

Passing the Baton

The transition of board leadership at orchestras is always a delicate balancing act, and the pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to board chairs—as well as unexpected opportunities. Here, incoming and outgoing board chairs at three orchestras reveal how they view their roles, what they foresee for the future, and how they got involved with orchestras in the first place.

by Nancy Malitz

The coming season is likely to be one of the most challenging for symphony orchestras in recent history. For organizations in the midst of board-leadership transitions, there is a complicated array of concerns to be considered. Some challenges are shared by the industry as a whole—the constantly shifting threat of the pandemic itself, the impossibility of predicting when audiences will return, and the urgent need to remain flexible and ramp up digital skills. Still, with the latest round of federal financial relief as well as the increasing numbers of Americans who are fully vaccinated, many in the orchestra field are cautiously hopeful about the coming season.

In the midst of this time that is transitional in so many ways, we check in on three orchestras in the midst of their own board-chair transitions. The three pairs of incoming and outgoing board chairs represent the larger-budget Chicago Symphony Orchestra and San Francisco Symphony, as well as the smaller-budget Annapolis Symphony Orchestra. Board transitions in San Francisco and Annapolis took place in 2020, while in Chicago the board baton hand-off is set for November. All of the board chairs, past and present, are focused on finding

new opportunities during this time, as they work to make those opportunities a reality in collaboration with top administration: Executive Director Edgar Herrera in Annapolis, President Jeff Alexander in Chicago, and Executive Director Mark C. Hanson in San Francisco. Each board chair has her own distinctive style, even as they all have in common the need for their orchestra to adapt to the “new normal” for performances, increase and deepen their community connections, and address racial equity at their organizations. As these board chairs continue to navigate the new COVID and post-COVID reality, they offer their thoughts about what lies ahead.

CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Helen Zell, outgoing board chair

Mary Louise Gorno, board chair-elect

Helen Zell, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s outgoing board chair, was elected board chair in 2015 and concludes her term in late 2021.

Zell recalls that the CSO’s digital presence had to be invented almost overnight when COVID struck. “I now think of COVID as an opportunity, not a stumbling block,” Zell says. “I hate to say our website was stodgy, though it really was, in some respects. But we went from zero to

60 fast! There were all these wonderful ideas that our dynamic (Vice President of Sales and Marketing) Ryan Lewis had, and he began to implement them as he took advantage of all this down time to rejigger the website and think of ways to communicate.”

The orchestra’s new digital channel, CSOtv, has video programs on demand including legendary TV concerts from the archives, with much of the content offered free. Although the orchestra is planning its first return to live concerts at the Ravinia Festival this summer, there was no full-season subscription offering in January, as is customary, and going without traditional subscriptions at this time is among options still being considered while the situation remains fluid: “Subscriptions are not relevant,” Zell says. “People are uncertain, and they want some assurance that they can have control over what they are going to do, and they don’t want to make huge financial outlays. But do I think we’re going to abandon live music in favor of a digital presence forever? Of course not.”

Zell has subscribed to the CSO for more than four decades, and she was active in top committees for years prior to joining the board. “There were times when it was hard for me to envision a win-win for the orchestra, given the decline of music education, the banking collapse in 2008 followed by investment struggles, and then, after that, a recent painful work stoppage [in 2019], followed by COVID,” she said. “But we have a support group of incredibly dedicated people, some on



Todd Rosenberg

Helen Zell has served as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s board chair since 2015, when she became the first woman to occupy that position in the orchestra’s history.

the young side. The endowment is bigger than it has ever been. Fundraising is still strong. And we have started collaborating with artists from the theater and dance community, such as John Malkovich and the Joffrey Ballet.

“I think we have to take a deep breath. Do we make the orchestra smaller? I don’t think so. Basically we are commit-

“If I could change anything, it would be to re-program the mindset of the people who run this country to the belief that classical music participation in the school years has just as much value as football.”—Helen Zell, outgoing board chair, Chicago Symphony Orchestra

ted to the historical precedent as to what constitutes a first-class ensemble, and it’s a hundred people. That’s what our hall is built for. When I was last in Vienna at the Musikverein, I sat and thought about what it was like a couple hundred years ago, and how it is still going strong. One advantage the Europeans have over us is the government’s support of the art form. If I could change anything it would be to re-program the mind-set of the people who run this country to the belief that classical music participation in the school years has just as much value as football.”

For Zell, that early participation in music started with piano lessons—and having a father who served on his own local orchestra board. “My dad’s job took us to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, [where] he was offered a position as board chair of the Baton Rouge Symphony, which was almost in bankruptcy. He became friendly with the conductor. Dad brought him over to our house. I played a silly little piece for him on the piano—I was maybe ten or eleven—it wasn’t an audition, but it made a big impression to have him watch me play. I learned to play the piano and loved every minute of it.” Zell kept up the music when her family moved to New

York, where “My teacher convinced me that I was the next Horowitz, and I even had a piano quartet with three other people my age, an experience that just kind of solidified everything.”

Mary Louise Gorno, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s chair-elect, assumes her new board duties in November. She wants to see the Chicago Symphony become an orchestra “without walls, whether the point of entry is a jazz concert or a wonderful experience with Beethoven’s Ninth,” she says. “And we want to be talking with our full community. We want to make sure that our own symphony community stays reflective of that diversity, whether in programming opportunities or thinking about our board and members and staff. What does an orchestra look like today? And what could it look like?”

Like Zell, Gorno has strong memories of early exposure to music, and not just classical music: “Detroit was exploding with music: Soul, gospel, the blues—Aretha Franklin, what a woman!” she says. Her first exposure to classical music was “Brunch with Bach,” a Sunday series at the Detroit Institute of Arts featuring musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra that she attended with her family. “Later, as a grad student at the University of Chicago,” she says, “I would get discount student tickets at \$10 for afternoon performances [by the Chicago Symphony], even box seats, and so I was immersed in the very best. I was still living in that area when I called to purchase my first subscription, and I was told I needed to give a donation, however small. And I thought, ‘Oh, okay, I have been a beneficiary all these years.’”

For Gorno, who is also a member of the League of American Orchestras’ board of directors, the hope is that the Chicago Symphony can come back “refreshed and wiser” after COVID, and “build to the



Left to right: Chicago Symphony Orchestra cellist Brant Taylor, current CSO board chair Helen Zell, and CSO board member Roderick Branch.

point where we can feature the highest level of quality and at the same time become more nimble and more innovative. I’ve done a lot of thinking whether we want to put our foot on the brakes. If anything, we should hit the accelerator. To infuse new energy into these great institutions that so excel at what they’re doing may be the greatest opportunity that we will ever have.”

ANNAPOLIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Jane Casey, board chair, 2018-20

Jill Kidwell, current board chair

Jill Kidwell, the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra’s current board chair, remembers the day in mid-March 2020 when most of the nation’s orchestras got shut down. “It has been a rough year for our musicians,” she says. “The orchestra is committed to doing all that it can to support them financially and to keep them safe. They have lost income. And last year they also lost what they love to do the most, which is to perform together, for an audience.”

A year later, things have improved significantly. Staffing a COVID check-in station at Annapolis’s Maryland Hall, the orchestra’s primary performance venue, in March 2021, Kidwell greeted the string players as they arrived for one of their many “virtual concert” recording sessions. “Listening in the concert hall, out of the way of the cameras, it was as if I had



Todd Rosenberg

Mary Louise Gorno will succeed Helen Zell as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's board chair in November 2021.

emerged from a black-and-white world to technicolor," she says. "The musicians were so happy to be performing again.

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One of them handed me an envelope with a check made out to the ASO and a note that said, 'Let's keep the music going.'"

The musicians have been performing, though not, as of press time, for an in-person audience. The orchestra has a collection of videos it says are comparable technically to the work of larger orchestras. "I think we have hit the ball out of the park this year, thanks to Music Director José-Luis Novo, who is quite brilliant,

and who has handled everything thrown at him," Kidwell said. "We are hoping to add some winds and brass this season. And we now have an audience that knows it can watch from home. The videos are beautiful. Novo understands what it is like to film while performing. The first concert series was done at Strathmore Music Center, which has recording capability, and we found a subcontractor to help with the video. It's going very well."

Another bright light, a real showpiece, is the expansion of the orchestra's training academy for young musicians, who can start as young as four, and includes need-based reduced tuition and full tuition waivers for qualifying students. It's the brainchild of the orchestra's concertmaster, Netanel Draiblate. "He's quite a force," said Kidwell. "It was his idea. The goal is diversity."

The planning process for the Annapolis Symphony Academy began with conversations as far back as 2015, says **Jane Casey**, who stepped down as board chair in 2018 but remains a board member and serves on the finance committee. "Maestro Novo, our music director of fifteen years, is Spanish. But as with most orchestras, we were not where we would like to be in terms of equity, diversity, and inclusion. If we want our onstage orchestra to look like our audience, we have to look to them when they are young. We started the Academy on the premise that there was a gap in the marketplace for young musicians to learn how to play together in small groups. Our target was 50 percent White, 50 percent non-White, 50 percent in need of financial assistance. We have been able to hit those targets."

During her time as board chair, Casey led the search for a new executive director and found the ideal candidate in Edgar Herrera, a trained pianist who previously had served as executive director of the Pensacola Symphony Orchestra and director of marketing, public relations, and communications at the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra. He was also a participant in the League of American Orchestras' 2004-05 Orchestra Management Fellowship Program. At the time he was hired,

in May, Herrera was doing foundation work in Mexico City—and then COVID struck. Herrera was unable at first to travel to the United States, and did his job remotely. Casey worked at making the physical move happen—which did finally take place in October. Despite the

Jill Kidwell, the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra's current board chair, says, "It has been a rough year for our musicians. The orchestra is committed to doing all that it can to support them financially and to keep them safe. They have lost income. And last year they also lost what they love to do the most, which is to perform together, for an audience."

difficulties, says Casey, "If it had not been for COVID, we would not be where we are today with streaming. What I'm seeing is really a digital transformation, not just a digital strategy."

Both Novo and Herrera are native Spanish speakers, and they made the decision during the pandemic to add Spanish subtitles to the spoken portions of the orchestra's streamed performances; in Annapolis, the Hispanic/Latino community comprises 16.8 percent of the city's population, according to the 2010 U.S. census. It's all part of the orchestra's increased focus on its community.

SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY

Sakurako Fisher, board chair, 2012-December 2020

Priscilla B. Geeslin, current board chair
Outgoing San Francisco Symphony President **Sakurako Fisher** still marvels at the experience of serving on the committee that chose Finnish composer and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen to take over the music directorship upon the close of Michael Tilson Thomas's quarter-century tenure. She noted how thrilled the musicians involved in the search effort became, once it dawned on everyone that they



Jane Casey, chair of the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra's board of trustees from 2018 to 2020.



Jill Kidwell has served as the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra board chair since January 2020.

out of their comfort zone. They liked the idea of his pushing the envelope.”

The San Francisco Symphony became involved in a discussion about what the definition of “classical” actually means. “Is it a fixed place in time?” Fisher asked. “But we are not a fixed-place-in-time entity. Our musicians are wildly creative, and we are asking them to bring some of that expression into the hall.

had found their guy: “There were musicians, management, and board people all involved in this search. The musicians actually wanted Esa-Pekka to take them

Contemporary music, some of it gets a bad rap. It’s not all atonal twelve-tone music. It just means new. We recently featured five women composers, and it

was so great, the music was so beautiful. Why haven’t we looked at this before? I’m convinced that what great boards do is help an organization ask these kinds of questions, to keep moving them forward and holding everyone accountable.”

“If it had not been for COVID, we would not be where we are today with streaming. What I’m seeing is really a digital transformation, not just a digital strategy.”— Jane Casey, former board chair, Annapolis Symphony Orchestra, 2018-20

The announcement of Salonen as music director came in late 2018—and with it the news that he would adjust the orchestra’s artistic model. As part of the redefined job,



Randall Goosby
Photo: Kaupo Kikkas



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Salonen works with eight Collaborative Partners: a group of musicians and other artists who curate programs for the orchestra. Salonen started his new job in 2020, when the pandemic forced the orchestra to pivot to virtual formats—including multiple filmed episodes curated by Salonen and the eight partners. Among the partners is composer Nico Muhly, whose first work for the ensemble, *Throughline*, presented an

The San Francisco Symphony recently became involved in a discussion about what the definition of “classical” actually means. “I’m convinced that what great boards do is help an organization ask these kinds of questions, to keep moving them forward and holding everyone accountable,” says **Sakurako Fisher**, who stepped down as the San Francisco Symphony’s board chair in December 2020.

intricately filmed solution to the challenge of writing for an orchestra when only six players could be on stage at a time, unless it was a breath-based instrument, in which case only one.

The orchestra has also taken this time away from in-person performances to refocus its energies in other areas as well. “COVID has been super trying, forcing us to do things we had procrastinated on, and getting us to do a lot of work on accelerating diversity,” says Fisher. “Michael [Tilson Thomas] led us to that place where we could really make that deep intrinsic commitment to bringing more people into the tent, and taking a look at what that will mean when it becomes more natural. One of the things he taught me for sure was that you can never zone out, because you never know what to expect. I love that sensation.”

Priscilla B. Geeslin, who took office as the San Francisco Symphony’s board chair in December 2020, says, “I’ve always



Incoming and outgoing San Francisco Symphony Orchestra board chairs Priscilla Geeslin (left) and Sakurako Fisher (right).

been lucky to work with great development people,” in her prior work with universities, museums, opera companies, and other Bay Area cultural institutions. Geeslin admits the pandemic presents a daunting situation, financially and otherwise: “It’s going to be incredibly difficult for all of us

pulling out of this. Certainly COVID gives us that opportunity to start making digital changes we’ve all been talking about. We’ve just been nibbling at the edges.

“We’re thinking about some virtual salons, starting in June or July, maybe two a month. We used them as a way last



San Francisco Symphony percussionist Jacob Nissly and Stan Muncy perform Ellen Reid’s *Fear / Release* for the orchestra’s 2020-21 filmed *Throughline: San Francisco Symphony—From Hall to Home* virtual season.



Kristen Loken

Sakurako Fisher, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and Executive Director Mark C. Hanson sit down to sign the contract appointing Salonen as the San Francisco Symphony's music director, December 2018.

summer to give an update on what was happening. It will also be an opportunity to have musicians talk about what they have been doing during the lockdown, what they're working on, how they're keeping up their skills, which always fascinates me."

"It's going to be incredibly difficult for all of us pulling out of this," says **Priscilla B. Geeslin**, the San Francisco Symphony's newly elected board chair. "Certainly COVID gives us that opportunity to start making digital changes we've all been talking about. We've just been nibbling at the edges."

Geeslin is still new to her working relationship with Salonen, but they meet regularly. "I'll see him leading a rehearsal. We will share Zoom calls. We had an in-person meeting, which I felt terrible about, because I only had coffee at the house and I had to tell him I hoped he didn't take cream. He is a delight, though. In talking about what he wants to do, I become more and more excited to see where all this is going, particularly for the digital side of it. He's incredibly flexible.

"But the issue for people is not just about opening the hall. Restaurants have to open. People need to feel comfortable about coming back into the Bay Area. I do think they will. I think they are hungry for it. I hope that is the case." **S**

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