

Embracing a Changed World

Some 1,400 orchestra professionals gathered virtually from June 7 to 17 at the League of American Orchestras' 2021 National Conference. With the theme of "Embracing a Changed World," the Conference—the League's 76th and the second to be held online—tackled big questions about the future through new perspectives, actionable content, and provocative discussion. It was the first Conference since President and CEO Simon Woods joined the League, and it featured many new voices; an unprecedented number of orchestral performances; a redesigned format encouraging discussion among attendees; and adjustments to make the Conference more accessible for people with a wide range of disabilities.

Conference sessions and events were grouped under five thematic days: Concert Hall vs. Digital, Better Together, Showing Up for Racial Equity, New Directions, and Reframing the Narrative. An Innovation Day featured sessions led by experts in the fields of acoustics, finance, brand strategy, audience retention, wellness, and patron engagement.

Ten orchestras showcased music that ranged from classical and contemporary works to world premieres by Tré Bryant, Roger Tallman, Michael Daugherty, Alexis Lamb, and Nina Shekhar. The orchestras were the Albany (NY) Symphony, Great Lakes Chamber Orchestra, Greensboro Symphony Orchestra, Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra, Interscholar Orchestras of New York, Minnesota Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, New Bedford Symphony Orchestra, Omaha Symphony, and San Diego Symphony.

Visit <https://leagueconference.org/> to learn more, watch videos and read transcripts of 2021 Conference sessions, and much more.

Wynton Marsalis, musician and managing and artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, spoke at the Opening Session of the 2021 National Conference with League President and CEO Simon Woods about the future of the arts and orchestras in expanding musical offerings and audiences.

"What's productive [in moving forward] is: get the greatest achievements of Afro-American composers, women composers, whoever we deem as 'other.' There have been great people of

The League's 2021 National Conference featured new ideas, new voices, new formats, new music, and drew thousands of orchestra professionals—all online.



every race, ethnicity, gender. Find them. However, the achievements of Beethoven, Bach—there's no way you should ever undermine those great masters. Our communities, both White and Black, need to know that music. I've taught in schools around America, and White people don't

know about their music, either. We have a challenge: to teach everyone who these great masters are. And they can't be seen only through the prism of race. I don't see them through that prism. However, I work in a field that sees them that way. We need to correct those things ... Systems in our country are a certain way ... from the urban renewal that ran highways through Black folks' communities to the travesty of the prison plantation system that exists now. Music cannot solve all those things.... What does Beethoven say in the Ninth Symphony? Live that message.... We need a holistic community approach that deals with parents and kids who are not exposed to our music. And by 'our,' I mean classical music. Beethoven's music is my music. We need to figure out what we can do to expose them to the power of this music."

Doug McLennan, founder and editor of ArtsJournal.com, which aggregates arts and culture news from around the Internet, speaking at "How Has Technology Changed Orchestras Forever?"

"Have orchestras had to rethink how to do things, rethink who they are and how to reach [people] and learn to operate virtually in meaningful ways and maybe even change the definition of what constitutes an artistic experience? Yes.... But will this



period have produced fundamental change that sends orchestras down a different path? I'm not so sure. Of course, we now know how to collaborate over Zoom and that's cool, I guess.... Many

orchestras required and honed new skills in being able to stream and make videos.... Being online has certainly expanded the reach of audience for many orchestras.... I suspect some orchestras will [continue to] stream concerts as a regular thing, but I expect after initial gestures and hybrids, most orchestras will go back to some version of what they have always done—and why not? One of the biggest things over the last 16 months ... is the universal desire to get together physically in the same space.... We're beyond being wowed by the mere fact you can hear a performance a click away or it's possible to buy your tickets online. How about making these things fun or making them playful or making them a delight to participate in? Addictive, even? ... The promise and the biggest dividends are still to come."

Marc Bamuthi Joseph, vice president and artistic director of social impact at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, speaking at "The Arc of Art and Community Solidarity."



"The experience of privilege and vulnerability shapes what I think is the way to attack the question of equity in the classical music business. To do this work, we have to question our institutional aesthetics. My mentor, the great Liz Lerman, says that aesthetics

are what a people believe to be good, beautiful, and true. So I ask you: Who are your people? Maybe answer that question for yourself, or on behalf of your organization. What do your people believe to be good? To be beautiful? To be true? Classical music is a genre whose aesthetics are duly concerned with a centuries-old canon. My aesthetics are duly concerned with a centuries-old canon as well, and the ethos of beauty. And 'overcome' is present throughout. Who are we—the assembled body of artists and administrators that steward classical music in this country—talking about when we use the phrase 'the community'?... In this industry, whose aesthetics force us to constantly look back for beauty, how do we move socially forward?... What does a culturally transformative organization think about diversity, equity, and inclusion? Many of us are working on diversity of staff and canon.... To be inclusive means that we're conscious of welcoming disparate cultures and cultural literacies with an aim towards tolerance, balance, and safety."

Janna Walters-Gidseg, executive director of the Pioneer Valley Symphony, a community-based orchestra in western Massachusetts, speaking at "Survive to Thrive: Why Community Is Central to Our Success."

"The Pioneer Valley Symphony has been a community organization since 1939, and during that time we identified as a symphony of skilled musicians united by our love of music. Over the past 25 years or so we expanded our identity beyond this, and our core stakeholders include students, educators, artistic

staff, collaborating organizations.... Before the pandemic, we defined community in somewhat an insular way.... The pandemic and ... our pivot to virtual reality challenged us to take stock of our relationships... It was no longer clear how to separate 'us' from 'them' and who we are versus who we serve. We chose to lean into this new reality. We affirmed our dedication to a community that includes, yes, those who sit on our stage or in our concert audience, but also the people who enable our regional performance and music education ecosystem, which includes stakeholders from donors to parents to frontline service providers and beyond. It's a much more expansive community than we'd allowed ourselves to envision before. It's a perspective that casts a broader lens over who we are and who we impact now. It also asks us to look into the future to how we want our community to look, sound, and feel, and what voices we need to elevate as we continue to evolve."




Ashleigh Gordon, artistic/executive director and violist at Castle of our Skins, a Boston-based concert and educational series devoted to Black artistry in music, speaking at "The Summer of 2020," which examined the impact of calls for racial equity and representation on orchestras, programming, and artistic leadership.



Robert Tomes Photography

"With respect to the canon, there are four ... concepts that are shared by myself and Castle of our Skins cofounder Anthony Green. The first is craft, having to do with skill, with merit—which is far from being objective and is wrapped up in subjective

preferences determining the parameters by which we gauge craft. In our field, this has led to an idealization of an elite, highly exclusive group of composers and values, rules, processes, aesthetics that were narrowly created but exported as being universal.... The second point is time, which is related to repetition. Repetition is not only a good practice tool but it's also good for securing something in our collective consciousness.... A newly created work or an overlooked composer don't have that benefit of time, the generations of exposure, plus the repeated airtime to be driven into our collective consciousness. We can spend 2020 celebrating Beethoven's anniversary, increasing his exposure and not acknowledging William Grant Still's 125th anniversary—and therefore keep him relegated to a place of forgetfulness.... Classification doesn't really do well for hybridity as it relates to music styles and to composers that have footholds in multiple spaces.... These points [relate] to what we consider to be beloved, what we consider to be part of what we call the canon of classical music." 

Save the dates! The League of American Orchestras' 77th National Conference takes place in person in Los Angeles, June 1-3, 2022.

The 2022 Conference will be hosted by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and presented in partnership with the Association of California Symphony Orchestras. Stay tuned for more details at <https://leagueconference.org/>.