

Service Mission

The League's new Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service recognize five orchestral players for exemplary work in education, cross-cultural diplomacy, and bringing music's therapeutic power to hospitals and other special-needs facilities. Here are their stories.

by Chester Lane



The Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service were presented at the League of American Orchestras Conference on June 10. From left: Baltimore Symphony Orchestra percussionist Brian Precht; South Dakota Symphony Orchestra Principal Oboe Jeffrey Paul; Oakland Symphony cellist Beth Vandervennet; League Chairman Patricia A. Richards; Ford Motor Company Fund Community Relations Manager Elizabeth McAdam; League President and CEO Jesse Rosen; Detroit Symphony Orchestra bass clarinetist Shannon Orme; Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra violist Penny Anderson Brill.

MORE AND MORE, the definition of what it means to be a musician in a symphony orchestra is expanding. As orchestras' missions evolve, their musicians are contributing in ways that go far beyond the traditional role of performing concerts for a ticket-buying public. Under the orchestra's auspices, some musicians teach in area schools, or bring live music to hospital patients or eldercare facilities. Others work with low-income or at-risk youth. Still others connect with communities that are steeped in very different musical traditions.

A new program launched this year by the League of American Orchestras—the Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service—recognizes orchestral musicians for outstanding efforts in these areas. Made possible by Ford Motor

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra percussionist Brian Prechtl with members of the bucket band he directs as part of the BSO's OrchKids program.



Detroit Symphony Orchestra musician Shannon Orme performs for patients at Children's Hospital of Detroit Medical Center as part of the DSO's Neighborhood Residency Initiative.

Detroit Symphony Orchestra



South Dakota Symphony Orchestra Principal Oboe Jeffrey Paul (at left, holding guitar) played a major role in bringing the orchestra to Custer City, South Dakota, for a 2010 collaboration with the Creekside Singers at Crazy Horse Memorial. Music Director Delta David Gier (at far right in front of harp) led the concert, part of the orchestra's Lakota Music Project.

© Crazy Horse Memorial

Company Fund, the program honors individual musicians' essential contributions to the community through work supported by their orchestras.

Of the many orchestral musicians who engage in community service, the inaugural Ford program has singled out five awardees, selected by a panel of industry professionals following a competitive nomination process. They are Penny Anderson Brill, a violist in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra; Detroit Symphony Orchestra bass clarinetist Shannon Orme; Jeffrey Paul, principal

oboist in the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra; Beth Vandervennet, a cellist in California's Oakland Symphony; and Baltimore Symphony Orchestra percussionist Brian Prechtl. Each award includes a \$2,500 grant to the musician and an additional \$2,500 to his or her home orchestra to support professional development focused on community service and engagement for its musicians. The five musicians demonstrated their community-service work—some with instruments, some through video—during a “Ford Musician Awardees in Action”

session at the League's Conference in June, and were formally presented with their awards during the League Luncheon and Annual Meeting.

“These five musicians serve as models and mentors to the entire orchestra field,” says League President and CEO Jesse Rosen. “Their commitment and dedicated work, whether by inspiring under-served students, bringing comfort in healthcare settings, or bridging cultures through their artistry, is on the leading edge of orchestras' service to their communities. We're grateful to Ford Motor Company Fund for helping support this vital program, and for enabling us to publicly acknowledge and share the important work of these musicians.”

Jim Vella, president of Ford Motor Company Fund, notes that when music is combined with community service, “it results in a powerful experience that has lasting impact on everyone involved. These dedicated musicians, and many more like them who take the time to share their talents with those less fortunate or in need, deserve special recognition. They really do go further

in their communities, and we're proud to recognize their thoughtful and caring service. Enjoying music and the arts, sharing cultural activities and community traditions are all part of building stronger communities. Supporting music and music education has always been important to Ford Fund, because music can inspire creativity and help sharpen skills and learning in ways that benefit people beyond the concert hall and into other aspects of their lives and careers."

Music and Wellness

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra violist Penny Anderson Brill first experienced the power of music to help heal the body and soothe the soul nearly two decades ago. Faced with a number of procedures following a diagnosis of breast cancer, she turned to music therapy. To prepare for reconstructive surgery, Brill had a therapist do a session using a technique called guided imagery. "It was enormously helpful to me in imagining the surgery and the recovery," she says. Particularly beneficial during the post-operative phase was the therapeutic use of

music therapists. She has led numerous workshops on health and wellness and written extensively on the subject, most recently in "Addressing Community Concerns Through Music," a scholarly article published in the July issue of *Music and Medicine*, journal of the International Association for Music and Medicine. And thanks in large part to Brill's work, the Pittsburgh Symphony has, through its newly launched Musicians as a Community Resource website (musacor.com), become a resource for orchestras and orchestral musicians seeking to establish or manage wellness programs.

For Brill, "wellness" is not simply the absence of sickness. It's a matter of mental and emotional focus, relief from stress and worry, a feeling of connectedness. Music and sound have a powerful role to play in all of that, as she demonstrated in the Ford Musicians session at the League Conference. Brill owns many percussion instruments—



Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra violist Penny Anderson Brill at The Woodlands, July 2016. The Pittsburgh-area retreat serves children with autism, Down syndrome, and other disabilities.

Pittsburgh Symphony violist Penny Anderson Brill has become an international authority on the effective use of live music in healthcare settings, and in the complementary relationship between musicians and music therapists.

Indian-inspired Shakti Yoga music, which Brill says "helped me in getting my circulation back, and in reducing the amount of pain medication I needed. It made a big difference in how quickly I recovered."

At that time, Brill says, there were no music therapists on staff at the hospital where she was treated, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC). With help from the Pittsburgh Symphony, she set out to change that. Music therapists are now a key component of the PSO's Music and Wellness program, which allows Brill and many other musicians from the orchestra to bring music to hospitals in the UPMC system, as well as nearby nursing homes and special-needs facilities. They do this through a service-exchange arrangement that earns the musician vacation days for time spent in a vital community service.

Brill has become an international authority on the effective use of live music in healthcare settings, and in the complementary relationship between musicians and

"a rolling suitcase of stuff," she says—and for this gathering of orchestra professionals she brought out one of her standard tools, the ocean drum; it evokes the sound of waves washing over a beach as it's tilted and metal balls under the drumhead roll from side to side. Brill asked the audience to inhale and exhale slowly and deeply, mimicking the ebb and flow of the ocean. She then played two pitches on a violin, a perfect fifth, directing half the audience to drone on one note, half on the other.

"Practicing with the wave and creating the drone are ways of extending the time that you're breathing with your diaphragm," Brill explains. "There's a test that hospitals do before letting you go home. You're more likely to pass it if you've been practicing deep diaphragm breathing. Four minutes have gone by, and what has changed? Everything, because for four minutes you've been paying attention to the *present*. Suddenly you feel more optimistic, you're more alert, you can handle

things. And the sound of everybody doing the drone together is incredibly powerful. You gather a sense of strength from helping each other create the sound."

In hospital settings, it's not just the patients who benefit from what Brill and her colleagues have to offer. Twice a year she visits UPMC Children's Hospital with a violinist, cellist, and flutist from the PSO to perform at a memorial service for the children who have died—about 75 of them will have passed during a typical six-month period. Aside from the children's families and UPMC medical staff, the people attending these services come from "all parts of the hospital: the spiritual department, the administrators, the music therapists. There's a sense of the whole community helping the families get through an unimaginable event. The memorial service takes place after the families have had some private time to deal with their loss. A sibling, or someone whose child died, might talk about how they are coping. The people who play for these services often tell me it's one of the most powerful and important things they do all year."

Brill also brings her musical talents to The Woodlands, an organization that runs weeklong retreats for special-needs kids in Wexford, Pa., just north of Pittsburgh. This summer she visited a Woodlands retreat for children with autism, Down syndrome, and other disabilities. Together with a music therapist and two PSO colleagues, violinist Louis Lev and cellist Adam Liu, she worked with the kids in interactive settings. The goal, she says, is to give them the "most positive experience of music. At the end of the week there's a performance where each child—by being allowed to conduct or do other things—is given a chance to shine."

Health in the Neighborhood

At the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, musician visits to healthcare facilities and nursing homes are part of a comprehensive Neighborhood Residency Initiative that also includes subscription series and chamber concerts in the suburbs and a wide range of in-school and other educational activities. Shannon Orme, the DSO's bass clarinetist, participates in all of these. For her, playing at the Children's Hospital of Detroit Medical Center has been especially rewarding.

"The kids are really sick at this hospital, and their attention spans are short," says Orme. "We've played for kids of all ages. If it's toddlers, you might play nursery rhymes. For the older kids you might



Detroit Symphony Orchestra

"We have to be able to change what we're doing at any moment," says DSO bass clarinetist Shannon Orme of her work with patients at Children's Hospital of Detroit Medical Center.

incorporate TV tunes or popular songs they might know; they're not going to be happy with 'Mary Had a Little Lamb.' I do some improvisation, and we play 'name that tune' games. Sometimes I'll play a march-like melody and change the tempo as they stamp their feet. I'll play high or low and they move their bodies or arms up and down. We try to make it physically active for them, but they have different levels of mobility. If something isn't working we go on to the next thing. I've done these with my bass clarinet and with a regular clarinet, but I usually use the regular one, because it's easier to carry and I can play a

greater variety of music with it. We have to be able to change what we're doing at any moment."

Crucial to these sessions, says Orme, has been the presence of a music therapist. Children's Hospital recently discontinued its music-therapy program, and Caen Thomason-Redus, who holds the title of Community Catalyst, Director of Community and Learning at the Detroit Symphony, says the orchestra is actively working with the hospital to find a way to restore music therapy to its program of musician visits.

Orme also visits nursing homes as part of the DSO's Neighborhood Residency Initiative. "Music can help reduce stress, and ease pain and discomfort," she says, "especially in anxious situations like before and after surgery, or if an older patient is going through a difficult time in their life or transitioning into the home. I really like these concerts for seniors, because it elevates their mood and can aid memory. The music may help them remember a different period in their life: we might play Gershwin, or 'Moon River,' or patriotic tunes. They can really relate to that music. I have a few musicians I play with quite regularly, another clarinetist and a bassoonist. And sometimes, in homes where the seniors are still quite active, I play by myself and give a little lecture and demonstration."

Native Sounds

The South Dakota Symphony Orchestra serves a state in which nearly 10 percent of the population consists of Native Americans, most of them residing on reservations far from the orchestra's home in Sioux Falls near the Iowa border. The Missouri River bisects the state, with the indigenous Da-

presenting programs that meld Native and Western European styles.

Jeffrey Paul joined the South Dakota Symphony in 2003 as principal oboe in the orchestra and oboist in the Dakota Wind Quintet, an ensemble of SDSO principals that performs in educational settings. Not long after he arrived the quintet visited Pine Ridge Reservation, in the southwestern part of the state. "The minute we got there," he recalls, "it became evident that there was no reason for us to be teaching the Native children about wind quintet music or Western classical instruments. It seemed wrong to go there with the idea, 'We're here to give you something.' The Western classical tradition wasn't really relevant to them, and the children had no means of getting ahold of most of our instruments."

Paul says that when Delta David Gier, who became the orchestra's music director in 2004, "came out on one of our reservation tours, we started brainstorming on how we could collaborate with Native musicians, getting out of the 'white concert hall' and onto the reservations." Paul was a key part of that brainstorming, and his talents as a composer and player have been essential to the Lakota Music Project. He says the effort was initially "met with a bit of mistrust and suspicion: 'Why are you doing this? White people don't do anything without getting something out of it for themselves.' But we got together for a jam session with some of the Native musicians—played for each other, then played a bit together, discovered each other as human beings, and tried to figure out if this had any legs."

The first Lakota Music Project concerts, says SDSO Executive Director Jennifer Boomgaarden, took place in May 2009—in

The idea of the Lakota Music Project, says South Dakota Symphony Principal Oboe Jeffrey Paul, is to "get into the reservations and play with Natives for Natives—to see if there is a possibility of using music to culturally heal."

kota people living largely east of the river, the Lakota west of it, and the Nakota toward the south. Mindful of this larger community, the orchestra has broadened its musical and cultural mission well beyond the Western European canon. It has done so with the Lakota Music Project, a multi-year effort to bridge musical cultures by performing for and with Native musicians and

Rapid City, far to the west of Sioux Falls, and on reservations in Flandreau, Lower Brule, and Pine Ridge. As Paul describes it, the program began with "a back-and-forth between a drum group—the Porcupine Singers—and our chamber orchestra: a dialogue on common themes like love, war, and celebration. A Lakota war song was played next to Khachaturian's 'Saber Dance.' A

Lakota song of mourning was paired with Barber's *Adagio for Strings*." The second half included the world premieres of two South Dakota Symphony commissions: *Black Hills Olowan* by Native American composer Brent Michael Davids (a Wisconsin-born member of the Mohican Nation) and Paul's

by the Sisseton Arts Council, based in a town near the reservation's southern border. "They had heard my *Desert Wind*," Paul recalls, "and they said, 'This is great, but we have a cultural treasure here in Bryan Akipa. He's Dakota, and so far that's been lacking in the Lakota Music Project. We want to have Dakota music represented.'" The orchestra premiered Paul's *Pentatonic Fantasy* in Sisseton in April 2013.

The Lakota Music Project's most recent iteration was a March 2016 partnership with Joseph Horowitz's "Music Unwound" project exploring Native American and African American influences on Dvořák's "New World" Symphony. Presented in Sisseton and Sioux Falls, the program paired the Dvořák with Brent Michael Davids's *Black Hills Olowan*, performed with the Creekside Singers, a Lakota drum group. Boomgaarden expects the Lakota Music Project's next phase to include programs involving the full orchestra as well as residencies by its Dakota String Quartet and Dakota Wind Quintet in multiple South Dakota communities and reservations.

Music for Excellence

Cellist Beth Vandervennet makes her living in what Bay Area freelance musicians call the "freeway philharmonic circuit": she performs with California's Oakland and Marin symphonies and is principal cellist in the Vallejo Symphony. Her main job is with the Oakland Symphony, where in addition to playing cello she serves as the orchestra's education coordinator and runs a key component of its Music for Excellence (MUSE) program. Through MUSE, Oakland Symphony musicians make regular visits to the schools, not just as instrumental instructors but as mentors and role models for the students.

"Oakland Symphony musicians from all four instrument families are paired with the school's instrumental teachers, and they partner around whatever the teacher's biggest need is," Vandervennet says. "This year we go to ten elementary schools, eight middle schools, and four high schools. There's an after-school program with three ensembles, and a piano class for third graders." The students served by MUSE, she says, represent "diversity in skin color, family makeup, and socioeconomic status." The MUSE Orchestra, a fourth- through sixth-grade group that meets weekly under Vandervennet's supervision, "has kids who can't even get a ride to rehearsals—latchkey kids, kids on free or reduced lunch—but it also has two sisters whose mom is a lawyer."

As a hands-on leader of the mentoring program, Vandervennet employs skills outside her expertise as a cellist. "I'm not very good on the violin," she says, "but I can lead a group and play beginner music. I'll be up and walking among the kids, something that you can't do when you're behind a cello! Each May we put together a concert involving about 100 beginner violinists, violists, and cellists. That's hard, because I have to go around to all of those schools that I don't visit regularly and go, 'rah rah rah!' But it's such a heartwarming concert—really adorable."

In her school visits Vandervennet talks



South Dakota Symphony Orchestra Principal Oboe Jeffrey Paul (right) with Native American performer and flute maker Bryan Akipa and SDSO Music Director Delta David Gier at the April 2013 premiere of Paul's *Pentatonic Fantasy for Dakota Flute and Orchestra*.

own *Desert Wind*. The concert was a "very moving experience for the orchestra, and seemed to be so for the drum group as well," says Paul. Another new work generated by the Lakota Music Project was *Waktégli Olowan* ("Victory Songs"), a song cycle for baritone and orchestra by Jerod Impich-

Baltimore Symphony percussionist Brian Precht learned about educating at-risk youth during his time with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic 25 years ago: "We needed to fill a lot of roles that a normal teacher or musician wouldn't be expected to fill."

chaachaaha'Tate, an Oklahoma-born member of the Chickasaw Nation. (His middle name means "high corncrib.") It was commissioned by the South Dakota Symphony and premiered in January 2013.

Paul, a composer since childhood, has long had a keen interest in indigenous and folk music, and he admires those influences in his favorite composers. "Beethoven borrowed tunes from the German countryside," he points out. "Bartók was using Hungarian stuff all the time." Paul's *Pentatonic Fantasy for Dakota Flute and Orchestra*, composed for the South Dakota Symphony and Bryan Akipa—a noted performer, cedar flute maker, and resident of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation north of Sioux Falls—was commissioned

As Paul sees it, the whole idea of the project is to "get into the reservations and play with Natives for Natives—to see if there is a possibility of using music to culturally heal, even in the tiniest way. It's so important not to traipse into their territory, to cheapen or exploit their music. We want this to be authentic. And that has meant treating each of our traditions with equal reverence."

Ford Webinar: Watch, Listen, Learn

All five recipients of the 2016 Ford Musician Awards will discuss their work in a League of American Orchestras webinar this fall moderated by the noted educator and author Eric Booth. Individuals affiliated with League-member orchestras may participate in the webinar free of charge, and the full content will be posted to americanorchestras.org following the event.



Eric Lundgren

Swapping her regular instrument for a violin, Oakland Symphony cellist and education coordinator Beth Vandervennet leads kids from the Oakland Unified School District at the annual String Festival last May.

about “the four things you need to make a symphony concert happen: a musician, a composer, a conductor, and an audience. I’ll have a kid come up and play ‘Pop Goes the Weasel,’ where they pluck the E-string on ‘pop.’ I’ll have kids conduct me while I play the cello: when they conduct big I play loud, if they conduct fast I go fast. They’re learning how music is shaped. It’s one of the most rewarding things I do.

“I like to call the musicians in this pro-

gram ‘mentoring/teaching artists.’ We really are different from that teacher the kids see every day. In the five years I’ve been coordinating the program I’ve encouraged our mentors to develop relationships with the kids so they’re learning about our careers. When they come to a concert they get really excited: ‘Oh my gosh, there’s my mentor up there!’ It’s hard to get kids and families out to concerts, but one small

piece of that is having them see us as mentors and not just teachers.” Having participated in the mentoring program for seventeen years, Vandervennet is “seeing kids I’ve worked with go off to college. They haven’t gone to Juilliard or anything like that, but that’s not my focus. It’s to enrich their lives through music, and to show them that when you really stick with something you can get good at it, and it will add a whole other dimension to your life.”

Buckets in Baltimore

“So many life skills are tied up in ensemble playing,” says Baltimore Symphony Orchestra percussionist Brian Prechtel. “Teamwork. Understanding your place in the greater scheme of things. Putting yourself second and the group first. Everybody wants to see himself as part of a group. And this is like, ‘boom, you’re in a group.’ Pride, identification, knowing who you are, who your peeps are. So often we see groups form around less desirable commonalities. It’s really nice to give kids something that’s so productive.”

Prechtel is talking about his bucket band, an ensemble that he directs as part of OrchKids, a program of the Baltimore Symphony that provides free instruction, both after school and year-round, to students in some of the city’s toughest neighborhoods. “Except for the ones who are exclusively percussionists,” he says, “almost all of the bucket-band kids play other instruments. They’re coached by OrchKids specialists in those instruments and participate in an orchestra, then come to me for the bucket band.”

As a member of the Fort Wayne Philharmonic some 25 years ago, Prechtel says

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Baltimore Symphony Orchestra percussionist Brian Prechtl leads the OrchKids bucket band at Baltimore's Lockerman Bundy Elementary School.

he “got a call from a woman at the YMCA in one of the worst parts of town. She said, ‘I have an after-school program, and I want it to have music.’ I said, ‘How much money do you have?’ Her response was, ‘\$850.’ So I said, ‘OK, we’ll buy some buckets at Home Depot and get drumsticks.’ I learned pretty quickly just how much you are able to do with such an economical approach.”

Prechtl also learned a few things in Fort Wayne about educating at-risk youth. “I would go to this person who ran the after-school program and say, ‘We have a problem with this kid. He doesn’t really understand what I want from him and how he’s going to handle himself. We need to get him a psychologist, get his parents here.’ She said, ‘Brian, that isn’t going to happen. I know his mother. She has five kids, works two jobs, and there is no father. And no psychologist. We are all of those things rolled into one, and we’ll have to solve these problems ourselves.’ That was a wakeup moment for me. I realized that we needed to fill a lot of roles in this kind of work that a normal teacher or musician wouldn’t be expected to fill.”

A member of the OrchKids team of teacher-mentors since 2009, Prechtl works with more than 200 students weekly in three schools. What is the kids’ level of commitment to the program? “There are always some hurdles,” Prechtl says. “Their idea of what’s acceptable in terms of participation is constantly being updated by us. I have to let them know, ‘You can’t just come or go as you please. If you want to work in this world, there are expectations you have to meet.’ That’s really difficult for some of them. But they do get self-motivated.” Prechtl has watched kids in his bucket band go on to Baltimore School for

the Arts, to summer camps such as Interlochen, and to the El Sistema-inspired National Take a Stand Festival, a partnership of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Aspen Music Festival and School, and the Longy School of Music of Bard College.

“The relationships I’ve developed with these kids are going to last forever,” Prechtl says. “When I spend time with them outside of rehearsals or class, we’re talking about life—how to handle disappoint-

ment, how they deal with their parents, or some of the hurdles they have at school, especially when they’re trying to balance it with the kinds of demands OrchKids puts on them. They may not go on to become percussionists or cellists or tuba players, but you know you’re helping these kids in a host of different ways. And they will take that with them.” **S**

CHESTER LANE is senior editor of *Symphony*.



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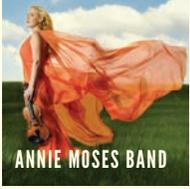
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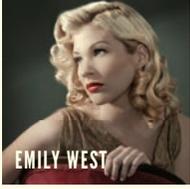
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