

## How Can We Help?

It's been a year of unprecedented change and adjustment, but the focus at the League of American Orchestras remains constant: finding ways to help American orchestras not just survive, but thrive.

By Rebecca Winzenried



"Nimble" may be the word of the year across the orchestra field. Organizations everywhere have realized just how flexible they can be in the face of rapidly evolving circumstances. The same is true at the League of American Orchestras, which has weathered a challenging time through a series of quick pivots, all aimed to keep members informed, equipped, and connected as they confront the pandemic and examine their roles and responsibilities in the nationwide conversation about racial injustice.

The League has helped to keep everyone in the orchestra field connected during a difficult time while learning about best practices and staying abreast on emerging issues.

Here, we tell the stories of some of the people on the front lines of assisting orchestras in multiple League departments: Knowledge, Learning, and Leadership;

Advocacy and Government; Artistic and Learning Programs; Member Services; Marketing and Communications; and Development. League staff members describe just some of ways they have helped orchestras adapt during a tumultuous year.

### Online Convenings: Learning and Leadership

In early 2020, when organizations left



**David Styers,**  
Director,  
Learning and  
Leadership  
Programs

and right were cancelling major gatherings due to the pandemic, the League faced a conundrum: how to produce its long-running National Conference, an annual, in-person convening of people

from orchestras across the country, in the midst of a pandemic? The League opted to go big, by going virtual, and turned that year's Conference into a marathon online event offered over six weeks in May and June. The move into unfamiliar technology—who was truly fluent in Zoom 18 months ago?—meant that the League helped to keep everyone in the orchestra field connected during a difficult time while learning about best practices, and staying abreast on emerging issues. And when nationwide protests erupted after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, prompting a long-delayed examination of orchestras and racial inequity, the flexibility of the online format meant that the Conference added timely sessions focusing on current events and providing a safe space for needed discussions.

With pandemic still in force, the League's annual National Conference went virtual for a second time this June. Running from June 7 to 17, the 2021

Conference, “Embracing a Changed World,” brought forward new voices and perspectives to explore what the future of orchestras might look like—and how to get there.

The move to virtual Conferences “has kept us in an online learning mode,” says **David Styers**, who produces the League’s National Conference as Director, Learning and Leadership Programs. “The learnings from this are going to be ongoing and continuous,” he says.

The 2021 National Conference builds on the success of the online 2020 Conference, only this time the decision to head online was made well in advance. Which gave organizers a little more leeway than they’d had for the previous year.

Back in early 2020, David Styers, Director, Learning and Leadership Programs, quickly drew up a master plan for how to incorporate a full slate of programming for that year’s online Conference, along with general sessions and constituent-group meetings. Then came the hard part. “Once I had a vision of what it could look like, then we had to figure out how to execute it,” he says. His situation paralleled that of many League members, who had been thrust into the role of digital producer/presenter overnight as concerts were cancelled and events went virtual. “All we knew was we didn’t know, and we went out and found the experts to fill out those gaps,” he recalls. One thing Styers did know, he says, is, “We are a field that’s used to rehearsing. Nothing happened online that did not have a rehearsal.” Some sessions at the 2020 online Conference went better than others, he says, “but we never had a failure. We got a good recording of every single one of the 28 sessions, so anyone who could not attend live could see it—and we had 4,000 people register.”

The opening session of the 2020 Conference drew 1,000 virtual attendees, and subsequent smaller sessions, which focused on specific topics, averaged 460 attendees. The numbers outpaced what could be expected for any in-person Conference, boosted by the League’s one-time decision to offer free registration. “We had hundreds of board members, youth orchestra, smaller-budget orchestras, finance directors—people who never would have been able to attend Conference in person,” says Styers. In addition to welcoming a broader range of orchestra stakeholders, making the 2020 Conference more accessible gave everyone in the orchestra community a sense of connection, continuity, and support in the face of the financial and emotion distress caused by the pandemic—and the chance to learn how other organizations were coping and innovating.

The League scaled up the number of online constituent meeting groups, “so we had a way to do peer-to-peer connection” online, says Styers. “How are you doing out in your community? Let me hear and learn from you.” In one example, a call went out for executive directors who had been through crisis situations like natural disasters or the 2008-09 recession who might be willing to mentor younger counterparts. “We probably had three dozen executive directors we paired with about a dozen mentors in the field,” says Styers.

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Multiple sessions at the League’s 2020 virtual Conference focused on helping orchestras navigate the pandemic. Sessions included “Scenario Planning in the Time of COVID-19,” hosted by Susan Nelson, executive president of the nonprofit management consulting and research firm TDC.



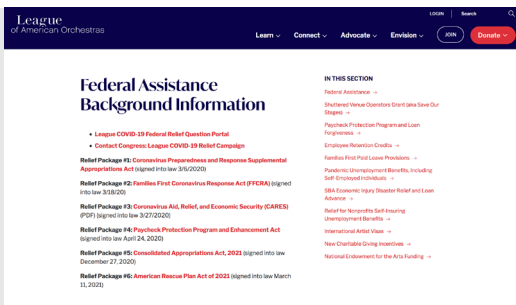
At the League’s virtual National Conference in 2021, one session re-examined ways orchestras are engaging with audiences and connecting with communities.

Among the League’s activities are advocacy alerts reminding orchestras to contact members of Congress and other government officials with issues important to the arts—these alerts were often connected with pandemic relief packages.

In February, the League’s Najean Lee was among participants in a Music Policy Forum with arts coalition partners.



In March 2021, Heather Noonan and Najean Lee hosted a virtual event designed to help orchestras navigate COVID-relief opportunities.



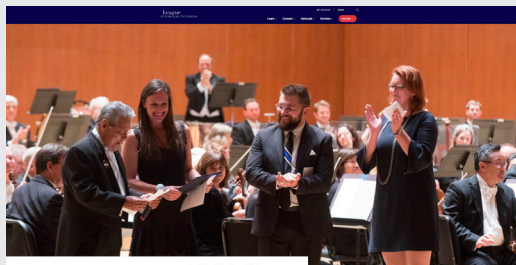
An advocacy webpage at the League of American Orchestras website includes links to multiple COVID-relief packages offered by the federal government between March 6, 2020 and March 11, 2021.



Conductor participants and League staffers at the League of American Orchestras' 2018 Bruno Walter National Conducting Preview in Nashville. During the pandemic, James Barry, Senior Manager, Artistic and Learning Programs (third from right), has worked virtually to support artistic administrators, conductors, composers, and musicians. Left to right: John-Morgan Bush, the League's former director of learning and leadership programs; conductors Lidiya Yankovskaya, Lee Mills, Mélisse Brunet, Raúl Gómez-Rojas, Nadège Foofat, and Ankush Kumar Bahi; and composer and musician C.F. Kip Winger.



In past years, Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service were given to recipients in person at the League's National Conference. In 2021, five orchestra musicians received Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service from the League of American Orchestras at the League's 76th National Conference, which was held online for the second year. Supported by Ford Motor Company Fund, the awards recognize professional musicians' deeply impactful work outside the concert hall.



Among the virtual events produced during the pandemic was a webinar this winter for League members entitled "Mental Health and Wellness: A Conversation."



and hosted League webinars on multiple topics. And although the 2022 Conference is planned to take place in person, in part due to requests from members, many of the League's offerings on multiple fronts now take place online, reaching wider groups of orchestra stakeholders. Says Styers, "the learnings from this are going to be ongoing and continuous."

### Federal COVID Relief, Legislation: Advocacy and Government

Most years, League members appreciate the League's longtime, active presence in Washington, D.C., and know that they will be kept informed of pertinent issues like NEA funding or visa re-requirements for guest artists. But most years do not require immediate actions by virtually every orchestra, just to survive, and certainly not the tsunami of federal aid tied to COVID relief, like the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Shuttered Venues Operators Grants. As a result, says Heather Noonan, the League's Vice President for Advocacy, "there was a commensurate realignment of how much time orchestras were spending on federal funding topics. Everything from how much advocacy they did, to how in the weeds they were with figuring out how all the pieces worked, to alliances they formed at the community level."

Fast-breaking and complex relief packages have kept Noonan and Najean Lee, Director, Government Affairs and Education Advocacy, at work with arts coalition partners around the clock. One goal: to ensure that orchestras are included in legislation and qualify for support. Noonan recalls being told by a Senate staffer on one occasion that she shouldn't plan to go to sleep that night: "And they weren't kidding. They said, 'We're in the middle of these negotiations, and we have to know that we can reach you, in order to answer any questions.'"

For their part, Noonan and Lee turned to orchestras for help in untangling aspects of some legislation. They made their own share of midnight and weekend calls to orchestra CFOs across the country for help in interpreting PPP regulations, such as determination of financial losses and projected revenue trends. "That was a huge part of qualifying for federal support: did you lose revenue due to COVID?" says Noonan.

Fast-breaking, complex relief packages have kept Vice President of Advocacy Heather Noonan and Najean Lee, Director, Government Affairs and Education Advocacy, working with arts coalition partners nonstop. Noonan was told by a Senate staffer that she shouldn't plan to go to sleep on a certain night in case negotiators needed to reach her.

Discussions at League360, the League's online member discussion forum, especially the Disaster Relief and Emergency Preparedness Group, have been a source for sharing information, asking orchestra peers for advice, and tracking emerging issues. Noonan says she'll always remember how League members helped each other navi-



**Heather Noonan,**  
Vice President  
for Advocacy

gate the Shuttered Venues program on the day it launched—and the web portal for the grants was so overwhelmed with applications that it didn't work properly. "Member orchestras were on League360 telling each other how they'd gotten through to the site," she recalls. "It was a real-time example of this feeling of, 'We're all in this together.'"

Advocacy issues became an impor-



**Najeane Lee,**  
Director,  
Government  
Affairs and  
Education  
Advocacy

tant topic at the new League webinars, with Noonan and Lee walking attendees through details of legislation. They've encouraged orchestras to build alliances at the local level, too, where decisions about how federal funding is distributed are made. "Orchestras right now are more experienced in engaging in these conversations and doing this advocacy because they've been doing so much of it in the last year and a half," says Noonan. "They are building relationships not only with elected officials, but coalition partners."

### Help for Musicians: Artistic and Learning Programs



**James Barry,**  
Senior Manager,  
Artistic and  
Learning  
Programs

From microgrants for musicians to a webinar on mental health and well-being, the League's artistic programs have responded with immediate, needs-based

assistance and information for musicians, composers, and conductors. When highly anticipated programs such as the League's Bruno Walter National Conductor Preview, Ford Musician Awards, and Women Composers Readings and Commissions initiative were postponed in 2020, James Barry, Senior Manager, Artistic and Learning Programs, focused on pressing concerns being expressed by the artistic administrators, conductors, composers, and musician constituencies he handles.

As a composer himself, Barry felt the pain of those who had lost income, were having trouble covering expenses, or were facing hard decisions about staffing. "Orchestras just didn't know where to look in the dark," he says. "At the same time, deal-

As a composer himself, **James Barry, Senior Manager, Artistic and Learning Programs,** felt the pain of those who had lost income, were having trouble covering expenses, or were facing hard decisions about staffing. "Dealing with all these people gave me a bird's eye view of what was needed," he says.

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Efforts could be specific to constituent groups: Conductors, who had suddenly found themselves away from the podium and thinking about the changing nature of leadership, were connected in Zoom chats that Barry set up. The Ford Musician Impact Fund was created to assist individual orchestra musicians who were creating their own digital stories and performances. "I was able to put money in 166 musicians' pockets. That was pretty amazing," says Barry.

As the pandemic continued, broader topics became the subject of webinars offered to League members and non-members alike. When comments about the anxiety and depression associated with sudden loss of a lifestyle filled with performances and social interaction began popping up in online discussions, Barry organized a webinar with mental-health experts (covered in depth in "Restorative Notes" elsewhere in this issue). He invited composer Julia Adolphe, who had spoken publicly about her own struggles, to participate. "We were able to provide a little bit of strategy," Barry says, with the mental health experts taking part in the

session providing tips and resources.

Webinars also addressed issues of equity and diversity; one featured work on a new website of orchestral music by Black composers, the African Diaspora Music Project database; one of the site's founders, Louise Toppin, took part in the webinar. The African Diaspora Music Project's creators explained how the resource can make it easier for artistic administrators and others responsible for programming concerts to locate scores and, thus, schedule more frequent performances of works by Black composers. Barry says he has also begun looking to the future with webinars on issues such as how orchestras are involved in educating about climate change.

One silver lining of connecting virtually, says Barry, has been a realization that topics can be addressed in a nimbler fashion. "If anything urgent comes up, we can mobilize and three days later we can have a meeting. We don't have to wait to choose a city where we can meet in person six months down the road."

### Problem Solving: Member Services



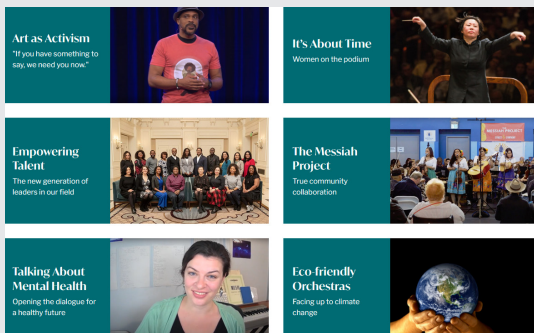
**Daniel Els-Piercey,**  
Senior Member  
Services  
Associate

Senior Member Services Associate Daniel Els-Piercey hadn't been back to the League's Manhattan headquarters in quite a while, as staff was working remotely since March of 2020 due to the pandemic. So when he did pop into the office after the beginning of this year, he was surprised to find a stack of holiday cards on his desk. They were from people he'd never actually met, but had gotten to know after responding to their email messages and phone calls to the League; they all expressed how important his front-line assistance had been when they were searching for answers to a wide range of questions.

The queries may have been about how to connect with online discussion groups or get more information about League resources. But their anxiety and worry were



League of American Orchestras staff in January 2020, shortly after moving into the League's new Manhattan office. During the pandemic, the League has continued its work helping orchestras virtually, with staff working remotely.



The League of American Orchestras' new website, americanorchestras.org, went live this winter. In addition to featuring eye-catching photos of League-member orchestras, the new site makes information much easier to find with a filtered search function.



Many of the League's fundraising events migrated online during the pandemic.

readily apparent. Often, he remembers, their first questions would be: How are other orchestras doing? What are other people doing? Els-Piercey's response: "We're going to have to tread water for a while, and at some point we're all going to figure out where we're going." Delivered in Els-Piercey's reassuring manner, his response was disarming enough to elicit a laugh from the most emotional of callers, who felt adrift in facing monumental financial, personnel, and artistic matters.

Senior Member Services Associate **Daniel Els-Piercey** pointed League members to resources where they could connect with peers or learn about federal relief actions. "It's really just an effort to continue to try to be as open as possible," says Els-Piercey.

Els-Piercey was able to point them to resources such as League360 member forums, where they could connect with peers or learn about federal relief actions. The most active discussions happened on the Disaster Relief and Emergency Preparedness group, which was formed specifically in response to the crisis and opened to League members across constituent groups and orchestra budget size.

He also noticed an uptick in participation in online gatherings, even among orchestra groups that had been relatively inactive over the years. Some that had rarely met outside of the annual National Conference were getting together online two or three times a month. "It's really just an effort to continue to try to be as open as possible. And that is something I'm also going to take with me going forward," says Els-Piercey.

### Website Launch, Spotlight on Members: Membership and Marketing

The League had been ramping up plans for digital learning even before the pandemic arrived and it began offering COVID-related webinars. That there is real, continued interest became apparent to Senior Director, Membership and Marketing Rachel Rossos Gallant, as numbers have remained at a consistent 200 to 300 registrations for each of the sessions offered, whatever the topic. Online, ongoing learning that anyone can participate in at a low cost, from their own home or office, she says, "has been one way we've been able to step up what we've been able to do to support the field."



**Rachel Rossos Gallant,**  
Senior Director,  
Membership and  
Marketing

Beth Barton-Burnt Toast Productions

Gallant regularly monitors participation in various efforts, such as the League360 online discussion groups, and notes questions from the field that signal topics of interest. "It helps indicate to us where there's a need to either provide more context or content around certain topics, or perhaps a webinar or some research is in order," she says. Requests for help on advocacy topics, for instance, demonstrated a need for webinars on specific aspects of aid to orchestras. "As part of my role, I've been trying to better communicate about all the different options and resources people have available to them," Gallant says.

Senior Director, Membership and Marketing **Rachel Rossos Gallant** says that presenting online events that everyone can participate in at a low cost, from their home or office, "has been one way we've been able to step up what we've been able to do to support the field."

A major communication tool is the League's newly redesigned website, launched earlier this year. The site has a visual style that places timely information front and center and shines more of a spotlight on League members. A dedicated page in the "Connect" section allows orchestras to submit their own photos of people and activities for possible use on the site. "As we build new pages, we comb through the database of images. If we can't use something right away, we might be able to three or six months down the line," says Gallant. "It's another way for us to support the field by giving visibility to what they're doing."

## Fundraising in a Virtual World: Development



**Marlah Bonner-McDuffie,**  
Vice President of  
Development

As the League was reaching out to members in new ways this past year, so, too, was Vice President of Development Marlah Bonner-McDuffie. She came on board last September, joining incoming President and CEO Simon Woods. The usual meet-and-greets for new leadership had to be confined to virtual introductions, but it didn't slow opportunities for Bonner-McDuffie to dig into development and fundraising issues facing orchestras.

Orchestras have grappled with how to stay connected with donors during the pandemic shut-downs. **Marlah Bonner-McDuffie**, the League's Vice President of Development, advised them to ramp up fundraising efforts. "If folks are passionate about giving to your organizations, that doesn't stop because of a crisis," she says.

League orchestra members expressed appreciation for the rich content, webinars, and partnerships around COVID relief offered, and that the 2020 Conference had been offered free of charge. Orchestras that had been conducting their own virtual fundraisers had come to understand the potential for increased audiences, engagement, and donor support. "Being able to sit in their living room and participate really opened doors, not just in terms of the League's visibility and reach, but for our members," she says. Some orchestras shared that because of this increased engagement they were able to engage for the first time with national and even international audiences.

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts were top of mind, says Bonner-McDuffie. Orchestras wanted to know, "How can you help us be more relevant and have meaning for our communities?" She explains, "Some people would think that doesn't really impact development,

but it does because orchestras, like most organizations, struggle with recruitment and retention of diverse development staff." Grantmakers are also interested in an orchestra's EDI efforts.

Orchestras, as well as the League, have grappled with how to stay connected with donors who were engaged through virtual efforts. If anything, Bonner-McDuffie advised them to ramp up fundraising efforts. "Across the nonprofit

world, not just orchestras per se, some organizations really were paralyzed. They just felt the timing was not right to ask for arts funding, when in reality it was the perfect time. If folks are passionate about giving to your organizations, that doesn't stop because of a crisis." **S**

REBECCA WINZENRIED is a New York-based arts writer and a former editor in chief of *Symphony*.

## American Academy of Arts and Letters



### 2021 NEW MEMBERS AND AWARD WINNERS IN MUSIC

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#### HONORARY MEMBER

Unsuik Chin

GOLD MEDAL · Yehudi Wyner

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David Sanford · Trevor Weston

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WALTER HINRICHSEN AWARD · Shawn E. Okpebholo

ANDREW IMBRIE AWARD · Juri Seo

CHARLES IVES FELLOWSHIPS  
Gabriel Kahane · Narong Prangcharoen

CHARLES IVES SCHOLARSHIPS  
William Dougherty · Alexis Lamb · Ehud Perlman  
Frances Pollock · Joel Thompson · Shelley Washington

WLADIMIR AND RHODA LAKOND AWARD  
Wang Lu

GODDARD LIEBERSON FELLOWSHIPS  
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