

Seen and Heard: Conference 2018

The League of American Orchestras' 2018 Conference explored how the artistry, art form, and artists of classical music can create a powerful impact. Here, excerpts from three addresses—by two musicians and one marketing guru—capture just some of the many voices and perspectives at the Conference. For more on the 2018 Conference, including highlights, videos, and presentations, visit americanorchestras.org/postconference18.

THE CONFERENCE BEGAN WITH a keynote address and brief solo performance by Vijay Gupta, a violinist and advocate for having artistic voices at the center of social justice. Gupta joined the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2007, and in 2011 founded Street Symphony, a group of professional musicians in Los Angeles who work with communities experiencing homelessness, mental illness, and incarceration.

A couple of years ago as I was starting the work that would become Street Symphony, I was invited to perform at the Patton State Hospital in San Bernardino. Everyone incarcerated at Patton was there because they had committed a serious, often violent crime due to a severe mental illness. I had never engaged an audience like this before. Believing in the universal power of music, I picked the most universal and most powerful piece of music that a violinist could perform, which is the Chaconne from the Partita in D minor by Johann Sebastian Bach. I started performing, and it was one of those rare times where as a performer you begin to believe that things are going well.

Instead, when I finished I got crickets—nothing. Then, an inmate who happened to be African-American stood up and said, “Son, after all of that, do you not know any songs we know?” In what turns out to be the greatest music lesson of my

life, he started to sing “Jesus on the Main Line,” one of the freedom songs from the civil rights movement.

I’ve had a couple of years to think about that experience. What I hear now in that man’s request and in that man’s song

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wasn’t, “Do you know something that will entertain me?” but rather, “Do you see me? Do you know who I am? Do you know my history? Will you reflect who I am while you stand on that stage?”

I spend most of my mornings and evenings with one of the greatest orchestras in the country. But most afternoons I’m in a community known as Skid Row. In walking distance of Walt Disney Concert Hall, Skid Row is the epicenter of the crisis of homelessness in America. LA County is home to over 60,000 people experiencing chronic homelessness, and Skid Row is a community of nearly 2,000 people living in tents or sleeping on the sidewalk, in and out of clinics and shelters. Folks in Skid Row, usually poor people of

color, often find themselves battling some form of mental illness or addiction. Many people living in Skid Row also face the revolving door of incarceration. The LA County jails and the Skid Row community are the heart of the work of Street Symphony, which serves to place social justice at the center of world-class musical engagement.



Vijay Gupta at the 2018 League Conference

As artists and arts leaders, we must reclaim the conversations about why we became artists in the first place. This Conference is a call to action, a time for us to reframe our conversations away from the double bottom line of fiscal growth and artistic excellence, beyond centennial celebrations and endowment campaigns, and to what really matters to our country today.

I joined the LA Phil in 2007. Ten years later, what continues to take my breath away is that I joined not just a world-class orchestra but a world-class community of people. I also became part of another story, of a man named Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, one of the first black men to study at the Juilliard School in the 1970s. Nathaniel in his junior year was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. He dropped out of Juilliard and ended up living in the Second Street Tunnel in downtown Los Angeles. Many of the musicians in the LA

Philharmonic, plus myself and the LA's Phil's Adam Crane—now vice president of external affairs for the New York Philharmonic—became part of Nathaniel's life. A couple of months later, Nathaniel wanted a violin lesson with me. After one of these lessons, I began to realize that this man had a savant-like knowledge of music.

How was it that this man ended up living in the Second Street Tunnel? After one of our lessons with Nathaniel, Adam and I saw Nathaniel setting up his milk crates in the tunnel to begin practicing. We were asking a homeless, mentally ill man to push a shopping cart from Skid Row to Walt Disney Concert Hall, because that's where we felt comfortable engaging him.

From that time, we started to visit Nathaniel in the city. We started to ask, how many more Nathaniels are out here? I reached out to clinics and shelters in Skid Row. I would take LA Philharmonic musicians along. At Twin Towers Jail, where we would play music of Schumann for men in a mentally ill ward, one of the inmates said, "Schumann died in a place like this." Our entire understanding of how we played Schumann changed.

At Street Symphony, we have only one organizational best practice, and that's to show up. We show up to be in relationship with our neighbors, wherever and whoever they are. We have to show up, because the Skid Row community matters. Their stories matter. Their neighborhoods matter. Their lives matter. Every person deserves access to a creative and expressive voice. And every person deserves access to the condition in which that voice is heard.

*Following a brief solo performance, violinist **Jennifer Koh** spoke about her lived experience as an Asian-American classical musician and invited Conference attendees to envision a future in which orchestras represent all members of the communities and cities in which we live.*

Each and every one of us in the music world has the capacity to create great impact on individual lives in our commu-



Jennifer Koh at the 2018 League Conference

nities, and each of us has the power to be an active and transformative participant in history.

I am the daughter of Korean War refugees. My mother is from North Korea and spent her early childhood walking

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down the entirety of the Korean Peninsula during the War. She came to the United States in 1965 on a student visa, and was able to apply for citizenship as a result of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. I am standing here because despite having begun her life running from mortar fire and begging for food, she made her way to the United States, worked as a nanny, earned a PhD in library science, and taught at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois for over 30 years. My mom gave me every opportunity that she did not have as a child, including a consistent education, violin lessons, and tickets to concerts.

My mother's history—and by extension, mine—is a familiar one for immigrants

and specifically Asian-Americans. I'm a part of the first generation of children, born to the wave of immigrants who arrived after 1965, not of European descent. As a member of this group of Americans, I would like to tell you about my experiences as an Asian-American in classical music.

I was born and raised outside Chicago. Chicago is where I first discovered how much I loved music and where I was lucky enough to attend concerts of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as a child. The experience of hearing a great ensemble like the CSO gave me the tools to imagine an entire world of sonic expression. I had the honor to make my debut with the Chicago Symphony when I was eleven years old. I have been fortunate to have a career in music.

American historian Grace Wang uses the term "innate capacity" to describe the belief that different types of music originate from, and therefore belong to, a certain group of people from a certain place. It means that an asset, or an inheritance, exists: an *essence* one is born into. The *essence* of music—its heart, its soul, and its spirit—is felt most palpably through blood lines. This means that when we say that a musician understands Mozart or Schubert because that person is Viennese, we are also saying that a person who is not Viennese, a person not born with European blood, can never truly understand or express the essence—the soul—of this music.

What do we imagine when we think of German sound? French style? What do we imagine when we think of a Chinese pianist? Korean violinist? Japanese cellist? Chinese-American violinist? Korean-American pianist? Indian-American cellist? Do we hold onto a racialized belief that Asian-Americans, non-white Americans, might have technique which is practiced, but have no soul and do not have the *essence* to be true artists?

When I was coming of age, Asian-Americans, women, and other people of color in classical music were very scarce. I am grateful that I was mentored by many members of the classical music commu-

nity. I am especially grateful to one of my teachers, Felix Galimir, for actively advocating for my inclusion in classical music, and for sharing his own stories of being the victim of derision and racism when he was a young Jewish violinist in the Vienna Philharmonic.

As I have become more empowered within this field, I am more mindful of our shared collective history of classical music, with its racial and gender-biased constructions. I ask myself what actions I can take to serve my artistic community, as well as the larger community. I ask myself what actions I take to build a world that I believe in and want to be a part of.

My first action has been to be myself: a dedicated musician who is a true and complicated presence. I perform and advocate for both music that is considered core classical repertoire as well as new music. I find inspiration in Jewish musicians like Felix Galimir who, in the face

of a society that sought to exterminate his existence, understood that it was necessary for an artist who is a minority and an unwanted presence to exist as a true, complicated artistic presence. This kind of presence has the power to transform culture. Today, this kind of presence has the power to inspire the imaginations of others: girls, women, and people of color represented complexly and truthfully, giving them an opening to a life in classical music.

If we believe that classical music can transcend all boundaries of language, nationality, and religion, then let's actively advocate for and build a community that transcends the categories of gender, sexual orientation, and race. What I ask of you, and what I ask of myself, is that we question our complacency in our programming, our choices of performers, conductors, and composers. Will we create a new, inclusive form of classical music?

*As downtown Seattle experienced rapid demographic change, the Seattle Symphony sought to connect with the newcomers by launching a market-research program with support from the Wallace Foundation's Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative. In the Connecting with New Audiences: Seattle Symphony Case Study session at the 2018 Conference, **Charlie Wade**, the Seattle Symphony's senior vice president for marketing and business operations, discussed how the orchestra has learned to engage with new and seasoned audiences. For more on the Seattle Symphony's market-research project, visit <https://americanorchestras.org/marketresearchstudy>.*

Downtown growth in Seattle has doubled that of the rest of the Seattle market, and is projected to grow even more. At the Seattle Symphony, we decided to investigate what sort of audience building we could do. We knew there is a

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Charlie Wade at the 2018 League Conference

growing downtown population, but what do they like? How do they respond to the things that we send them? This audience is in close proximity to us. We assumed that people moving into downtown were younger and that they were working in tech. We thought they would like less-traditional concerts, and that they could

Improving customer experience became a really big deal for us.

afford tickets. The Wallace Foundation funded research for us, including focus groups. That research gave us a lot of new insights.

People think that millennials don't respond to traditional media, but we found that they actually do respond to postcards, along with email. Those became our main drivers. We sent out something like 12,000 surveys, to people who bought single tickets and to those who didn't. Then we did a lot of data analysis. We learned that 43 percent of the households have a millennial as primary decision maker. We learned that they haven't lived downtown very long. They have high levels of interest in the arts but are not likely to donate. They are seeking unique cultural experiences, another common trait of millennials.

We learned that downtown had a greater percentage of households with incomes of \$25,000 or less—there are a number of buildings for fixed-income people. We also learned that empty-nesters and retirees are moving downtown. When we do little

musical events at an apartment building, almost half or more of the audience were retirees or empty-nesters, people who sold their home in the suburbs and moved downtown.

It's a really neat mix of potential audience members. We also realized that we are reaching a lot of people already without having done much—something like 12 percent, and higher for our Masterworks and special concerts. We learned that they weren't coming as much to our offbeat, nontraditional series, they were actually coming to our primary series. When you think you're creating something for a certain audience—well, no, that may not be the case. The wonder of data helps you understand that.

One result of the research is that we hired [a specialist to connect with downtown audiences]. He makes huge efforts to meet all the condominium and apartment people, to connect with the hotels and corporate world downtown. We also made efforts with brochures and technology to basically say, "Hello, neighbor! We're right here in the downtown area. Come over and visit us." In his first full year with us, he sold 3,000 extra tickets that we hadn't sold before, \$105,000 in new money. It wasn't some slick marketing effort; it was basically going and meeting people, saying hello, introducing ourselves, and having a few events. It was a very analog approach.

We talk about millennials as a monolithic group, but there are lots of different kinds of millennials. One of our focus groups comprised traditionalists within millennials; most of them played an instrument as a child. We had thought that our Untuxed series was going to be a great on-ramp for newcomers. It has a witty host providing really good commentary, no intermission, and was a little less expensive. In fact, it drew our most conservative audience: they come only if we are playing really mainstream classical music. That was a big lesson for us, because it took away the pretense that we had about this series converting people. We're happy that they're buying tickets to whatever they are buying; if they convert



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and go to other things, great. It's also about building frequency, which is why experience is so important. The experience that you have, not just in the hall itself but all along the way, is an important aspect of concertgoing.

Wallace helped to fund customer-experience training. An expert has come twice to train our ushers, box-office staff, parking folks, food-and-beverage people. Anybody who is dealing with front of house does these training programs. I am a big believer in customer experience. How do we build customer experience into the nature of going to a concert—for new people in particular, which most of the downtown folks are? If they come to a concert for the first time and an usher doesn't smile, or the parking or a food and beverage person gives them a hassle, it turns them off. Then it's almost doesn't matter what happened onstage because they are upset about something else.

Improving customer experience became a really big deal for us. Often in our orchestra world, we think it's just about what is onstage, but you have to see the whole arc of the experience.