Throughout the course of any given day, an orchestra manager can, and will, be faced with challenges from all sides—a board member who needs attention and guidance, a music director whose schedule has been upended by another orchestra, a patron who was spoken to rudely by an usher at the prior weekend’s concert, a donor who has been cultivated for months whose gift is anticipated but not yet received, a staff member who receives an attractive job offer at another organization but is a tremendous asset to the orchestra.

Or: a global pandemic that immediately halts the act of gathering large groups together indoors—the very mechanism that has historically enabled orchestras to deliver value to their communities.

Many of these challenges, whether short-term, long-term, internal, external, or existential, have faced orchestra managers since the beginning of the art form, and they will continue to face those who make the orchestra enterprise their life’s work, alongside new challenges that will arise in the 21st century. For example, increased awareness of systemic racism in the United States has recently prompted orchestras to examine their policies, practices, and assumptions, and these efforts are highly relevant to each and every aspect of orchestra man-
managers need most—relationships leads to what orchestra maintaining, growing, and deepening challenges holistically....

What today’s orchestra managers understand is that trust must be earned through diligent relationship building. Those leading and working within orchestras desperately need this trust in order to lead effectively. It is necessary when communicating honestly with a music director about the inherent challenges of artistic planning as related to financial constraints; when keeping underpaid and overworked staff members engaged; when encouraging a board of directors to govern strategically, rather than tactically; and when leading important conversations about moving the orchestra toward relevance as an asset to the entire community, not just to the privileged few.

The orchestra field in the United States is currently engaged in a reckoning over its history as a mostly white and elitist art form. As will be explored in Chapter 9, these efforts constitute an overdue (and welcome) shift in the field, and they will take time to fully take hold. What has been made clear from numerous field leaders (the League of American Orchestras, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Sphinx Organization, and others) is that these important efforts must be sustained over the long term. In short, this work is instigating a tectonic shift in the industry, reinforcing that in addition to being good, orchestras must also do good.

Meanwhile, orchestra leaders have recently been confronted with the horrors of the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from the tragic loss of life and unknown long-term health impacts on those infected with the virus, the pandemic has upended the entire arts ecosystem, including the core operations of orchestras—live concerts performed indoors for large crowds of people. Many orchestras have responded to this challenge by innovating and adapting, and as of this writing, the League of American Orchestras is not aware of any orchestra going out of business due to the virus.

Building and sustaining internal and external relationships has been (and will continue to be) orchestras’ most important task in addressing both of these systemic challenges. Confronting and adapting long-established cultures and traditions will mean questioning a myriad of assumptions and rebuilding internal and external relationships, as well as initiating new relationships with those who may not feel that orchestral music is “for them.” Revamping business models and content delivery in response to COVID-19 (as many orchestras have already done) requires renewed internal alignment in order to reach audience and community members in different ways. Thus, effective and intentional relationship building is a recurring theme in this book.

Any seasoned orchestra manager will state that much of the knowledge and skills needed in this field is gained through practical, hands-on experience, and this is absolutely true. In order to support this work, each chapter of this handbook will provide practical strategies, tools, and a variety of resources to those who work in the orchestra management field, with an emphasis on relationship building throughout. Illustrative case studies highlighting innovative practices being undertaken at orchestras across the country will be regularly featured, providing the reader an opportunity to learn from the experiences of others. Additionally, each chapter will conclude with a series of discussion questions to ponder, teasing out some of the chapter’s key concepts.

Ultimately, what works for one orchestra may be the exact opposite of what another orchestra needs. This makes perfect sense, especially if orchestras...
are reflecting the needs of their diverse communities—needs that will be very different from one region to another. Therefore, rather than prescribing a unified “model” or “guide” to orchestra management, this handbook introduces concepts that are largely common to orchestras, alongside a variety of potential approaches to any given challenge or opportunity.

The reason this handbook is able to focus squarely on orchestra management is that other scholars have done a remarkable job creating a trove of resources devoted to arts management. Thanks to the work of these scholars (some of which is cited in this book’s notes), those who would like additional depth or context have a number of potential books, journals, and other materials to explore. Additionally, a compilation of resources is included in Chapter 10.

In terms of scope, this book is focused on orchestras in the United States. Throughout the book, the term “orchestra manager” is utilized in reference to the chief administrator of the organization. The specific titles of orchestra managers have evolved over the decades, including General Manager, Executive Director, President and CEO, and many variations thereof. For the purposes of this book, the term “orchestra manager” will be used consistently to refer to the person charged with overseeing the entire administrative operation, typically reporting to the board of directors.

Managing an orchestra is a complicated endeavor that can be overwhelming, especially given the wide variety of challenges facing the field. Ultimately, the most important job of an orchestra manager is to be an active and patient listener—gathering information from all who are willing to share and making decisions that move the orchestra toward greater relevance as essential members of their community.

Effectively establishing, nurturing, maintaining, growing, and deepening relationships leads to what orchestra managers need most—trust.

Though many of the concepts presented herein could apply internationally (and some international examples are given), the particular characteristics of orchestras as a reflection of the financial, social, and cultural constructs that exist in the United States receive the bulk of the book’s attention. Additionally, much of the book’s content speaks to orchestras with paid musicians and staff, though again, many concepts could also be applied to volunteer or student orchestras.

A chart from the Orchestra Management Handbook illustrates an approach to patron acquisition, engagement, and advancement. Other graphs in the book illustrate internal decision-making processes, suggest ways to evaluate programs, and show organizational charts at orchestras with a variety of sizes and structures.