Embracing a Changed World

The world has radically changed from just a year ago, as orchestras have grappled with the pandemic and have sought to confront racial injustice. The League’s 2021 National Conference will explore what must change from the past, what the future might look like, and how we will get there.

by David Styers

Orchestral music has evolved over centuries and it will continue to evolve and thrive—differently. The time is right for orchestras to now embrace a changed world and build an inclusive and open future. With light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, and an overdue need to address racial equity, this time presents new opportunities for a vibrant reinvention of our art form and our institutions.

The League of American Orchestras’ online 2021 National Conference, June 7-17, will pose big questions, examine where we are, and look ahead to the future. Providing actionable, engaging content; diverse perspectives; provocative, timely discussion; and network development, the Conference will focus on five critical questions:

1. Concert Hall vs. Digital: What new opportunities and challenges are emerging, and how do we balance the need for both engagement and revenue?
2. Better Together: What responsibilities and opportunities do orchestras have to deepen their relationships with their communities?
3. Show Up for Racial Equity: What shifts across the board can we make, in order to progress towards a more equitable, post-pandemic future?
4. New Directions: How has a year of adversity and awareness changed our approach to programming and the concert experience?
5. Reframing the Narrative: How do we make a compelling case that resonates with government, funders, and the public as a new chapter in the work of orchestras begins?

We must thank all the individuals and organizations that have helped us put together such a vibrant gathering of people, perspectives, and ideas at this year’s National Conference, among them the consulting firm McKenzie Mack Group and many others.

For a list of the Conference’s funders and sponsors for this year’s Conference, visit https://leagueconference.org/2021-sponsors-sponsors. The League sincerely appreciates their support.

Here are just a few highlights of what to expect this June.

Inspiring Music and Speakers

The Conference will showcase the rich range of music-making by American orchestras of every description from across the country. The Interscholastical Orchestras of New York, the Minnesota Orchestra, and the Omaha Symphony will give live-streamed concerts, and the Albany (NY) Symphony, Great Lakes Chamber Orchestra, Greensboro Symphony Orchestra, Hawaii Symphony Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, New Bedford Symphony, and San Diego Symphony will be featured in previously recorded concerts.

World-renowned musician, composer, and bandleader Wynton Marsalis will kick off the Conference on Monday, June 7 in an interview by League President and CEO Simon Wood. Marsalis will share his core beliefs, which are based on the principles of jazz: individual creativity (improvisation), collective cooperation (swing), and facing adversity with persistence (optimism) (the blues). In 1983, Marsalis became the first and only artist to win classical and jazz Grammy Awards in the same year; he won in both categories again in 1984. An educator and leading advocate of American culture, Marsalis will reflect on what he sees as the future of the arts and orchestras in expanding musical offerings and audiences. Marsalis co-founded Juilliard at Lincoln Center, the first-ever new, permanent constituent at the NYC performing arts center since its launch.

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Thematic Days

Each of the five critical questions will frame a day of the Conference by providing an in-depth look into issues most pressing an in-depth look into issues most affecting orchestras.

On Tuesday, June 8, “Concert Hall vs. Digital: What new opportunities and challenges are emerging, and how do we balance the need for both engagement and revenue?” will explore what we have learned during the pandemic about digital content: it will always be part of our future, yet it will never replace live performance. This day is about the future interplay between live and digital—and the different experiences and potential of each medium.

• Making Connections: Leveraging Symphonic Strengths in a Pandemic-Impacted Nation with Colleen Dilschneider, chief market engagement officer for IMPACTS, a predictive market intelligence and technology firm, will lead the Making Connections: Leveraging Symphonic Strengths in a Pandemic-Impacted Nation session on June 8.

• Facing Resistance to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Work with Denise Wilmer Barreto, co-founder and executive producer of Sargent Productions, Chicago, will lead the June 8 “When We Don’t Give Up: Facing Resistance to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Work” session.

• Artistically Responsive Impacted Nation with Marc Bamuthi Joseph, vice president and artistic director of social impact at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, will lead the Art of Community and Social Impact session on June 9.

• Making Connections: Leveraging Symphonic Strengths in a Pandemic-Impacted Nation with Colleen Dilschneider, chief market engagement officer for IMPACTS, a global leader in predictive market intelligence and related technologies.

• How Has Technology Changed Musician, composer, and bandleader Wynton Marsalis will launch the League’s 2021 National Conference on Monday, June 7 in an interview by League President and CEO Simon Wood.

Colleen Dilschneider, chief market engagement officer for IMPACTS, a predictive market intelligence and technology firm, will lead the Making Connections: Leveraging Symphonic Strengths in a Pandemic-Impacted Nation session on June 8.

Blake-Antony Johnson, CEO of Chicago Sinfonietta, will moderate the June 8 “We Do This Work Together: Creating Pathways for Meaningful Action in the Face of Racial Justice Impact” panel discussion.

Laura Reynolds, executive director of the Boise Philharmonic, will moderate the June 8 “Survive to Thrive: Why Community is Central to Our Success panel discussion.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph, vice president and artistic director of social impact at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, will lead the June 8 “Making Connections: Leveraging Symphonic Strengths in a Pandemic-Impacted Nation” session.

Ed Yim, chief content officer and senior vice president of WQXR 105.9 FM, will moderate the June 9 “Artistically Responsive Orchestras: What does the future look like?” panel discussion.


Kirin Singh Sirah, president of the International Storytelling Center, will lead the June 16 “Your Values, Your Impact, Your Stories” session, which focuses on the story-telling skills that orchestras must sharpen to communicate their value.

Michelle Burns Miller, president and CEO of the Minnesota Orchestra, will lead the June 16 “Making the Case in 2021 panel discussion on how orchestras can articulate their roles in society.”
Each of these five days of the League’s 2021 Conference will conclude with a facilitated online open chat space for attendees to reflect upon and share their thoughts and surface ideas about implementation and impact, following the presentations and discussions of the day.

Orchestras Forever, panel discussion exploring the changing role of technology and the rise of the orchestra media company, moderated by Anwar Nasir, chief revenue and advancement officer of the Omaha Symphony.

On Wednesday, June 9, “Better Together: What responsibilities and opportunities do orchestras have to deepen their relationships with their communities?” will address how orchestras’ relationships with their communities will be redefined after the pandemic and will examine how orchestras play in the economic revival of their cities and towns. This day is about how orchestras can build even deeper relationships with their communities and create new dimensions of cultural belonging.

• The Arc of Art and Community Solidarity with Marc Bamuthi Joseph, vice president and artistic director of the Omaha Symphony.

Pre-Conference Seminars
Prior to the start of Conference, Pre-Conference Seminars will take deep dives into specific topics, June 1–4.

Leadership in a Time of Crisis with Susan Reinecke of the Center for Creative Leadership (extra fee, June 2): Participants will gain greater situational awareness of when to focus on crisis leadership versus crisis management; identify effective and ineffective crisis leadership and the impact of authenticity, transparency, compassion, and interdependence on success; learn how to prioritize, act, and communicate strategically at each stage of a crisis; no matter the crisis and ambiguity; develop skills to maintain agility and resilience throughout a crisis; and develop ways to pivot in order to thrive while taking advantage of new conditions and opportunities and reconfiguring the organization.

What Do You Need in a Post-Pandemic Board? with Susan Howlett of Susan Howlett Consulting (extra fee, June 3): As we emerge from the reverberating impacts of the last year, boards will have to think and behave differently if orchestras are to remain relevant. This interactive session will help participants identify what you need from your board to navigate a shifting landscape; discern which board attitudes and behaviors no longer serve you; and how to move forward more useful ones; and equip board members to champion your orchestra’s evolving identity. Expect conversations about equity, tools for addressing conundrums, and opportunities for real-time problem-solving.

Embracing Changed Fundraising: Keeping Your Donors in a Time of Renewal
Howlett Consulting (extra fee, June 3): As we emerge from the reverberating impacts of the last year, boards will have to think and behave differently if orchestras are to remain relevant. This interactive session will help participants identify what you need from your board to navigate a shifting landscape; discern which board attitudes and behaviors no longer serve you; and how to move forward more useful ones; and equip board members to champion your orchestra’s evolving identity. Expect conversations about equity, tools for addressing conundrums, and opportunities for real-time problem-solving.

Embracing a Changed World
On Tuesday, June 15, “New Directions: How has a year of adversity and awareness changed our approach to programming and the concert experience?” will provide a look at the future of repertoire planning and what orchestras’ priorities should be. This day will explore how the past year has altered the way orchestras program and present concerts.

• The Summer of 2020 with Titus Underwood, principal oboe of the Nashville Symphony; and a panel of BPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) orchestra professionals.

Networking and Learning
The Conference will also feature small-group Constituency Meetings by peer group, many of them taking place on Monday, June 14, to focus on each group’s most pressing concerns. Whether you are connected to the orchestra field as an executive director, trustee, volunteer, staff member, conductor, composer, or musician, there will be Constituency Meeting agendas designed specifically for you. Throughout the Conference, the online Exhibit Hall will connect you with Conference exhibitors and sponsors. On Friday, June 11, attendees will have a full day to visit virtual exhibit booths and attend innovation sessions to hear from experts in the fields of acoustics, finance, brand strategy, audience retention, and patron engagement, among others. And we will be having meet-and-greet opportunities prior to the opening and closing sessions for everyone to connect with colleagues and make new friends.

So, join us online in June for your own Spring 2021 76th National Conference Online LEAGUE OF AMERICAN ORCHESTRAS.