensured that ground has been gained since 1998. Following coverage of proposed elimination of the NEA earlier this year, House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Ken Calvert (R-CA) said, “The NEA and NEH have a lot of support from the American people and Congress.” Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK), a member of both the House Budget Committee and Appropriations Committee said the proposal to eliminate the NEA is “not a fight worth fighting.” Keeping the momentum will require ongoing collective action by orchestras and others who are putting federal dollars to use in service to their communities, and by the wider public that benefits from that investment, to continue to demonstrate that there is a base of support for federal funding for the arts.

Grassroots, Grasstops, and Geography
Mail campaigns, phone calls, fax blasts, emails, Facebook, and Twitter. The League has used every possible channel available to let orchestras know when their advocacy on a key policy issue matters most.

Mail campaigns, phone calls, fax blasts, emails, Facebook, Twitter: the League has used every possible channel to let orchestras know when their advocacy on a key policy issue matters most. Initiating field-wide action on an issue is usually called “grassroots” strategy, and it’s the most visible form of League advocacy among its members. Our current calls to action land in the email box of every orchestra stakeholder for whom we have an address, and the messages direct advocates to a customized online action center with background information, talking points, and ways to get in touch with their elected officials.

One of the most effective, but least visible, parts of the League’s advocacy work is our database indicating which orchestras are located within Congressional districts and states of members of Congress who sit...
Before committee hearings were broadcast live and archived online, the only way to get insight was to show up outside hearing rooms and stand for hours on the marble floors of hallways in hopes of claiming a seat.

have previously voted on the issue at hand, and what they can do, in turn, to deliver a highly personalized communication to the member of Congress when it is needed most. These one-to-one efforts provide insight into “grasstops” contacts within the orchestra family who might already have a relationship to policy leaders and are able to capture their attention. The reach of orchestras across the country means we can usually make the match when it is most urgent.

Unintended Consequences, Unexpected Allies

Given the surprising range of policy topics that affect orchestras, the number of Congressional committees that matter is vast. Before committee hearings were broadcast live and archived online as they are today, the only way to get insight into what was happening in the room was to show up outside hearing rooms early, and stand for hours on the marble floors of the hallways in hopes of claiming a seat when the doors opened. A good deal of business got done in those hallways. (This is still the case; even in the digital age, showing up in person matters.) While striking up casual conversations, other advocates are often perplexed to meet an orchestra representative waiting in line to enter a Judiciary Committee hearing on immigration, or to hear the Natural Resources Committee debate a new piece of legislation. Part of the League’s role in advocacy is to look out for any instance when policy could help or hurt orchestras’ ability to deliver on their mission, however unlikely the topic might seem.

February of 2014 brought just such a moment for both the League and its member orchestras. In response to serious threats to African elephant populations, the Obama Administration initiated an effort to put in place a ban on trade in African elephant ivory. The consequences for orchestras and their musicians were immediate, but not well understood by policy leaders: many older bow tips and stringed instruments contain small quantities of antique ivory that were subject to the restrictions. The most immediate impact was felt by orchestras and individual musicians departing for international tours, for under the new U.S. rules and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, “trade” encompasses both commerce and travel. The League embarked on a successful and ongoing effort to understand the conservation goals behind the new rules, explain the rules’ unintended consequences for cultural activity, and strategically partner with environmental organizations, global music organizations, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to work out a policy solution. Our continuing work in this area placed the League—for the first time—in the center of international policy discussions and at the negotiating table when 183 global parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) met in Johannesburg, South Africa in October of 2016.

The League’s work in the protected species area actually began years before this recent focus on the African elephant ivory trade, however. In 2007 when the endangered Brazilian Pernambuco tree was being considered for a higher level of protection under the CITES treaty, an exemption for finished products, like the many bows that are made from the wood, was secured. Keeping the exemption in place was then, and continues to
Among the many resources created and shared by the League’s advocacy department are (above from left) news alerts; the online Best Defense: A Guide for Orchestra Advocates, by John D. Sparks; a Public Value Toolkit (not pictured); and a mapping project that provides a visual representation of the work individual orchestras are doing in their communities. Opposite page: The League’s www.artistsfromabroad.org online guide to immigration and tax requirements helps orchestras obtain visas required for presenting international guest artists in the U.S., along with other processes.
be, dependent on the sustainability of the Pernambuco tree. The League's advocacy role included informing orchestras about how to comply with the rules and how to participate in the conservation of the Pernambuco tree, which earned the topic a cover story in the September/October 2007 issue of this magazine.

**Turning “Pain Points” into Policy Improvements**

Getting up to speed on compliance with current rules and regulations is often a key strategy toward helpful policy changes. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, as well as prior devastating flooding in Houston, the League partnered with orchestras to document their unsuccessful efforts to obtain FEMA support, due to regulatory language that was narrowly written to exclude performing arts facilities. That documentation formed the basis for a successful 2006 advocacy campaign by the League in partnership with the broader performing arts community to expand FEMA eligibility. Following flooding in 2010, the Nashville Symphony Orchestra was among the first to access relief toward the substantial cost of renovation under the newly improved regulations.

That same strategy of documenting problem areas and making a case for needed improvements spills over into nearly every policy area in which the League and orchestras are active. Orchestras have long turned to the League for help in obtaining the visas required for presenting international guest artists in concerts in the U.S. In the late 1990s, after our two-page memo of guidance we were faxing to orchestras began to grow steadily in length (our fax machine really got a workout in those days), the League decided to literally write the book on the visa and tax requirements for foreign guest artists. With the help of specialized legal counsel, what began as a binder of printed material became what is now the only comprehensive online resource on the topic, www.artistsfromabroad.org. From the creation of specialized visa categories for the arts in the Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1991, to current debates over immigration reform, the League has been a persistent advocate for improving and streamlining the visa process, with the end goal of encouraging international cultural activity. In order to bring our strongest case to policy leaders to change the visa process, we first had to prove that the existing rules simply didn't work.

Since then, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has sent a large universe of arts, education, and nonprofit organizations. Having a seat at so many coalition tables multiplies the impact of orchestras’ advocacy work and provides an opportunity to familiarize others with the work orchestras do in their own communities. The League is currently the lead convener of the Cultural Advocacy Group, an ad hoc coalition formed in the mid-1990s whose work continues through

**Even in the digital age, when it comes to advocacy, showing up in person matters.**

Even in the digital age, when it comes to advocacy, showing up in person matters.
today. In 2016, that group created a unified statement for the new Administration, *Advancing the Arts to Support National Policy Priorities*, which was endorsed by a group of more than 70 national arts and cultural organizations. We’re also an active participant in the Arts Education Partnership, which fuels the League’s many resources that help orchestras get engaged in music education advocacy at the local level—where it is needed the most. The insights we gain from the Arts Education Partnership help the League inform orchestras of key opportunities to close gaps in access to music education through implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act.

The League’s participation in national nonprofit coalition meetings related to tax policy—where we work alongside the American Red Cross, Feeding America, YMCA of the USA, and the full host of charities—not only advances our work on tax policies that directly affect charitable giving, but has also helped us hone the messages that convey what orchestras accomplish in partnership with their communities. Those tax policy developments in 2007 spurred the League to gain a better grasp of how orchestras are perceived as nonprofit organizations, sparking not only the development of the League’s Public Value Toolkit but also provoking ongoing conversations about how orchestras can more deeply and authentically engage with their communities. After all, any message delivered to Capitol Hill through collective action must be rooted in real work back home.

At the League’s 2005 National Conference in Washington, D.C., more than 500 orchestra representatives spent a day meeting with Congress. In preparation for the meetings, orchestra administrators, musicians, volunteers, and colleagues were seated at tables organized by state and Congressional districts. Many participants commented afterwards that although they are geographically nearby one another, that occasion was the first time they sat down together in common cause. One other happy byproduct of that day on the Hill was that participants gained a lasting understanding about how simple, effective, and satisfying it can be to directly engage policymakers. “It filled me with pride and satisfaction taking part in this endeavor,” said one participant. “Although it seemed like a huge undertaking, in reality it was an essential exercise in reminding me why we do what we do, and why music matters.”

While the League’s strategy for engaging in advocacy has changed to keep up with the times, one fundamental principle is unchanged from the very founding of the League to today. The capacity for collective action by orchestras is our strongest asset, and it can make a real difference in public policy.

HEATHER NOONAN is the League’s Vice President for Advocacy.