

August, 1952: the scene at the League's first course in Symphony Orchestra Management, Brevard, North Carolina.



Learning Curve

by Susan Elliott

Sharing knowledge and developing new leaders are core to the League's mission, and the League has produced a broad range of seminars, courses, and learning opportunities nearly since its founding. But the courses haven't stood still—they have adapted and been updated to meet new expectations in a changing world.



Faculty, staff, and participants in the 2012 Essentials of Orchestra Management seminar at the League offices in New York City.

Among its many roles—educator, advocate, data repository, resource center, networker-in-chief—the League’s knack for turning out the best and brightest is nonpareil. Between the original Orchestra Management Fellowship Program, launched in 1980 and now called Emerging Leaders, and the Essentials of Orchestra Management, launched in 2000, some 150 alumni are now leading American orchestras. Just a quick listing of the orchestras where star alumni have taken leadership positions includes the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Greater Baltimore Youth Orchestras, Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, Louisiana Philharmonic, North Carolina Symphony, Pacific Symphony, The Knights chamber ensemble, St. Louis Symphony, and New York Philharmonic.

Providing leadership to the field and teaching *how* to lead have long been part of the League’s mission. But the tools to do so and the content—not to mention delivery forms—are dramatically different today than they were back in 1952, when the League offered its first course in orchestra management in conjunction with the Brevard (North Carolina) Music Foundation.

“In the 1960s, ’70, ’80s, the performing arts were investing in professionalizing their work forces to build a sustainable

organization,” says League President and CEO Jesse Rosen. Following widely accepted best practices, the emphasis at the time was skill-based. “The League focused its training work on how to sell subscriptions, on fund raising, board development, building up endowment funds.” The context within which those skills were taught was radically different than it is today. First, it was assumed that the best teachers came only from inside the tent—current orchestra executives, specialists in their

The track record of the League’s training programs is stellar—alumni occupy leadership and other roles at orchestras throughout the country.

specific areas. Second, the environment for the performing arts was comparatively stable. In fact, says Rosen, citing the founding of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965 and the Ford Foundation’s \$500 million (in today’s dollars) gift to 50 orchestras in 1967, “The country prioritized the arts. It wasn’t necessarily easy to run an orchestra, but there were a lot of knowns.” If an orchestra leader knew how to raise funds, sell tickets, and negotiate a contract, “he or she would have a successful orchestra,” says Rosen.

“Now, the world is not predictable and not stable and there’s huge volatility around the two income streams: the audience and philanthropy,” Rosen contin-

ues. “Being a master of development and selling subscriptions is no longer enough. The traditional tools are not working; the issues we confront are not technical. You can’t fix them by tweaking the mix of print and digital advertising, and you can’t deal with the philanthropy challenges by saying, ‘Well, we’ll just get a few more rich people on the board.’”

These days, he says, “You need a whole different set of leadership chops.” New models have evolved, from command and

control—which is how orchestras formerly operated—to adapt and empower others to lead. “Contemporary priorities include listening skills, consensus building, the capacity for leading change, and living with ambiguity and uncertainty.” Rosen relates the Army’s acronym for today’s world: VUCA, or Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous. “The VUCA world has completely upended all their thinking about strategy; it requires all different kinds of military behaviors to operate in the world today.”

Surely, if the military is learning how to become flexible and adapt, orchestras can as well. To do so, they need constantly updated sets of tools and assumptions.

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1982
Michael Jackson's *Thriller* is released, breaking sales records. In its wake: a moonwalking frenzy.

1984
Amadeus wins the Academy Award for best film.

1987
"Black Monday" stock market crash: the Dow Jones Industrial Average loses 22.6 percent, the largest one-day decline in history.

1989
Germany's Berlin Wall comes down.

1982
League headquarters move to Washington, D.C.

1983
Department of Artistic Affairs established.

1984
Computer system linking all League staff operations installed.

1986
League launches OLIS digital repertoire database to assist orchestra administrators and musicians.

First New Music Project Reading Session; premiere of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's piano concerto, co-commissioned by the League, Carnegie Hall, and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

1987
Department of Volunteer Services established.

American Conductors Program debuts in New York.

1989
ASCAP Deems Taylor Award presented to *Symphony*, first of ten such awards the magazine will receive.

Department of Trustee Services established.

Orchestra Assessment Program established.

The New Now

Glancing down the exhaustive lists of webinars and workshops under "Learning and Leadership Development" on the League's website, many of the labels look familiar: marketing, fundraising, volunteerism, leadership, etc. Some reflect society's changes: electronic media, diversity, innovation, and technology. Programs have come and gone depending on the needs of the field. For many years, the League's training programs were under the aegis of Polly Kahn, who served as Vice President for Learning and Leadership Development until 2014. Today, Karen Yair is the League's Vice President of the Knowledge, Learning, and Leadership Department.

But while the categories may look familiar, their contents have constantly shifted. Especially "leadership," whose current key programs are the Emerging Leaders Program (ELP), which is the latest incarnation of the long-running Orchestra Management Fellowship Program, and the Essentials of Orchestra Management course. Despite the huge success of these programs, training leaders in today's VUCA world requires rethinking of for-

had yet to start their careers. So the ten-month program, which placed participants in three different cities to work at three different orchestras, was entirely feasible.



Faculty and participants in the League's 1968 Orchestra Management Course, Steinway Hall, New York City.

But as potential candidates' lifestyles and expectations began to change, the League recognized that the program needed to as well. "What happened over the years was that the pool of applicants was steadily diminishing," says Rosen. "People were reluctant to stop work in order to

spend a year in a fellowship with no guarantee of employment afterwards." Furthermore, life-balance issues had come into play; individuals didn't want to uproot themselves, especially if they had families, to spend a year in three different cities. At the same time, leadership consultants advised the League that on-the-job learning wasn't always the best teaching method. "So we morphed the Fellowship into a program built around people already

working in orchestras, with the idea of ratcheting up their own leadership skills," says Rosen.

The Emerging Leaders Program, now in its third year, requires participants to leave home just three times a year to attend seminars and meetings; they do most of their



Faculty and participants in a League Management Seminar in 1979, Chicago.

mer models. For example, Allison Vulgare, president and CEO of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and Anne Parsons, president and CEO of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, were just out of school when they joined an early iteration of the Orchestra Management Fellowship. They



At the 2016 Emerging Leaders Program, from left: Bradley Evans, interim manager, orchestra personnel, San Francisco Symphony; Nicholas Cohen, executive director, Maryland Citizens for the Arts; Caleb Bailey, executive director, Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra; Jennifer Barton, director of Individual Giving, Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra; Rebecca Zabinski, artistic administrator, Houston Symphony; and Yoo-Jin Hong, Director of Programs in the League's Knowledge, Learning, and Leadership Department.

learning and convening virtually. More important than the revised logistics are the revised assumptions. ELP's primary teachers are not orchestra executives, although each participant has an individual, in-house mentor at his or her home orchestra. John McCann, who runs the program, is an expert in leadership, not orchestras (although he does have a few as clients of his consultancy). "The content," explains

Yoo-Jin Hong, Director of Programs in the Knowledge, Learning, and Leadership Department at the League and herself a graduate of ELP, "isn't specific to orchestras. It's geared to leadership development." She cites some of ELP's key themes: the fundamentals of managing people; dimensions of organizational culture; elements of organizational strategy; and responsibilities of self-leadership. There's also the subject

At the League's 2015 Essentials of Orchestra Management course, participants work with each other and, in foreground at right, faculty member Deborah Rutter, president of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.



1990

League and Detroit Symphony Orchestra co-sponsor African American Composer Reading Session.

1991

The Soviet Union is dissolved.

1992

Orchestra Management Fellowship Program receives award from American Society for Training and Development.

Researchers at author Thomas Wolf's Cambridge, Mass.-based consulting group release *The Financial Condition of Symphony Orchestras*, a report examining statistics of the orchestra business.

1993

League releases *Americanizing the American Orchestra* report summarizing suggestions about future directions for orchestras, based on a year-long forum with people from within and outside the orchestra field.

1993

First World Trade Center attack, a truck bomb below the North Tower.

1997

Charles Olton becomes League president and CEO.

1998

Aretha Franklin sings Puccini's "Nessun dorma" at the Grammy Awards in place of Luciano Pavarotti, who has a sore throat.

1999

League launches Music Alive program to support new music.

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of change management in today's world, which addresses the questions of, as Hong puts it, "What does it mean for an arts organization or an orchestra to innovate? How do you distinguish when to instigate change or adapt to it?"

The rethought ELP is only in its infancy, but it has already undergone major changes. Among the changes: the program went from two years in length to one. Why the shift? "If we want our leaders to be adaptive," Hong says, "the program also has to be nimble enough to

Music directors, marketers, musicians, social-media hipsters, tech geeks, artist managers, orchestra executives of every stripe, presenters—the League brings them all in to share their knowledge and experience.

be able to respond. I was gratified to see that a lot of the feedback we offered as the first ELP cohort has been reflected in the new version."

The class of 2016-17, now just finishing its ten-month term, has nine members, each in different jobs at different orchestras, from Vermont Symphony Orchestra Executive Director Benjamin Cadwallader to Nora Brady, associate director of sales and marketing at the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The group represents as broad a range of jobs as it does budget sizes of orchestras. "We define leadership broadly," says Rosen. "ELP is not limited to CEOs. We're invested in governance leadership and work."

ELP faculty, aside from McCann, includes an executive coach, a nonprofit leadership specialist, and occasional guests, such as Sarah Johnson, director of the Weill Music Institute, which incorporates all of Carnegie Hall's education programs, and social justice expert Michelle Ramos, project director of the New Orleans office of the Vera Institute of Justice. Participants pay \$750 each for tuition and their home orchestras contribute between \$1,000 and \$2,500, depending on budget size. They must commit to being fully on-

board with their employees' involvement in the program.

Rebecca Zabinski, artistic administrator of the Houston Symphony, is a proud graduate of the first ELP. "I went in with no expectations and ended up feeling it was one of the greatest professional experiences of my life," she says. Her in-house mentor was Mark Hanson, the orchestra's executive director—not a position to which Zabinski would normally have access. (Hanson is a graduate of the Orchestra Management Fellowship Program). He and Zabinski met monthly. "It was fascinating to get his perspective on things as they were happening," remembers Zabinski. Performing her job regular duties in addition to ELP requirements was no picnic, she says, and often meant working on weekends and nights. "But I wouldn't trade it for anything." Equally valuable, she says, was the chance to work with the six other individuals in the class, all of whom remain in touch and call upon each other for advice and feedback.

Still, the most valuable aspect of the



USC/Daniel Anderson

Participants in the 2016 Essentials of Orchestra Management course in Los Angeles.

ELP for Zabinski was the work on leadership skills. "We learned about relationships, about listening to people and seeing the big picture, about being flexible and able to think about things in new ways." Asked if she could apply what she learned through ELP at a Fortune 500 company, like AT&T Corp., she responds without hesitation, "Absolutely."

Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today

The League's other leadership program, Essentials of Orchestra Management, caters to a different crowd and does focus specifically on orchestras and the nuts and bolts of their operations. Moved in 2015 from its longtime home at the League's New York headquarters to the University



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of Southern California, the ten-day seminar is a full-immersion, in-person experience, with the tuition of \$3,245 covering housing, concert tickets, and instruction from some of the brightest minds in the business. This year's faculty includes former San Francisco Executive Director Brent Assink; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Executive Director and Orchestra Fellowship graduate Jennifer Barlament; Bruce Coppock, former CEO of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra; Scott Faulkner, principal bassist for the Reno Philharmonic and former executive director of the Reno Chamber Orchestra; and Seattle Symphony President and CEO Simon Woods, in addition to USC Arts Leadership Program Director Kenneth Foster.

Participants range from orchestra staffers who want to broaden their area of expertise to musicians looking to move into the administrative realm to career-changers from other fields to graduate students exploring orchestra management. Essentials' track record is as stellar as that of the Orchestra Fellowship. Of the 329 individuals

who have attended Essentials from 1999 to 2012, 224 are now active in the field and 59 are executive directors. Among the more high-profile graduates is Gary Ginstling, CEO of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. Ginstling, who holds a masters degree in clarinet from the Juilliard School, was working as a marketing manager at Sun Microsystems when he signed up for the Essentials course in 2003. It wasn't long after its completion that he landed a job as executive director of the Berkeley Symphony. From there he hopped over to the San Francisco Symphony to become director of communications and external affairs, from there to general manager of the Cleveland Orchestra, and from there to Indianapolis, spending years at each organization.

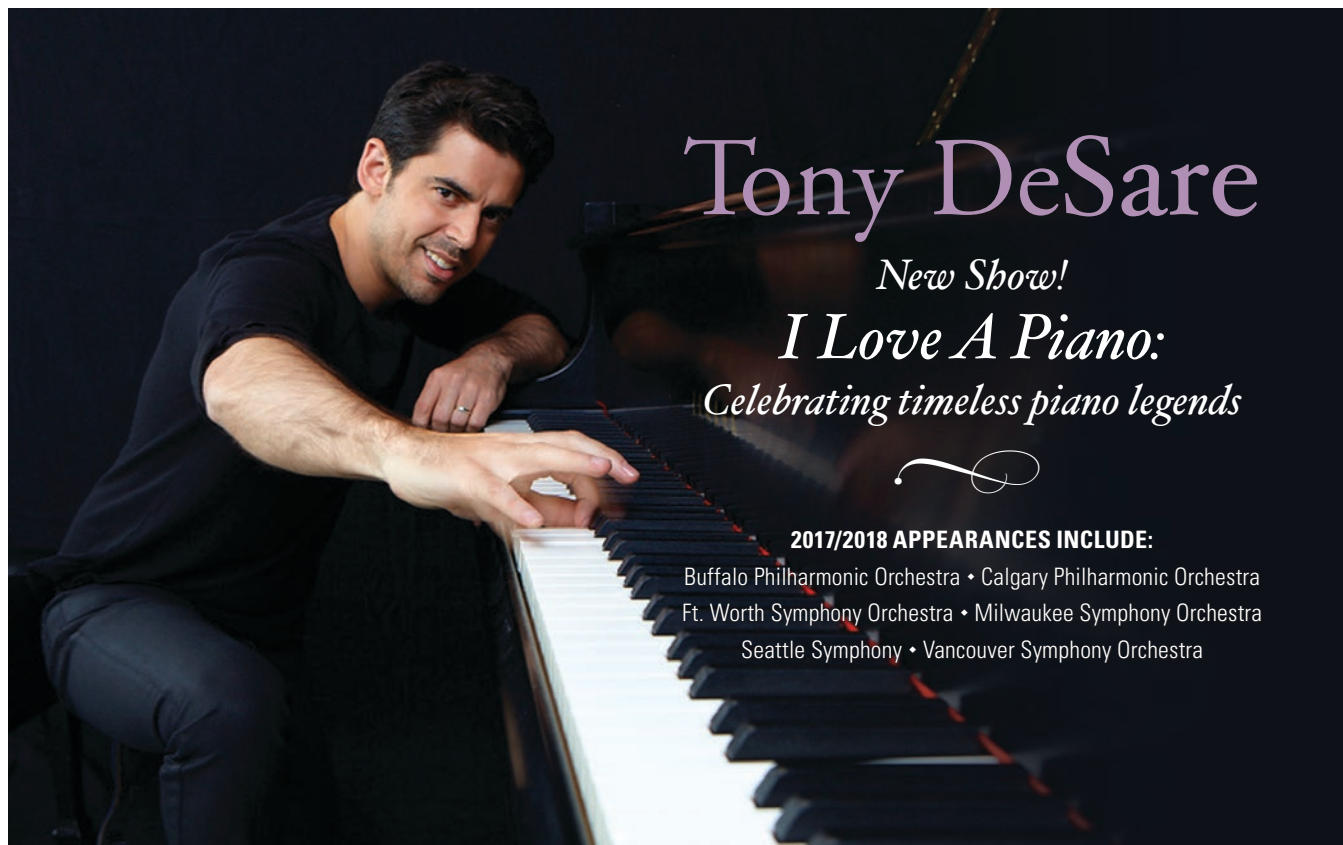
"The program exceeded my expectations on every front," says Ginstling, "in large part because of the parade of leaders from across the field that were brought in to talk with us." Music directors, marketers, musicians, social-media hipsters, tech geeks, artist managers, orchestra executives of every stripe, presenters—the League brings

them all in to share their knowledge and experience. Many are as generous sharing their contact lists as they are sharing their expertise. "It's so important," says the Atlanta Symphony's Barlament, "for us to welcome new people into the field and help them learn and grow."

Over time, the League's leadership and development programs have changed to reflect the needs of the field. That includes learning from experts both in- and outside the tent. As orchestras strive to function in a VUCA world, the League provides the most up-to-date tools and skills to do so. It's the orchestra world's very own change survival kit. **S**

SUSAN ELLIOTT writes frequently on the arts and is the editor of *MusicalAmerica.com*.

Find out more about the League's Learning and Leadership Development programs at <https://americanorchestras.org/learning-leadership-development.html>.



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