

Strategic Framework

2023–2026

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I. Executive Summary

Orchestras continue to thrive across America. Despite the turmoil of the past few years, the art form renews itself and inspires millions of people every year. But as orchestras look to the future, new and unpredictable realities are emerging alongside persistent themes that have long concerned our field. In light of this, the League of American Orchestras is reassessing its work for the coming years. Building on formal and informal consultation across the field and many discussions among the League's board and staff, we have produced a Strategic Framework that outlines goals and key strategies for 2023-2026. It is a flexible, living document to be updated on an annual basis that revisits the League's overarching vision, prioritizes critical focus areas of work in support of the field, and addresses the League's operational and business strategies.

The League's new Vision, Mission, and Commitments reflect the organization's dual role as a membership association supporting the field and as a leadership organization advocating for continuous evolution. We also reaffirm our commitment to thread the work of equity, diversity, and inclusion through everything we do, reflecting its central importance to justice, to creativity, and to orchestras' long-term ability to realize their missions in their communities.

Our essential work in advocacy, convening, leadership development, research, and resources is highly valued by our members and continues unabated. In addition, we have identified five Focus Areas that we believe are central to orchestras' long-term sustainability:

Broadening and Redefining Audience and Community Relationships
Accelerating the Pace of Change in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
Youth Development and Participation
Financial and Organizational Sustainability
Change Leadership

An important overall theme of the Framework is the strengthening of the League's commitment to play a courageous leadership role in advancing change.

The League is meanwhile addressing its own sustainability through a series of business strategies, including increased partnership working, digital transformation, maximizing staff expertise and experience, enhancing the role of the board, and more tightly tying its projects to funding streams.

The Framework will be supported by a national fundraising campaign designed to fund the League's current programs and the new initiatives we have outlined here.

We are grateful to the many people who contributed to the development and writing of this document with their time, insight, and experience.

April 2023

II. The Current Environment

At the League we have enduring faith in the power of orchestral music to inspire those who come into relationship with it. We hold deep admiration for the artistry, creativity, and passion of all those who work in the more than 1,600 orchestras across the country — from musicians, conductors, and staff, to composers, board members, volunteers, business partners, and the many others engaged in important work in the orbit of orchestras.

The period from 2020 to 2022 was a time of unparalleled upheaval for the orchestra field, as it was for all the arts. The pandemic accelerated change in orchestras in several important areas (most notably in digital innovation and collaborative cultures). But it also profoundly disrupted audience behavior, loyalty, purchasing patterns, and preferences. As of the time of writing, audiences are returning in encouraging numbers, but the need to attract and retain new audiences — especially different demographic groups from the traditional orchestra audience — is more critical than ever. And this is not just a marketing issue. It speaks to deeper questions of meaning and identity that orchestras must address holistically across their organizations.

In parallel, the murder of George Floyd in 2020 produced a widely documented moment of racial reckoning across both the nonprofit and for-profit worlds in which the orchestra field actively participated. In a period of communal reflection about race alongside ongoing discussions about gender equity, orchestras dramatically stepped up their investment in the change that has long eluded this field. There is new hope to be had from the significant advances in diversity of concert programming and from the urgency of the discussions about equity, diversity, and inclusion — aided by the League’s longstanding work in providing resources and support. But there is a long way to go, and the League is committed to staying in the vanguard, supporting the field’s capacity to change; addressing inequities, exclusions, and injustice; and responding to the rapidly evolving nature of American society.

Meanwhile, orchestras and other “legacy” arts organizations are under intense scrutiny for how they reach and serve the whole of society, not just a portion of it. As audiences and funders seek out organizations that are invested in communities of color and those that explicitly commit to community inclusion and social health, orchestras have an unprecedented opportunity to reframe their broader meaning.

Orchestras are at a crossroads. The immediate challenges risk pulling orchestras toward short-term solutions at a moment when the need to build an arc toward broader relevance is more apparent than ever. This Framework explicitly articulates the hope for orchestras to advance more quickly to build more equitable and inclusive organizations, take holistic approaches to community meaning and new audiences, and contribute to local youth development ecosystems. These are not new issues, but they are issues that have new urgency in the current environment. We believe that long-term mission impact, financial health, and sustainability will be within reach for those that center them courageously and hard to attain for those that don’t. We look forward to supporting the orchestra field on its ongoing journey.

III. Vision, Mission, Commitments

In addition to its role as an association that supports the organizations and people of the orchestra field, the League advocates for a future that is artistically vibrant, equitable, and sustainable. Our revised Vision, Mission, and Commitments reflect both aspects of this dual identity.

OUR VISION

A thriving future for orchestras and their communities that celebrates creativity, artistry, and inclusion.

OUR MISSION

To champion the vitality of music and the orchestral experience, support the orchestra community, and lead change boldly.

OUR COMMITMENTS

As an organization and as individuals, we affirm the following commitments in our work together:

Service: We support our members and those who contribute to the orchestral experience.

Equity, diversity, and inclusion: We embrace equity, diversity, and inclusion as fundamentals, valuing the richness of difference, centering marginalized voices, and creating a supportive environment for all.

Advocacy: We champion the orchestral field and tell the story of its impact.

Leadership: We lead bravely, with transparency, integrity, and authenticity.

Respect: We welcome divergent views, assuming others' good intent while considering the impact of our words and actions.

Creativity: Inspired by the artistry in our field, we strive for innovation and continuous improvement in our programs, practices, and culture.

Accountability: We set ambitious expectations and we deliver on what we promise.

We work together for a common cause.

IV. Supporting the Field: Focus Areas

Through research and discussion during 2022, five interconnected areas were identified as critical to orchestras' future ability to thrive. In the coming years, the League will devote a significant portion of its financial and human capacity to supporting orchestras in these areas. This work will integrate with and complement the continuing advocacy, convenings, leadership development, research, and resources our stakeholders rely on, which we always seek to adapt to the varying needs of orchestras of different budget sizes.

A. Broadening and Redefining Audience and Community Relationships

“Imagine that each of us takes action today so that we create a powerful, artistic world for the future — a world that is so inclusive, so multitudinous, so emotionally expansive that we cannot even imagine it today.” —Jennifer Koh, violinist

The arts are experiencing seismic shifts in public participation that echo social and economic changes among the U.S. population. Expanding orchestras' actual and perceived relevance is work of critical importance, not only for deepening engagement with communities, but also for underpinning the long-term building of new audiences that is urgently needed.

The League will support the field in embracing holistic approaches to community engagement and audience development, building authentic dialogues with communities, creating welcoming audience experiences, and developing adaptive marketing strategies to increase attendance and revenue. In particular, we will:

1. Support the mainstreaming of artistic initiatives that increase relevance and reach, including repertoire diversification, new presentation formats, community-partnered programming, humanities-infused programming, social justice programming, lifelong learning, and new digital initiatives.
2. Engage music directors and other artistic leaders in discussions about the full range of strategies to build relevance and create symbiotic relationships with communities.
3. Establish regular reporting on audience, attendance, revenue, and demographics to illuminate patterns of audience engagement and track field progress.
4. Launch a new interactive toolkit to empower orchestras to map their “public value” and effectively communicate their civic/social/community impact.
5. Provide field-wide professional development focused on building organizational cultures that put community and audience at the center.
6. Through partnerships with research agencies and experts, share intelligence on audience patterns and behavior, disseminate insights from adjacent fields, and share actionable resources.

B. Accelerating the Pace of Change in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

“The opportunity in front of the League and orchestras right now is not about incrementalism. It’s about being bold and courageous about the change we know is needed.”—Aaron Flagg, trumpeter, educator, and arts executive

The League is committed to threading the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) throughout its work, with the ultimate goal that the field reflects and embodies the diversity of this country. In addition to this overall cultural commitment, the following is an outline of the specific action areas for the coming years:

1. Build the League’s capacity for change, aligning our EDI work around a clear statement of long-term goals, and providing orchestras with resources that support the building of diverse organizations and inclusive cultures.
2. Launch “Inclusive Stages” — a program to mobilize a coalition for musician racial diversity, including convening annual summits of executive and artistic leadership, musicians, and union representatives to develop and adopt collective action commitments for hiring, tenure, and retention.
3. Empower diverse voices, center marginalized voices in our work, and improve the financial accessibility of League activities through grants, discounts, and incentives.
4. Create a data-driven culture of accountability supported by the launch of a new EDI Data Hub and based on equitable data practices.
5. Exemplify EDI as a foundation of the League’s organizational culture, building a board and staff that embody the diversity and inclusion we seek in the field.

C. Youth Development and Participation

“Access to music is a fundamental human right.”—Gustavo Dudamel, conductor

Our field has a unique role in supporting young people in realizing their creative potential. Orchestral music and musicians can inspire youth to develop lifelong connections to music as audience members, supporters, and in their careers, and the active steps orchestras take to advance access to music and music education in their communities will have profound consequences for the wellbeing of both students and the field. The League will re-invest in these areas and bring them increased visibility. In particular, we will:

1. Incorporate the voices and leadership of young people in our work, including advisory groups, “think tanks,” and increased support for the League’s student constituency.
2. Develop a new foundational “why, how, what” document to support orchestras in growing their capacities in creative youth development and in participating in local arts education ecosystems.
3. Support skills development for orchestra musicians working with young people and elevate the work of teaching artists.

4. Collaborate with the major conservatories and music schools to build inclusive pathways to the music profession, preparing musicians for roles beyond performance (the “citizen musician”).
5. Leverage expertise and experience within the field’s Education and Community Engagement and Youth Orchestra constituencies.
6. Bring new visibility to the League’s work in public policy advocacy to support access to music education and creative youth development; expand collaboration with national arts, education, and youth-centered organizations.
7. Build pathways for a new generation of diverse and creative administrative leaders to enter the orchestra field and flourish as leaders.

D. Financial and Organizational Sustainability

“Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it.”—Alan Lakein, author

The business model of American orchestras is systemically fragile and has been rendered increasingly unstable by the pandemic. While the focus areas described above on EDI, new audiences, community relevance, and young people will be crucial for long-term financial stability, orchestras will need to continue to focus on rigorous and prudent financial practices and more robust capitalization.

The League will support the field as it works toward financial balance through the following strategies:

1. More effectively connect financial leaders in the field through support and growth of the League’s Finance constituency group, as well as through the creation of cross-constituency conversations about shared goals, data, trends, financial planning tools, and alternative business models.
2. Elevate the utility of the Orchestra Statistical Report (OSR) as a strategic tool by minimizing lead time, lowering barriers to access, and increasing return for member orchestras through interpretation and commentary.
3. Spotlight business model enhancements, including alternative revenue sources, new budget structures, appropriate capitalization strategies, and adaptation to emerging philanthropic trends.
4. Build a library of financial planning resources from the broader non-profit sector.

E. Change Leadership

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”—Margaret Mead, cultural anthropologist

The pandemic engendered a tremendous burst of creativity in orchestras of all types and sizes. However, systemic obstacles remain. Identifying and overcoming them will require increased internal stakeholder alignment in values and priorities; nimble governance approaches; modes of artistic leadership adapted for the complexity of orchestras’ broader emerging missions; entrepreneurship that goes beyond immediate need; and cultures that reward creativity and freedom of thinking.

The League plans to develop a new program that each year will convene and invest in a group of change leaders drawn from staff, musicians, music directors, and board members across the field. The group will collaborate to identify systemic barriers in the field, devise new strategies to interrupt the replication of patterns that no longer serve us, and engage in professional development activities that equip them to lead change and build alignment in their organizations. We imagine the process following this path:

GOAL SETTING > IDEATION > DEVELOPMENT > CONSULTATION > FUNDING > PILOT LAUNCH

This process will take 12 to 18 months, with the program launching at the earliest in the 2024-2025 season.

V. League Structural and Business Strategies

The upheaval of the pandemic has provided the League with a historic opportunity to modernize its business model, consider new modalities for developing content, and re-think how it interacts with and supports its members in their missions. The below strategies are steps on a journey from a centralized, control-based, in-person model to a distributed, networked, virtual approach to our business.

A. Partnership Working and the Networked Field

As an organization, we do not have — and are unlikely to have within the timeframe of this framework — the resources to deliver on all the needs of the field. However, there are important areas of activity that we can effectively advance in partnership with others. By employing the League’s ability to be a convenor and “big tent,” we can add value for all those across the field who rely on us for resources, convening, networking, and support. This also marks an important step toward the sharing of power and the surfacing of new voices.

1. Increase partnership working to generate high-quality content for webinars, digital learning, and convenings.
2. Involve guest curators in generating webinars and content, particularly giving space to marginalized and under-represented voices.
3. Harness the power of outside experts and adjacent organizations to disseminate content, convene affinity groups, and create new networking opportunities within League activities.
4. Embed the idea of the “networked field” into all our activities, establishing as a standard practice the linking of members to other members with relevant experience and wisdom.
5. Support and grow the League Alumni Network for alumni of League professional development programs.

B. Digital Transformation

The League is on a journey to becoming a digital-first organization. The new League website and *Symphony* site are already achieved. Key future steps include:

1. Invest in new and innovative modalities of digital learning.
2. Upgrade League360, email marketing, and survey reporting.
3. Grow and improve the Resource Centers on the League website, including the EDI Resource Center and the Noteboom Governance Center.
4. Improve internal IT infrastructure, including automating data processes and syncing between software platforms.
5. Appropriately resource and support the League’s remote staff team.

C. Staff and Office

As the League builds its virtual capacity, it will need to reassess the purpose and use of the New York office. It must also attract and retain a high-quality staff by building and maintaining a staff culture that upholds our organizational commitments stated above, and that is rooted in the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

1. Reduce or eliminate physical office space in New York to free up resources to support a remote staff and to be able to direct increased investment in programs that directly support the field.
2. Continue to hire on a geographically flexible basis to attract and retain the best and most diverse talent, utilizing team members across the country as local resources for members; develop a new remote working protocol, including equitable reimbursement policies and regular strategic convenings.
3. Run a salary benchmarking and equity exercise with the support of the Board's Human Resources Committee and our HR consultants.
4. Provide an employment experience that is inclusive, supportive, and rewarding for all team members.

D. Board

The League's Board of directors is committed to improving representation and inclusion and expanding its capacity to support the League's strategic objectives. The Board has committed to the following for the coming years:

1. Nurture a culture of respect, encourage dissenting opinions, and elevate quieter voices on the Board.
2. Be courageous about equity, diversity, and inclusion within the Board.
3. Continue building a diverse board, including leadership roles and succession planning.
4. Build the Board's philanthropic capacity by attracting new board members committed to supporting the League, the art form, and the field.
5. Increase representation of artistic leaders on the League board to fuel conversation about artistic change.
6. Find new ways to deepen board members' regular engagement with each other outside board meetings.
7. Include voices from across the field in board meetings alongside generative discussion to allow the Board to balance field realities and aspirational thinking.
8. Support board members in enhancing their individual practice as ambassadors of the League with their orchestras and in their communities.

E. Deployment of Financial Resources

The League's business planning exercise in 2021 and 2022 revealed systemic weaknesses in its financial structures. As a result of this, we will:

1. Work toward budgetary balance where core activity is budgeted at least at breakeven against core income.
2. Ensure that all projects falling outside the core are budgeted at least at breakeven before being undertaken. This approach responds to the field's preferences about the use of membership dues and annual fund contributions, heard during the planning process.
3. Employ salaried team members to manage core activity but use consultants and freelancers as appropriate to staff programs. This supports the containment of fixed costs and allows the League to retain the best and most diverse specialized domain expertise for each project.

F. Campaign and Fundraising

Emerging from the pandemic, there is a window for meaningful and important change across the orchestra field. The League must have the capacity to support this change above and beyond its current resources. To be able to implement the work outlined within this Strategic Framework over the next three years, the League will launch a fundraising campaign in 2023 to:

1. Secure new major and principal gifts to fund the priorities and programs outlined in this plan.
2. Provide the organization with funds for capitalization and liquidity.
3. Drive growth in the annual fund to support the League's core member services.
4. Expand participation in the League's planned giving program.
5. Increase the visibility of the League's impact across all constituencies in our field.
6. Raise awareness among members of the League's value proposition and its reliance on individual donor support to support the field at the level expected.

VI. Appendices

Appendix I – Summary of Planning Process

During 2021, the League undertook a detailed financial and business planning process to understand and address emerging financial challenges brought on by the pandemic and its longstanding undercapitalization. This process involved a small Business Planning Task Force comprising board and staff, supported by Susan Nelson from TDC. Most of the conclusions around financial structures, capitalization, partnership working, digital strategies, and the New York office outlined in Section 5 were reached during this period.

In parallel, the League conducted an in-depth survey of orchestras in April 2022, which strongly endorsed the League's general value proposition, focus, and trajectory, and provided vital clues as to future needs and field expectations of membership. The survey was followed up with formal and informal discussions with constituency groups at the June 2022 National Conference in Los Angeles. The League also conducted a donor survey that provided essential insight into how donors value the League's work and what their motivations are for giving. The donor survey will also inform the development of the major national campaign outlined above. Finally, the League conducted a business partner survey to learn about the priorities and expectations of our business partners.

Detailed planning during 2022 was supported by a Steering Group and an Advisory Group comprising League board and staff members. During the late summer and fall, convenings occurred of the Membership Committee, Program Committee, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee, full Board of Directors, and full staff. Aspects of strategy were discussed during these meetings and used as guidance for the first draft of the Framework, which was produced in December 2022 by the Leadership Team and discussed by the Board at its January 2023 meeting. Input on the draft was also sought from orchestra CEOs at the League's Midwinter Managers Meeting in January 2023, and further drafts were circulated for final edits from League board and staff as well as key external stakeholders prior to approval by the board at its April 2023 meeting.

Appendix II – Key Research Findings

Member Orchestras Survey

789 orchestra staff, musicians, board, and volunteers, working in a range of roles and orchestra budget sizes considered broadly representative of the League's membership, submitted responses to the April 2022 member survey. The resulting report explored member awareness of crucial areas of League work, alongside the perceived impact of these activities on individual respondents, the orchestras they serve, and the field as a whole.

Awareness and utilization levels among individuals at member orchestras were generally consistent with the intended reach of each program or activity. Research, reports, and publications were the only area of League work available to all members that did not see high awareness levels among all roles.

The most substantial impact (on members, the orchestras they serve, and the field as a whole) was reported within two specific areas of the League's work: a) advocacy and b) research, reports, and publications.

Some areas of work, including conferences, convenings, and on-demand services (including international travel support and Knowledge Center inquiries), were seen as being more impactful for individuals and member orchestras than for the field as a whole. Conversely, leadership training programs — such as Essentials of Orchestra Management — were valued more for their impact on the field than for their impact on member orchestras. Despite attracting high awareness and utilization, general interest publications (including *Symphony* magazine and The Hub) yielded the lowest perceived benefit to both members and the field.

Donor Survey

145 current donors submitted responses to the June 2022 donor survey. The survey results provided insights into current donor awareness of key areas of League work, alongside the perceived impact of these areas of work on individual respondents, member orchestras, and the field. In addition, the survey results highlighted clear motivations for giving.

Current donors had high awareness of all League activities, with almost 100% awareness for advocacy activity, Conference, trainings, and general interest publications. Advocacy was identified as the most significant motivator for donating to the League. However, other field-building activities (including research, training, and conferences) were also identified as highly important.

Current donors valued the League's more transactional offerings (including *Symphony* magazine, The Hub, on-demand support, and webinars/seminars) to a greater extent than the staff of member orchestras. Nonetheless, the printed *Symphony* magazine and The Hub, in particular, were rated low for impact compared to field-building activities. In general, donors viewed their giving to the League as supporting the orchestra field as a whole more than as transactional support for individual orchestras.

Business Partner Survey

Twenty-five current business partners submitted responses to the November 2022 business partner survey. The results provided insights into awareness of business partner benefits, key areas of League work, and business partners' motivations for engaging with the League. The profile of respondents skewed heavily towards artist managers and — secondarily — towards consultants. The vast majority of respondents had partnered with the League for ten years or more.

Awareness of all business partner benefits was fairly high overall, except for preferential meeting room rental pricing at the League's New York office and mailing label services. The three most significant motivators for partnering with the League were networking, the ability to exhibit at Conference (and register at a discounted rate), and being listed in the League's business directory. Business partners viewed Conference as the League's most impactful function at a field level.

Appendix III – Strategic Planning Leadership

LEAGUE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Steering Committee

Marisa Eisemann
Alan Mason, Chair

Advisory Group

Carmen Corrales
Chris Doerr
Marisa Eisemann
Aaron A. Flagg
Douglas M. Hagerman
Rhonda Hunsinger
Mark Jung
Kjristine Lund
Alan Mason
Jennifer Mondie
Alfred P. Moore
Catherine C. Moyer
Robert Naparstek
Mary Carr Patton
Helen Shaffer
Trine Sorenson
Alan D. Valentine

LEAGUE STAFF

Leadership Team

Marlah Bonner
Andrew Clark
Rachel Rossos Gallant
Heather Noonan
Caen Thomason-Redus
Simon Woods
Karen Yair

CONSULTANT

Susan Nelson, TDC