

California States of Mind

California is a big place, home to orchestras of every size and description. These ensembles' missions, circumstances, successes, and challenges are as wide-ranging as the state itself, yet they share commonalities with orchestras everywhere. What do board leaders at several California orchestras see as today's key issues—for themselves and the field at large?

By Steven Brown

As the League of American Orchestras' National Conference takes place in Los Angeles this June, board chairs at orchestras from across California share what's on their minds—including coming back from the pandemic, enjoying or dreaming of new venues, determining the roles of their boards, and embracing innovation and inclusion.



Los Angeles Philharmonic Association

Orchestras across the United States face opportunities and challenges. But the difference among the issues that orchestras of different sizes face is just a matter of magnitude, says Thomas L. Beckmen, board chair of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, host orchestra of the League's 2022 National Conference.

He lays out some of today's big issues for orchestras, asking: "How do you connect artistic excellence with social relevance, the heritage of the past with contemporary culture and innovation? How do you function locally, even hyper-locally, and also globally? And how do you meet financial needs across the organization, today and ten years from now?"

Beckmen and his wife donated the funds to create the Judith and Thomas L. Beckmen YOLA Center, which was designed by Frank Gehry and opened last fall in a converted bank. The center

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is the linchpin of YOLA (Youth Orchestra Los Angeles), a program the LA Phil launched in 2007. Now serving more than 1,500 budding musicians in several communities, the 15-year-old YOLA serves notice that the LA Phil helped lead the way in orchestras' focus on community and diversity. Pursuing those values never ends. "There is always work to be done to ensure equity and inclusion and serve the people of Los Angeles. The staff, orchestra, and board created and adopted an EDI Guiding Statement and it is the lens that we use as we do all our work," Beckmen says. "We try to remain aware that we are engaged with communities—plural—so we respect differences at the same time as we find common ground. It's not about benchmarks reached so much as commitments lived."

When the pandemic forced the LA Phil, along with other ensembles nationwide, to go into lockdown, it "impacted our orchestra deeply," Beckmen says. But the orchestra's fundraising sustained it. "We received incredible moral and financial support from our patrons and friends," he explains. "It was clear that so many of us were missing live music

and wanted the LA Phil to return even stronger."

When concerts resumed, he continues, "our attendance had a slow and steady start. That said, attendance has been increasing and the last couple of weeks we have been nearly sold out at Walt Disney Concert Hall."

Even as it builds back from the pandemic, the LA Phil "continues to push itself" artistically, Beckmen says. He points to the orchestra's April concert performances of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, which featured sign-language actors from Los Angeles' Deaf West Theatre. "This was innovation of the most meaningful kind," Beckmen says, "undertaken not for the sake of innovation itself, but to explore the nature of the work and directly, powerfully address the hearts and minds of today's audiences."



Santa Cruz Symphony

The Santa Cruz Symphony is a small organization in a small community, Board President Linda Burroughs says. And it has a very small staff. Guess who takes up the slack. "I call this a working board, where we contribute a lot of our time to help out however we can at the staff level—so that we don't have to burden our budget with hiring more people to do the job we can do as volunteers,"

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– Linda Burroughs, Santa Cruz Symphony

Burroughs says. That starts with helping build back the orchestra’s attendance after the pandemic.

Attendance currently stands at around 60 percent, rather than the 90 to 100 percent that prevailed before the pandemic. Lingering caution due to COVID-19 is driving the shortfall, Burroughs explains. She doesn’t want to just wait for the way to return, though. She prods the board to help expand the audience. “We can do that through our own participation with friends of neighbors of ours,” she says. At a recent meeting, “I mentioned to our board that we each have the capacity to bring two new people to each concert,” and she went through the math: With 23 board members times two guests per program times six programs a season—five classical and one pops—that could amount to more than 200 newcomers a year. “If even half of them buy season tickets, we’ve done our job as board members,” Burroughs recalls telling the group.

She lauds the staff’s commitment, the musicians’ abilities, and Music Director Daniel Stewart’s devotion to fresh, diverse programming. But she focuses—necessarily—on the board. “The one thing I think is critical for the longevity of our organization is to keep our board membership inspired and growing,” Burroughs says. “We’re trying to get younger, more diverse people on our board. My feeling is that everyone has their sphere of influence. If we can use that sphere of influence to attract more people to concerts and to become contributors, we’ll continue to grow and thrive.”

The orchestra would thrive even more, Burroughs thinks, if it had a new concert hall to replace Santa Cruz’s aging, acoustically middling Civic Auditorium. She has a vision: the Santa Cruz Warriors, a training team for the Golden State Warriors basketball powerhouse, is planning to build a new arena, and Bur-

roughs hopes it can be designed to double as a concert hall. “We’ve been talking [with them] for years, and it’s finally to the point that it looks like it’s going to happen,” she says. “I’m wondering how an acoustician can overcome the obstacles. You’ve got to think outside the box.”



Santa Rosa Symphony

Despite sitting in northern California’s wildfire-prone Sonoma County, the Santa Cruz Symphony and its hometown have recently enjoyed a run of good luck.

“Fortunately, in 2021 we had a reprieve from evacuations and nearby area fires,” Board Chair Corinne Byrd says. That has let the group turn to happier subjects, such as sending the Santa Rosa Symphony Youth Orchestra to Spain this summer. Otherwise, the orchestra’s leaders face the same questions that confront their colleagues nationwide. “Can we rebuild the audiences to pre-pandemic levels?” Byrd asks. “Will musicians and audience members feel safe attending live performances with mask mandates lifted in many places? Will individual board members and community donors with wealth continue to step up and donate?”

Since March 2020, Byrd says, the orchestra’s mantra has been Plan and Adjust. Donations have provided a bright spot: “Who would have figured in the midst of COVID that we would end up with contributed revenue at all-time highs, with more new donors than ever before?” Now, with federal and state pandemic aid waning, the orchestra has to forge a “sustainable growth model,”

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she says. Subscription sales for next season are up and encouraging, and the orchestra’s goal is to reach pre-pandemic attendance levels—ticket sales at about 75 percent of capacity—by the 2023-24 fiscal year.

Sonoma County’s population is 30 percent Latinx, Byrd points out, and the orchestra is engaging the community through its programming. In June, the Santa Rosa Symphony will give the world premiere of *Los Braceros*—in English, *The Workers*—a cantata for mariachi musicians and orchestra by Mexican composer Enrico Chapela Barba. Thinking of the future, the orchestra runs educational programs that reach 30,000 students a year.

“Experiencing and hearing music is healing and transformative,” Byrd says. “We just need to keep messaging that, keep educating a generation of young musicians, keep offering high-quality music with consistently exciting and innovative programming, and keep finding new avenues to appeal to, and be relevant to our audience.”



Vallejo Symphony

The timing of the pandemic lockdown was especially frustrating for the Vallejo Symphony.

The orchestra had just expanded from single to double performances of its programs, Board President Mary Eichbauer says, and “we were on the way up in gaining exposure, audience, reach and funding. Now we’re working on getting back to where we were and starting again from there.”

The orchestra’s 2021-22 season couldn’t begin until this April. Yet while attendance at the opening program was a bit smaller than the pre-COVID norm, Eichbauer recalls, “I don’t think I’ve ever felt such an electric sense of excitement in the hall. People were so glad to see each other and to be there enjoying the music together.”

When the current season ends, the orchestra will launch a strategic-planning

process “to discuss what our future will look like,” she says. Since the orchestra’s hometown of Vallejo, north of San Francisco, is one of the most diverse cities in the United States, broadening the group’s reach will be a prime topic. “Just formulating a statement on diversity, equity, and inclusion made us realize how far we, and most orchestras, are from the ideal,” Eichbauer says. Some steps are obvious: “The board could and should be more diverse. We’re working on it. But we’re happy to have added younger people with a diversity of talents” already.

As someone who fell in love with music thanks to free tickets given out by the New York Philharmonic, Eichbauer says, “I’ve always thought one of the best ways to reach the heart of a community is to engage and excite its youth.” Toward that end, the orchestra is working to launch an educational project this fall that the pandemic delayed, dubbed Sound Explorers! A composer in residence will teach middle-school students about writing music—in whatever style they like—and the Vallejo Symphony will perform the youngsters’ creations.

At the same time, the orchestra is turning toward a professional staff, including a part-time executive director who came on board before the pandemic. “We haven’t been able to hire as much staff as we really need, so the board is still involved in a very hands-on way,” Eichbauer says. “I’d like to change that, so that the board can fulfill its primary function, which is fundraising.”

In fact, Eichbauer plays another role. She’s a rare—if not unique—example of a board chair who doubles as program annotator. “I don’t know if I’m the only board chair who does that,” she says. “Somehow I doubt it! It’s something I really enjoy doing—it’s a way of connecting personally with our audience by telling them what the music means to me.”

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Pacific Symphony

The Pacific Symphony sits in a diverse region—and knows it. Celebrations of the Chinese New Year and subsequent Lantern Festival are annual traditions; the orchestra added an observance of Nawruz, the Persian new year, in 2019. The board has long included members of Asian and other communities. Nevertheless, the orchestra is carrying out a top-to-bottom examination of its equity, diversity, and inclusion.

“Of course, there were blind spots we had, as any organization would—as well-intentioned as they are,” Board Chair John R. Evans says. “We’re trying to uncover those blind spots and be more sensitive.” The orchestra is in the midst of a study that looks at topics ranging from serving diverse schools and communities to expanding the orchestra members’ diversity within the framework of blind auditions. (A grant from the League of American Orchestras’ Catalyst Fund has helped support the study.)

The Pacific Symphony’s board has “always been familial,” says Evans, who has served on it for 35 years. “We’ve always been devoted to making something better in our community, rather than worrying about social status or any of that—or else I wouldn’t have stayed around so long.” The pandemic put that commitment to the test. “The axiom that hardship tells us who we really are, makes people overcome difficulties and [builds] character—I think that has happened with our symphony,” Evans says. He cites the example—not the only one, he says—of a board member who called to make a six-figure donation because she wanted to help the musicians get through a difficult time. She asked for no recognition.

Despite cases like that, the orchestra’s overall contributions declined during the pandemic. Now, “we’re rebuilding that,” Evans says. The orchestra has ended mask requirements, so the concert-hall atmosphere is “feeling like it used to.” He aims to maintain the we’re-

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in-this-together attitude that blossomed during the pandemic. “When the [orchestra’s] office was closed, I showed up anyway,” Evans recalls. “Seven or eight staff members were there, trying to keep things together. We just stood in the foyer and spoke with one another, expressing our appreciation for each other. It was informal and impromptu. But it was one of those bonding movements that let us know how we feel about each other. It was a nice experience, and it defined that we’re a close organization.”



San Diego Symphony

The San Diego Symphony takes pride in the sleek outdoor venue it opened last summer: the Rady Shell at Jacobs Park, overlooking the city’s waterfront. Now the orchestra is deep in a second construction project, renovating its 1929-vintage main home. With Copley Symphony Hall closed until next year, the ensemble is shuttling among the Rady Shell and temporary indoor locations across the area.

“The effect of both of these projects has been to introduce a huge amount of uncertainty into our financial situation,” says Harold W. Fuson Jr., the orchestra’s board chair. While COVID-19 barely affected the turnout at the outdoor Rady Shell, attendance indoors suggests “reluctance to come back”—partly because of virus wariness, Fuson thinks, and partly because people “have been gone for a year, and they’ve found other things to do.” And even with the best planning, the ongoing cost of running two venues remains to be seen. “It will take another couple of years before we get to a point where we’re confident that our business model will support the kind of orches-

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– Harold W. Fuson Jr., San Diego Symphony

tra that we believe San Diego needs,” Fuson says. What will be the bridge as the situation becomes clear? “The key is to generate enough revenue from the [Rady] Shell to keep our business model working,” Fuson says. By accommodating a wide range of classical and popular music—as well as people mainly looking for a night out in an attractive setting—it can bring in revenue and at the same time help diversify the orchestra’s audience.

For an orchestra whose hometown is “a point of connection to Central America and South America, we need to do a better job relating to those cultures,” Fuson says. The orchestra’s music director, Rafael Payare, is a Venezuelan with African ancestry, Fuson notes, and “we’ve been able to find quote-unquote minority board members—but not as many as we’d like to have.”

But his orchestra—and others—must keep trying. “It’s a little like climate change, in that you can sort of look the other way for a period of time,” Fuson says. “But if you don’t make sure the issues are addressed, you’re sooner or later going to pay heavier and heavier prices. Part of that price is that orchestras like ours aren’t going to exist anymore.”



Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles

After an 18-month shutdown brought on by COVID-19, the Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (ICYOLA) made its comeback in the limelight: its musicians played on the nationally telecast NFL Honors show during the run-up to February’s Super Bowl, and ensembles from the group played for a

few game-day events.

“That was a great way to restart our program,” Board Chair J. Stanley Sanders says. The orchestra, founded in 2009—one of the United States’ largest primarily African American orchestras—will resume regular performances in July, making its annual Walt Disney Concert Hall appearance for the first time since 2019. And it’s planning to restart its regular slate of concerts across the Los Angeles area.

Thanks to the Super Bowl boost—and “the philanthropy that has opened up” that Sanders says occurred in the wake of the national conversation about racial injustice—the orchestra has done well with fundraising. Not only has it balanced its budget and reinstated some paid staff positions it cut during the pandemic, but the group’s leaders are returning to plans they had shelved, such as a concert trip to Africa—perhaps as an exchange with a South African youth

Through music, the Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles “can make the point that we’re better off together than apart.” – J. Stanley Sanders, Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles

orchestra. “There is a classical music tradition in the big urban areas of South Africa, and we think that would be a big and important gesture for an LA-based orchestra to make,” Sanders says. ICYOLA’s young musicians also can be ambassadors at home, he adds, where Americans of different backgrounds have split off into “separate suburbs and separate compartments and separate streets. In a lot of ways, we’re more segregated than we were before *Brown v. Board of Education*.”

Through music, Sanders adds, the orchestra “can make the point that we’re better off together than apart. ‘This is the Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles, and it’s here today to demonstrate the relationship between the Inner City of Los Angeles and the all-white city of Glendale,’ or wherever.”

Such plans may depend on whether the philanthropy inspired by the Black

Lives Matter movement endures. “A lot of Black Americans are convinced that it’s a flurry, and it [eventually] dies out,” Sanders says. Some of the group’s board members think “we’d better do as much as we can while the money is coming in, because in a year or two, people will forget, and these sources of funding will dry up.” But he’s more optimistic that society is undergoing a permanent change. “I’m 80 years old, and I’ve seen a lot,” Sanders says. “But I’m as hopeful as I’ve ever been that this is a different era.” **S**

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