Global Stages / Local Stories

In a global society, orchestras are significant public institutions confronting the question of what it means to be citizens of the world. Due to the pandemic, in mid-March the world changed dramatically. To help orchestras meet today’s extraordinary challenges, the League of American Orchestras shifted its 2020 National Conference from a three-day gathering in Minneapolis-St. Paul to a free online event running May 5–June 12. More than 3,700 Conference registrants heard diverse voices on how orchestras are relevant and essential organizations for their communities—especially now—and how they can best weather the current crisis.

By David Styers

The first week of March, the League proudly launched the website for its 75th National Conference, highlighting the exciting sessions we had planned with our hosts at the Minnesota Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Within days, as we watched the pandemic spread and saw orchestras move from postponing individual concerts to cancelling the rest of their seasons, we realized that an in-person Conference in June would be impossible.

We knew, though, that the orchestra field needed information and resources from the League more than ever, so canceling the Conference was not an option. And we knew that orchestras needed those resources right now, so waiting until mid-June to do a three-day virtual Conference did not make sense. We also wanted to preserve as much of the planned Conference content as we could, plus have room to add new, coronavirus-specific sessions without overwhelming attendees. And we wanted to provide the content for free to League members. So, an online Conference event stretching six weeks, with near-daily sessions starting the first week of May, was born.

And, as the League’s online Conference progressed and worldwide demonstrations in June protested racial injustice following the death of George Floyd while in police custody, the Conference adapted again, this time to include new and newly refocused sessions on today’s most urgent social issues.

Inspiring Speakers and Live Music

The online Conference commenced on May 5 with live music and a stimulating discussion of where orchestras are now. At the Opening Session, Anthony McGill, principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic and a board member of the League of American Orchestras, shared his musical artistry, and he was then joined by New York Philharmonic President and CEO Deborah Borda.
The League of American Orchestras' 2020 National Conference was presented online from May 5 to June 12, free of charge to League members. The schedule of the general sessions, above, was adapted as the Conference progressed to incorporate new and newly refocused sessions on today's most urgent social issues. In addition, the Conference included a comprehensive lineup of Constituency Meetings for groups including executive directors, artistic administrators, composers, conductors, musicians, staff members, volunteers, and board members.
and Lincoln Center President and CEO Henry Timms for a thought-provoking conversation on what opportunities and inspiration they had been seeing to understand the moment unfolding around us and how to navigate this new world.

McGill stated, “The normal is not going to be the normal of the past. There’s nothing we can do to make it so. Through this obstacle we can become stronger, and more beautiful, and more diverse, than ever before.” Timms observed, “This world is opening up. Our job is to get people to engage in our mission on their own terms.” And Borda offered, “New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said that ‘shutting down was easy; reopening will be an art form.’ And who’s better at art forms than us?”

Over the course of the six weeks, nearly 40 hours of keynote addresses, elective sessions, and sponsored sessions—streamed and recorded on Zoom, and broadcast and archived on our Conference portal PheedLoop—highlighted the current challenges and opportunities orchestras face; the need to continue committing to equity, diversity, and inclusion; and the artistic work and digital evolution in a changing world. Throughout the Conference, small-group Constituency Meetings gathered delegates by peer group to focus on their most pressing concerns. And a virtual Exhibit Hall provided an opportunity to connect with Conference exhibitors and sponsors.

Mid-Conference, National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Mary Anne Carter opened our Annual Meeting with the reassurance, “By being apart, we’re actually coming together more. And we need to. This is an incredibly challenging time. Especially for the performing arts. Yet, despite the unknown and uncertainty, you continue to create and share your music. I applaud the orchestra community for adapting so quickly to this new digital environment… Please, stay safe, healthy, and always let the music play.”

The Annual Meeting was followed by an inspiring address by Nina Simon, a museum director turned community activist who founded OF/ BY/FOR ALL, a nonprofit that aims to build a more inclusive world by helping organizations embrace the full diversity of their commu-
nities. Civic and cultural organizations are focused on inclusion and relevance—and Simon discussed how orchestras can turn aims into actions. She stressed four questions to re-envision relevance to build a more inclusive future:

- What do you choose to change?
- Who do you commit to involve?
- What assets can you share?
- How?

For the Conference Finale on June 12, flutist and composer Valerie Coleman shared her story of founding Imani Winds, an American wind quintet known for adventurous programming, and her work to stretch awareness and understanding of the musical art form while engaging more communities. And she shared *Seven O’Clock Shout*, her recent world premiere performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra at its June 6 *HearTO-

GETHER: A Healing Conversation in Music and Words* event; Coleman’s work was commissioned for musicians performing and recording during social distancing, and honoring frontline workers.

At the Closing Session, Coleman stated, “I have to ask: can we afford not to reconsider where we place the arts in our society? As Robert Battle, the director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, said: ‘The arts nurture the positive imagination, and the imagination costs nothing. But, if it is not used, it will cost everything.’ As I see it, the arts are as crucial as the air we breathe.”

In addition, the League’s Gold Baton award was given to two of the orchestra field’s most vital organizations: to the American Composers Forum for cultivating a vibrant ecosystem of music creators, performers, advocates, and new-music listeners; and to New Music USA for fostering a thriving, interconnected new-music community and unparalleled support of creative artists and their work.

To all who attended the Conference online to exchange ideas, resources, and tools: thank you for your work to lead, support, and champion your orchestra during a time of crisis. Each session of the Conference opened with an energizing selection from Jessie Montgomery’s *Starburst*, performed in a recording by the Minnesota Orchestra. As League President and CEO Jesse Rosen said in his opening remarks, “We’re looking forward to the time we can hear it live.” And we look forward to the time we can have in-person convenings again. Until then, thank you for gathering with us online.

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