

League of American Orchestras

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Written Testimony in Support of FY 2022 Funding for the National Endowment for the Arts

The League of American Orchestras urges the House Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee to **substantially increase** Fiscal Year 2022 funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). While the agency has received steady bipartisan support from the Subcommittee and Congress over the last several years, this past year of unprecedented closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic has called for special consideration of the devastating impact on the arts sector, including orchestras.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the League of American Orchestras has collected information tracking the pandemic's impact on orchestras, their workforce, and their capacity to deliver on their community-centered mission. Our third COVID-19 Impact Survey opened on February 22, 2021, with 198 orchestras across budget sizes participating by March 11, 2021. The survey collected information to help gain a better understanding of orchestras' capacity to deliver performances for the rest of the current season and the 2021-22 season. Among the highlights: 23% of orchestras are currently offering performances with a live, in-person audience; over two-thirds (67%) are offering streaming performances; orchestras are expecting halls to be on average at 42% of capacity when audiences return in person. The full impact of this pandemic has yet to be felt. Even as government closure orders lift, orchestras will not quickly return to full capacity, which will have a severe and prolonged impact on their financial capacity and workforce.

The designation of being an NEA grantee has long provided a significant reputational boost that assists orchestras of all sizes in presenting concerts and unique experiences to the public. In 2020, the value of an NEA grant became even more significant given the crucial financial support in the form of CARES Act grants during what continues to be an extended period of vulnerability for the performing arts. The following testimony is both an expression of gratitude by the grantees and a request on behalf of the orchestral field for the agency to be empowered to continue providing necessary support. The NEA's leadership capacity, direct grants via Art Works and Challenge America as well as its indirect grantmaking through state and regional partnerships, research, and convening role make the agency an irreplaceable beacon to arts organizations and the communities that rely upon them as they cope with and recover from this troubled time.

A National Endowment for the Arts CARES Act grant made it possible for the **Portland (Maine) Symphony Orchestra** (PSO) to retain its office location, pay needed utility bills, and preserve its artistic and education staff, all of which were needed for the 2020-21 season to

operate. Without NEA CARES funding, the orchestra would have had to make dire cuts to its programs, staff, and operations. The NEA CARES grant freed up operational funds that led to the PSO's ability to quickly plan scenarios for an ever-changing 2020-21 season. This work resulted in a virtual concert season and the creation of a new program entitled *Musician Led Projects*. Both were launched in fall 2020. The digital season is employing nearly the entire roster of PSO musicians through Classical, Pops, Youth, Holiday, and Summer concerts. These concerts have included works by Arturo Marquez, Florence Price, Max Richter, George Walker, Ahmet Adnan Suycun, and many others. *Musician Led Projects* have given every musician in the orchestra the opportunity to earn income through self-led initiatives that connect music to members of the Portland community; this has been critical as the orchestra can only perform with 25-30 musicians on stage due to health recommendations. These projects have included small performances in outdoor locations, virtual performances, zoom studio tours with patrons, and educational content to engage very young listeners. Virtual concerts and Musician Led Initiatives have reached supporters and patrons in 36 states and provided employment opportunities for stagehand and concert hall staff in addition to work for PSO staff members. The NEA CARES Act grant allowed the Portland Symphony Orchestra not only to survive but quickly pivot to provide safe employment opportunities for artists and meaningful programs for the community.

With funding from an NEA CARES grant, the **Nashville Symphony** will present a series of free Community Concerts in the spring and summer of 2021. Scheduled to take place both at Schermerhorn Symphony Center and at locations around the Middle Tennessee region, these concerts will be the Nashville Symphony's very first performances since being forced to shut down in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past year, the Nashville Symphony has embarked on a reimagining process and has initiated dialogues with key stakeholders and organizations in its community in order to help shape and transform the orchestra's community engagement programming. As part of the Nashville Symphony's reemergence, these Community Concerts represent a vital first step in how the orchestra will respond to the community's input and play a meaningful role in helping the people of Middle Tennessee heal from the devastation of the pandemic.

The **Billings Symphony** utilized its NEA CARES grant to fill and sustain three key positions: Music Director, Education Director and Manager of Artistic Operations. These positions play a significant role in contributing to the organization's overall community engagement and are critical for sustaining the orchestra's mission to "enrich lives through music." Eliminating or curtailing even one position would have resulted in dramatically reduced services to its already-underserved populations. This award allowed the Billings Symphony to continue offering its services through uncertain times as well as sustain it into the future. Given the unknown end of this public health crisis, the Billings Symphony has started facing a new reality by tasking its community engagement division to begin a transformation to provide creative and effective alternative programming, i.e. live streaming events, online educational resources for students, creative connection platforms for patrons and more. It prioritized scheduling for those who have been most isolated during the shutdown such as the Women's Prison and assisted living facilities. Lastly, receiving CARES funding freed up the orchestra to

retain a residency for its “you can’t be it if you can’t see it” equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives, which include the leads for its planned March 2021 Guys and Dolls Concert.

By supporting musician salaries at the **St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (SLSO)** during the summer of 2020, CARES Act funds benefitted both performers and the regional community, which enjoyed continued access to orchestral music. Creative offerings included: the #SLSOatHome video series in which musicians offered performances from their homes; the SLSO Instrument Playground Online, a valuable free educational tool for students, teachers, and parents to be introduced to orchestral instruments by musicians; and several musicians organized outdoor concerts in their own neighborhoods. The SLSO *Songs of America* project, a series of videos celebrating the breadth of voices in American music, featured SLSO musicians, local guest artists, and St. Louis landmarks that showcase the unique spirit of the community. The project reached more than 250,000 people online in its first month and aired on the local PBS affiliate, reaching another 185,000 people. Federal support, including NEA CARES Act funds, enabled the SLSO to be nimble and creative, maintain employment for musicians and staff throughout the pandemic, and continue making meaningful musical experiences when the community needed them most.

During a season when far too many performing arts organizations have been unable to perform, the NEA CARES Act grant facilitated **Toledo Alliance for the Performing Arts (TAPA’s)** return to the stage. The funding helped retain their Music Director and plan a season with both in-person and virtual audiences. TAPA adjusted its concert repertoire to accommodate a limited number of musicians safely on the stage while selecting programming that would resonate with the Toledo community during these extraordinary times. TAPA’s celebratory 80th anniversary *Nutcracker*, the longest running annual production in the entire country, was modified and streamed by over 4,000 viewers with a recorded score performed by Toledo Symphony musicians, and in December PBS *Newshour* featured this Toledo production. So far this season, concerts have been viewed not only locally, but in 46 states and 29 countries through the new TAPA Streaming service. This spring, TAPA celebrates Toledo’s Metroparks, with *Forces of Nature*, a concert highlighting the treasure of their nationally acclaimed Metroparks system. In gratitude to their audiences, supporters, students, and community, their final concert this June will feature Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 6, Pastoral* (feelings of gratitude after a storm). Toledo Alliance for the Performing Arts is deeply grateful for the NEA’s investment in its efforts to provide the healing power of the arts during these challenging times.

The **South Bend Symphony Orchestra (SBSO)** in Indiana was honored to be a recipient of CARES Act support administered by the NEA. While the 2019-20 performance season came to an abrupt end for SBSO—as it did for nearly every arts organization in the country—the work of the organization had to continue. The operating support allowed the SBSO to focus energy on shifting to new projects and platforms during the pandemic. During a year spent exploring and redefining new ways in which the performing arts could thrive, the SBSO discovered that adaptation was equal to innovation. During the height of the pandemic, the South Bend Symphony launched an innovative new project entitled *Octet*. *Octet* was a proof of concept that attempted to add new dimensions to the listening experience when musicians and audiences were unable to gather in person. To provide musicians work at a time when it had become nearly non-existent for performers, eight SBSO string players were hired to assemble

and perform in a socially distanced hall to record chamber music. This recording was mixed to be channeled through eight individual speakers, which were later set up in a circle in an exhibition hall at the South Bend Museum of Art where patrons could safely visit and encounter the sounds of a live octet as part an immersive audio experience. The project united several community partners and brought “live” music into South Bend for months. *Octet*, a fully transportable system, transcends the pandemic and will travel indefinitely to area hospitals, libraries, schools, and other community venues in the future. It is currently making rounds at several area COVID vaccine clinics, where patients can enjoy a unique musical experience during the mandatory observation time following vaccination. Without the incredible support of federal agencies like the NEA during this time, projects like *Octet* could never have happened. The SBSO is proud to have continued serving its patrons and community during the COVID-19 pandemic and is poised to thrive in the seasons to come.

Thank you for this opportunity to share a sampling of ways in which the National Endowment for the Arts has been able to support orchestras through the COVID-19 pandemic, which directly translated to supporting musicians, staff, and their communities. These dedicated grants and the flexibility for FY20 and FY21 grantees to pay down operating costs have made a tremendous difference at a financially precarious time. NEA CARES Act grants have helped many organizations offer much-needed employment and provide ways for children and adults to enjoy music and inspiration amid great uncertainty. The NEA has shown consistent strong leadership in promoting public engagement with high-quality artistry and great empathy and understanding for the urgent needs of arts organizations and artists throughout this pandemic. While this year’s testimony has focused on the COVID-19 support provided by the agency in acknowledgment of this anomalous time, it is our hope that Congress will support the annual appropriations for the National Endowment for the Arts with a substantial increase in FY22 so that communities throughout our nation can look forward to deeper engagement with and increased access to the arts.

About the League

The League of American Orchestras leads, supports, and champions America’s orchestras and the vitality of the music they perform. Its diverse membership of more than 1,800 organizations and individuals across North America runs the gamut from world-renowned orchestras to community groups, from summer festivals to student and youth ensembles, from conservatories to libraries, from businesses serving orchestras to individuals who love symphonic music. A national organization dedicated solely to the orchestral experience, the League is a nexus of knowledge and innovation, advocacy, and leadership advancement. Its conferences and events, award-winning Symphony magazine, website, and other publications inform people around the world about orchestral activity and developments.

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