

# Managing Change

*Essentials of Orchestra Management* has long been one of the League of American Orchestras' signature professional-development courses: an immersive, intensive boot camp in how to succeed at running an orchestra. Now *Essentials* is getting an update, staying relevant to the present—and future—of orchestras.

By Heidi Waleson



The 2019 *Essentials of Orchestra Management* seminar in Los Angeles. This summer, *Essentials* will take place at place at the Juilliard School in New York City.

Nearly two years of the global pandemic have had a dramatic effect on everything, including how orchestras are run. This summer, when the League of American Orchestras' *Essentials of Orchestra Management* seminar returns after a pandemic-enforced three-year hiatus, there will be new areas to explore. For Jennifer Barlament, executive director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and a core faculty member of the *Essentials*

program since 2017, one of those areas is attention to change management. "That's what we have all been doing 24/7," she says. "What we have been able to achieve in the midst of major disruptive change has to do with the level of skill that we have in bringing people together, listening to voices, and creating a strategic plan." Pre-COVID, Barlament says, orchestra managers "were not set up for flexibility. Artistic planning was about how to build a grid and be locked

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and loaded 18 months out. During the pandemic, we realized that there is great value in being able to respond to world events. We can do in-person and virtual events. We can keep people safe and healthy and do concerts. We can have incredible pre-planning and also be flexible and responsive.”

In late July and early August of 2022, between 30 and 35 current and aspiring orchestra administrators will gather in New York City for the League’s intensive, 10-day *Essentials of Orchestra Management* seminar, learning from top professionals in the field and from each other. The program, which took place at the USC Thornton School of Music in Los Angeles from 2015 through 2019, will now be presented by the League in collaboration with Juilliard Extension, using the Juilliard School’s housing, classrooms, and other resources; participants will receive a non-credit Juilliard Extension certificate upon completion. *Essentials* is aimed at early and mid-career professionals, musicians, career changers, and students, as well as experienced orchestra administrators wishing to expand their knowledge.

“*Essentials of Orchestra Management* is more essential than ever,” says League President and CEO Simon Woods, who was the director of *Essentials* from 2018 until he became the League’s leader in 2020. “*Essentials* is a beloved program, and we’re excited to unveil its new identity. There are alumni from *Essentials* and its predecessor programs working across the orchestra field, and many of them credit *Essentials* as a career-defining moment. Now we’re taking the program to the next stage in its evolution, combining the League’s depth and experience in curriculum development with the resources of one of the music world’s most

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inspiring educational institutions.”

The League anticipates a higher-than-usual number of applicants, given the pent-up demand after three years off. Scott Faulkner, principal bass of the Reno Philharmonic and former executive director of the Reno Chamber Orchestra, who assumed the directorship of the seminar after Simon Woods, explains, “We decided not to do *Essentials* virtually in 2020 and 2021. You can teach finance over Zoom, but the culture of the intensive, residential seminar—the context, the relationships, the networking inside and outside of the sessions—is central to the experience.” David Styers, the League’s director of Learning and Leadership Programs who administers the program, also expects to see an increased number of applications from career changers: “people who were spurred by the pandemic to follow their passion.”

While the League has offered management training programs since the 1950s, the *Essentials* prototype was launched in 2000 by veteran orchestra manager Peter Pastreich. Since that year, more than 450 people have participated in the seminar, many of whom now hold leadership positions in the field. Faulkner was an *Essentials* student in 2002, when it took place in January at the League’s New York office. A bass player, he had



Participants in the 2019 *Essentials of Orchestra Management* course.

# ESSENTIALS OF ORCHESTRA MANAGEMENT

July 24-August 2, 2022

The League of American Orchestras’ hallmark professional development seminar, *Essentials of Orchestra Management*, will return to New York City after nearly a decade, presented in collaboration with Juilliard Extension. Taking place July 24-August 2, 2022, *Essentials* gives early- and mid-career orchestra professionals the knowledge they need to advance and enhance their careers.

### THE 10-DAY SEMINAR OFFERS:

- An immersive, 360-degree view of the orchestra field;
- An academically rigorous curriculum, developed and taught by leaders in the orchestra field;
- A diverse cohort of peers, offering a wide variety of perspectives and backgrounds;
- A dedicated core faculty, who will be present for the entire program, as well as adjunct faculty in specialist areas;
- A classroom environment that encourages discussion and the open exchange of ideas;
- Individual and group coaching.

*Essentials of Orchestra Management* is made possible by generous grants from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Learn more about *Essentials* and register at [americanorchestras.org/essentials](https://americanorchestras.org/essentials).





Core faculty for *Essentials of Orchestra Management*, from left: Alexander Laing, principal clarinet, Phoenix Symphony; Jennifer Barlament, executive director, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; *Essentials* Director Scott Faulkner, principal bass, Reno Philharmonic; and Simon Woods, president and CEO, League of American Orchestras.

just become executive director at the Reno Chamber Orchestra, and recalls, “I was starting from scratch. *Essentials* was the most important training I had as an executive director.”

The program has evolved in its two-decade history. While its nuts-and-bolts approach, with how-to sessions on finance, governance, union negotiations, artistic planning, marketing, and related topics, remains, finding a balance with broader topics, such as equity, organizational culture and generational change, has grown in importance. “It’s a combination of technical skills, like how to read a spreadsheet, and thinking about

*Essentials of Orchestra Management* is “a combination of technical skills, like how to read a spreadsheet, and thinking about what our future is,” says Jennifer Barlament, executive director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and a core faculty member of the *Essentials* program.

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The core faculty—Faulkner, Barlament, and Alexander Laing, principal clarinet of the Phoenix Symphony—are planning sessions with the aid of Styers and John-Morgan Bush, formerly of the League and now Juilliard’s director of Lifelong Learning. As in the past, the core faculty’s teaching will be supplemented by contributions from about 25 guest presenters, all experts in their subject matter and many with orchestra management backgrounds. “There are plenty of management training programs out there, but there’s no need for translation at *Essentials*,” Styers says. “This program is unique in showing how the management of an orchestra is different from management of businesses, other non-profits, even other arts organizations. The topics cover the breadth of what an executive director has to think of in all types of orchestras—major orchestras, small-budget orchestras, youth orchestras, orchestras with unique structures. *Essentials* tries to scale every idea for every size orchestra. No one majored in orchestra management in college, and *Essentials* is the crash course that you didn’t get in your academic life.” Seminar participants receive a reading and video list that they are expected to digest before they arrive, so everyone, regardless of experience, starts with a common base



Sharing a moment at the 2019 *Essentials of Orchestra Management* seminar.

of understanding.

The seminar’s teaching style has evolved over the years, “from the transfer of knowledge from elder statesmen in the field to more of a conversation,” Faulkner says. “We encourage the students to push back at things—and we push back at them, if warranted. We see it as part lecture, part think tank.” For example, in the wake of COVID, the use of digital media is likely to be a major topic this summer. “I expect that the younger students will be more fluent with this subject,” Faulkner says.

The 9 a.m.-6 p.m. schedule covers three to four topics a day, grouped thematically. It will feature presentations and panel discussions, but also interactive elements like small-group sessions, role-playing, debriefing, synthesis, and plenty of space for questions, as well as a group capstone project. The core faculty members are present at all the sessions, Barlament says, “to underline, illuminate, repeat, and ask questions.” Another



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“Digging into how orchestras attract, maintain, and remain relevant to the audiences of the future is ultimately one of the most essential parts of *Essentials*,” says *Essentials* Director Scott Faulkner, who is principal bass of the Reno Philharmonic and former executive director of the Reno Chamber Orchestra.

key role of the faculty is mentoring, both in formally scheduled meetings and impromptu consultations. “That’s some of the most important work we do,” she says. Seminar participants will also attend concerts and evaluate those experiences from an orchestra manager’s point of view.

#### New Dimensions

Philosophical questions about the future of orchestras that became even more

urgent during the last two years will be a theme throughout the seminar. The killing of George Floyd in 2020 sparked a national reckoning about racial justice, and arts groups were among the many sectors to take a harder look at themselves as a result. Work on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) had already been instituted as part of the *Essentials* curriculum in previous iterations. However, faculty member Alexander Laing notes, “Orchestras have been slow to recognize and act on this area, commonly referred to as EDI. I think that what has happened in the country and the world since the last time *Essentials* convened will certainly have the impact of growing the understanding across the field that American orchestras are not neutral or a-racial institutions.” The first full day of the 2022 *Essentials* seminar includes a three-hour block devoted to EDI. And this year, Faulkner says, all core and guest faculty will be expected to include EDI in their presentations, discussing how those topics touch their area of expertise.

The experience of running an orchestra during the pandemic, requiring dramatically new approaches to issues like flexibility and team management, will also be disseminated through the *Essentials* curriculum. Barlament says that the “plate spinning” experience of managing in the face of constant change



“Everyone is thinking, ‘What is business as usual now?’ That’s a theme for the *Essentials* seminar: how do we continue best practices and also adapt,” says John-Morgan Bush, Juilliard’s director of Lifelong Learning.

was eye-opening. “Ironically, it was really fun in certain ways,” she recalls. “It made the whole endeavor seem more engaging and exciting. Everyone had to get in there together, work through problems simultaneously, and consider all the implications. The management structure had been getting less siloed in general, and who gets to participate in any discussion was changing. That sped up in the pandemic. All these things that had been gradually coming along got put on fast forward. People had nascent ideas that are now suddenly important. The idea of the Philadelphia Orchestra recording all the works of Florence Price—that was not on the table two years ago. It’s a time of clarity and change for institutions.”

John-Morgan Bush, who administered the *Essentials* seminar at the League before moving to Juilliard, says, “COVID-19 has forced us to imagine so many different ways of engagement. For example, Juilliard really expanded engagement in the arts through media and harnessed creative energy for new formats. And everyone is thinking, ‘What is business as usual now?’ That’s a theme for the seminar: how do we continue best practices and also adapt? We are looking at the far future of orchestras, not just the immediate future.”

Immediate impacts of COVID are on the agenda as well; for example, will audiences return, and in what kind of numbers? Faulkner says that the seminar will encompass data from the League, researchers who have partnered with the League on several studies, and the marketing and communications experts



This summer, the League of American Orchestras’ 10-day *Essentials of Orchestra Management* seminar will take place at the Juilliard School, at Lincoln Center on Manhattan’s Upper West Side.



at the seminar. In addition, he expects that there will be “a wealth of experience in the room from the students themselves about what they have seen and done at their home orchestras. I’m also sure there will be success (and horror) stories about how orchestras got music to their audiences, as well as how their box-office staffs have been screamed at by folks who don’t like mask and vaccine requirements. The multi-tentacled pandemic issue is one of the big topics that will inform most of the sessions. It will be addressed explicitly in both tactical and philosophical ways.”

At *Essentials*, the question of change and the future of orchestras hovers over any discussion of how to read a spreadsheet, build a community engagement program, work with a board of directors,

or negotiate with musicians. Asked what topic might best exemplify the learning in the seminar, Faulkner pointed to the issue of culture, and the Peter Drucker quote “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” “As classical music organizations, we are blessed and burdened by our 300 years of history, and doing things a certain way,” Faulkner says. “What’s the baby? What’s the bathwater? What can be shed?”

Like many of his colleagues, Faulkner sees the COVID experience as an opportunity for a reset. “What have we learned about artistic planning? There’s no going backward in electronic media and digital, so what does and does not work?” he asks. “For-profit companies devote lots of resources to planning for failure; orchestras don’t. So how can we build in capacity to take some chances? The bottom line is, change has to happen. Orchestras need to include more people and voices from different generations and backgrounds. These kinds of issues start with governance, and having boards committed to evolving out of our molds. Digging into how orchestras attract, maintain, and remain relevant to the audiences of the future is ultimately one of the most essential parts of *Essentials*. It remains to be seen how we will make Generation Z love us, so that we can survive another 100 years.”

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**Learning in the Classroom and Beyond**  
Faulkner and the rest of the *Essentials* faculty and leadership look forward to a lively cohort of “smart, energetic, insightful students” this summer. Learning takes place not only in the classrooms, but in the corridors, at evening pizza party/war stories get-togethers, and late-night conversations reminiscent of college life. The dormitory setup will be a bit different from those college days, however—Styers is hoping to ensure that every participant gets a single room—and a logistical necessity, new this year, is the New York State and Juilliard requirement that all participants be vaccinated. A mask mandate will depend on rules in force at the time.

Students of past *Essentials* seminars have formed strong personal and professional alliances. Former classmates get together for reunions and tap each other for advice. The faculty also remain a supportive resource for alumni. “I talk to alums pretty frequently,” Barlament says. “They might have something come up and want to talk to someone who knows them but is not tied to their institution. At *Essentials*, you are able to get close to people quickly, understand what they care about, and stay in touch over the long term.”

Styers points out that the League regularly evaluates its programs to determine whether they are relevant. The demand for *Essentials* has never flagged. “There’s always the next generation,” he says. “Some of these people were just children when the program began. There are constantly new people who need to go through this experience to ground them, as well as the people who are changing careers. We keep it fresh, and it can go on for another 20 years and be relevant to the children being born today.”

“I love teaching this course,” Barlament says. “Spending time with these participants—dedicated, curious, open-minded, passionate people—makes me feel optimistic about the future of orchestras. I wish everyone had a chance to experience that up close.” **S**

HEIDI WALESON is the opera critic of the *Wall Street Journal* and author of *Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America* (Metropolitan).

*Essentials* was “an unbelievably meaningful experience. It prepared me for my upcoming role and provided me with a network that will serve me throughout my career. What a gift!”

—Jessica Satava, executive director, Johnstown Symphony Orchestra

“It was fantastic to get to know a group of people with such a different array of backgrounds and levels of experience. Everyone is so passionate.”

—Ignacio Barron Viela, executive director, Billings Symphony Orchestra

“I led a regional orchestra as its executive director for 10 years. At the start of my tenure, I attended the League’s incomparable *Essentials* course, the gold standard for management training in the intricacies of the orchestra enterprise.”

—Melanie Clarke, former executive director, Princeton Symphony Orchestra