

Seen and Heard: Conference 2019

The League of American Orchestras' 2019 National Conference put music, musicians, and composers center stage—while exploring the ideas and issues that are most relevant to orchestras in today's changing world. Here's a look at just four of the highlights from the League's 74th annual Conference.

The Conference was hosted by the Nashville Symphony and took place June 3-5, 2019. For more about the Conference, including videos, resources, and presentations, visit <https://www.leagueconference2019.org/conference-overview>.

“Music is the Humanizing Force We Need”

In his address at the Opening Plenary Session of the League's Conference, Nashville Symphony Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero explored what it means to be an orchestra in the America of today, stating that musical convictions must inform an orchestra's authentic connection to its community and reflect an active cultivation of diverse talent.

Here are excerpts from his address. To watch a video of Guerrero delivering the speech, or to read the complete text, visit <https://www.leagueconference2019.org/conference-overview>.

Every single one of us here—whether you are a musician, an administrator, a volunteer, or some combination of those—contributes to the success of our orchestras. And as with the orchestra itself, each of us plays an important role; we all have to work together to shape the outcome. With the guidance and leadership of the League, along with the communities we serve, we are all working toward a continually deepening understanding of our shared mission: to achieve artistic excellence, yes, but also, of equal importance, to work toward dismantling barriers so that everyone is invited in to the conversation and everyone is served by the work we do.

There's a simple reason why music should be at the center of this conversation—why it *has* to be at the center of this conversation. Music is the humanizing force we need to do this very work, to make all voices be heard and counted, and to transform the wisdom of those collective voices into action. Our greatest responsibility to our communities is to channel this profound, humanizing force of music and use it to create meaningful, lasting, and growing transformation.

I can't imagine life without music. I get the very same rewards from it today that I got when I started out at age eleven as a new arrival in Costa Rica, fleeing the instability in my home country of Nicaragua. There was no reason to expect that I'd become a musician—much

less the conductor of a Grammy-winning orchestra in the United States. I came from a completely non-musical family. No one even knew how to read music. My dad loved mariachi, my mom loved Julio Iglesias. Beethoven and Brahms were nonexistent, because we had no awareness of it, much less any access to it. There was no orchestra or youth orchestra where I grew up in Nicaragua. And had civil war not broken out between the Sandinistas and the Somoza regime, I might never have begun my journey as a musician.

When the war ended in 1981, we hoped that life would go back to normal. It didn't, and there was a mass exodus from Nicaragua. Leaving was difficult. But my parents made the decision that they wanted to make a better life for us. We



Giancarlo Guerrero, music director of the Nashville Symphony, speaks at the Opening Plenary Session of the League's National Conference, Laura Turner Concert Hall at Schermerhorn Symphony Center, Nashville, June 3, 2019.

took what we could and started the journey. We were openly welcomed in Costa Rica, and I had the privilege that at least my family was together. Music helped me make this transition into a new life, starting from nothing. For my parents, it was a way to keep me busy, but it became a lifesaver, an obsession for me. It was as simple as my parents seeing an ad in the newspaper for

the Costa Rica Youth Symphony Orchestra and deciding to sign me up. It was a free government program.

When my parents went to sign me

up for youth orchestra, they learned that the program was only for Costa Rican citizens. One of the teachers who had done my aptitude test said, “No, this is unfair. This kid is here, and he deserves a chance.” He vouched for me. Without his intervention, I might not be standing here right now.

That first year, I learned to read music, and they made us watch rehearsals. We didn’t even get to choose our instruments. But from the very beginning, it was inspiring to see people my age so devoted to something. I still feel the same way when I work with young people: Give a kid an instrument, and that violin, that horn, that mallet gives them a voice. It gives them power. It gives them an identity that transcends the one they were born into.

Because of my participation in youth orchestra, I never had to deal with any negative aspects of being a refugee from Nicaragua. When I joined the ensemble, I became a member of the club—a club whose only basis for membership was a love of music. My participation in youth orchestra helped me establish strong roots in my new country.

When I had the opportunity to study music in the U.S. on scholarship, I took it. My first experience in America was as a freshman at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. I came over as a percussion major, following in the footsteps of other Costa Ricans. Baylor made a huge investment in us and took an amazing leap of faith. There were teachers and faculty members who put their hands in the fire for us, because they saw possibilities in these young musicians from Latin America. Once again, I found myself in unfamiliar territory, and music became my grounding force. Being surrounded by great musicians—my teachers, my peers—made me realize what was possible; it gave me an idea of what I could achieve through dedication, discipline, and hard work.

The problem, of course, is that not everyone has access to the music—a fact that we are getting better at acknowledging and learning how to address more effectively. In the orchestra world, we used to believe that it was simply enough

to perform great music. Sell tickets, and people will come. Pipe concerts out on the radio, and just maybe, you might reach the ears of an eager young music student in Costa Rica. We now know that this is not enough. We now are recognizing—decades after the Civil Rights movement in America—that not everyone has the same opportunities, and that race is one of the defining factors in who has access and who does not.

This is not a new conversation. But to create diverse, inclusive orchestras, we all have to embrace and fulfill this work. Every day, I am gratified to see that the conversation is growing. But we still have to do better. We have to get beyond thinking that inclusion is special, or unique. This

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work is at the very core of our mission and our identities as orchestras.

When I think about my own role in this process, much of it comes down to the choices I get to make about who and what we put on our stage: Which composers will we champion? Which artists will we invite? I’ve always been musically curious. At the same time, after engaging in conversations with my colleagues and peers, when I look at the repertoire I’ve championed as a conductor, I’ve started to see the gaps. As much as I’ve treasured working with Joan Tower and Jennifer Higdon, I have performed the work of very few female composers.

The same thing is true when we talk about composers of color. I have conducted hundreds of pieces from the twentieth century. I have referred to myself and to the Nashville Symphony as champions of American music. And yet Florence Price’s music has never been performed on this stage. I wasn’t even familiar with her until recently—never mind the many other

composers of color who have contributed to our repertoire. Composers like Florence Price, George Walker, Adolphus Hailstork, Gabriela Lena Frank, Hannibal Lokumbe, Jonathan Bailey Holland, and Tania León have been routinely pushed to the periphery. It is time to bring them and their music to the center.

As music director, this is within my capacity. And it is my job to do this in a way that is meaningful, that makes it integral to the conversation. To move from a spirit of equity and inclusion to one of belonging.

If we want to make room for new voices and diverse perspectives, we have to expand the repertoire, and we can do that not just by commissioning new work, but by continuing to breathe life into these new works through repeat performances. Every orchestra, no matter the size or the budget, has a role to play.

Whether we are performing Beethoven for the 250th time, or we are giving a world premiere; whether we are upholding the artistry of old dead white guys or of young, diverse voices—and there is room for both—it’s worth remembering that music is more than beautiful melodies and harmonies and solos. It is emotion. When we are performing and promoting the work of a composer, we are conveying what’s deep inside their souls. And if we’re willing to listen not just with open ears, but also open hearts, we’ll learn that the things that inspire and frustrate them are often the very same things that inspire and frustrate us every day.

We need to remember that music is just a tool. It’s the tool we use to do our real job, which is reaching, teaching, serving, healing, transforming, and inspiring. My own journey has taught me that everyone—no matter where they came from, what they look like, what their identity is—deserves that opportunity.

MUSIC CentriCITY

Distinctive musical performances were integral to the League’s 2019 Conference, with events including a new work performed by a youth orchestra, *Carmina Burana* danced by a ballet troupe, and a meditative walk to a concert honoring



Alan Pozner

At the Opening Plenary session of the Conference, students from the Nashville Symphony's Accelerando program were joined by Nashville Symphony musicians for a new work by Christopher Farrell, led by Enrico Lopez-Yañez.

victims of a mass shooting. And since the Conference was in Nashville, live music was pretty much everywhere.

At the Opening Plenary Session, students in the Nashville Symphony's Accelerando initiative performed a new work by composer Christopher Farrell alongside musicians from the Nashville Symphony. Nashville Symphony Prin-

cipal Pops Conductor Enrico Lopez-Yañez led the performance. Accelerando is an intensive music education program that prepares gifted young students from communities underrepresented in today's orchestras to pursue music at the collegiate level and beyond.

On June 3, the Nashville Symphony and Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero gave a wide-ranging concert. It began with Joan Tower's *Sixth Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman* in a performance that had special meaning with the composer in attendance (Tower also received the League's Gold Baton award at the Conference). Next came Jonathan Leshnoff's Symphony No. 4, "Heichalos," which the Nashville Symphony had commissioned and premiered in 2018.

Leshnoff's score revolves around themes of Jewish survival and spirituality, and in this performance segued into Barber's Adagio for Strings. Orff's familiar *Carmina Burana* got surprising new twists in a production with Nashville Ballet that featured choreography by Paul Vasterling and evocative multimedia, with choral groups surrounding the audience in Laura Turner Hall.

Walk of Love

The power of music and collective action was forcefully illuminated by an extraordinary artistic experience at the League's 2019 Conference. On June 4, hundreds of Conference delegates and Nashville community members convened at the Conference site to participate in a silent walk to Downtown Presbyterian Church. The meditative

"Walk of Love" was envisioned by composer and performer Hannibal Lokumbe as an integral part of his work, *Crucifixion Resurrection: Nine Souls a-Traveling*, honoring the nine victims of the 2015 mass shooting at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC. Participants carried banners commemorating the victims as they walked through the city streets.

Once the marchers arrived at Downtown Presbyterian Church, Lokumbe's *Crucifixion Resurrection: Nine Souls a-Traveling* was performed by Intersection Contemporary Music Ensemble, with Artistic Director Kelly Corcoran conducting, in a free concert. The work is scored for jazz ensemble, chorus, narrators, and vocal soloists.

Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service

Five orchestra musicians received Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service from the League of American Orchestras at the League's 2019 Conference. The awards, supported by Ford Motor Company Fund, celebrate professional orchestra musicians who provide exemplary service in their communities and make a significant impact through education and community engagement. This year's awardees work on a variety of initiatives for young people that include introducing very young children to orchestral instruments, teaching hearing- and speech-impaired children new skills, providing music education and engagement to students from underserved communities, connecting with families in outlying communities, and facilitating the creation of new compositions by high school students.

This year's awardees are Victoria Griswold, violin, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra; Jeff Handley, principal percussion, Chicago Sinfonietta; Rebecca Patterson, principal cello, New Haven Symphony Orchestra; Donna Parkes, principal trombone, Louisville Orchestra; and Rebecca Young, associate principal viola, New York Philharmonic. They received their awards at the League's Annual Meeting on June 4



Alan Pozner

Conference delegates and Nashville community members participated in a "Walk of Love" from the Conference site to Downtown Presbyterian Church for a performance of Hannibal Lokumbe's *Crucifixion Resurrection: Nine Souls a-Traveling*, which honored the victims of the 2015 mass shooting at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC.

and discussed their work at the *Musicians Transforming Communities* session that same day. Videos of the musicians doing their award-winning work, along with more information about the Ford Musician Awards and past winners, are posted at <https://americanorchestras.org/conducting-artistic-programs/the-ford-musician-awards.html>.

The musicians were selected by a panel of peer professionals through a competitive nomination process to receive the awards, which include a \$2,500 grant to each musician, as well as an additional \$2,500 grant to the musician's home orchestra to support professional development focused on community service and engagement for musicians.

The five award recipients, their orchestras, and projects are:

—Victoria Griswold, violin, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra: Teddy Bear



The League's 2019 Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service were presented at the Conference on June 4. From left, League of American Orchestras President and CEO Jesse Rosen; award winners Victoria Griswold, Donna Parkes, Rebecca Patterson, Jeff Handley, and Rebecca Young; and Brian Hirst, Ford Credit Customer Service Manager—Nashville.

Series, introducing young children to orchestral instruments through story, live music, and movement.

—Jeff Handley, principal percussion, Chicago Sinfonietta: Audience Matters and SEED, in-school residency programs

for students from under-served communities.

—Rebecca Patterson, principal cello, New Haven Symphony Orchestra: NHSO Harmony Fellowship Quartet/Recording Composition Class, for students from underrepresented communities.

—Donna Parkes, principal trombone, Louisville Orchestra: Teaching children at the Heuser Hearing Institute with hearing and speech impairment such

skills as singing, clapping with rhythm, and dancing.

—Rebecca Young, associate principal viola, New York Philharmonic: Very Young People's Concerts for the youngest music lovers. **S**

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