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, Interschool Orchestras of New York, Minnesota Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, New Bedford Symphony Orchestra, Omaha Symphony, and San Diego Symphony.

Visit [https://leagueconference.org/](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 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
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.