

Closing Luncheon and Plenary: Youth Panel

June 16, 2023

JESSICA SATAVA: Welcome to a conversation that's been a year in the making. Last year in LA, Simon, our fearless leaders, took some time to sit down with the students that were part of the constituency last year. He really listened to them. And he participated in a dialogue that was so meaningful, that as he shared it, made its way to our strategic framework as part of the league's work this year. So I am super excited because if you were wondering what the bridges to the future are, they're sitting right next to me. So let's get started. Let's have all of you introduce yourselves. Christian, you want to get us started?

CHRISTIAN VASQUEZ: Hello guys, my name is Christian Vasquez. I am currently operations manager at Mid Texas Symphony, where I wear many hats and had the opportunity to learn a lot about nonprofit management. Prior to that I earned my degree from Texas State University in music and public administration, where I studied clarinet.

JESSICA: Woo-hoo!

ALEXIS NGUYEN: Hi everyone, thanks so much for having me here. My name is Alexis Nguyen, and I recently graduated with a master of arts administration and master of business administration from Southern Methodist University, or SMU in Dallas, Texas, where I had the chance to be an intern with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, and prior — yeah, shoutout. [LAUGHING] And prior to that I was a choir director, I got a bachelor of music in music education, and then arts managing choirs and youth orchestras before.

JESSICA: Thanks Alexis.

LAUREN ZWONIK: Hi everyone, my name is Lauren Zwonik, and I am a third year doctoral student at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. And that will be in flute performance. But my graduate assistantship is at the Las Vegas Philharmonic where I am the director of education and overseeing all of our stage management for our concerts about once a month.

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So my background in bachelor's is from the Crane School of Music at SUNY Potsdam in flute performance, music education, and a minor in music business. And my master's is from West Virginia University in flute performance, and a certificate in university teaching.

[APPLAUSE]

JESSICA: All right, woo-hoo.

DIEGO: Good afternoon everyone. I am Diego [UNNTEL] Vasquez. I got my degree in music in opera, orchestra, and ballet conductor — conducting with minors in arts administration and music theory. I did my master in LA in conducting, bachelor in conducting, and before entering into the path I also did another bachelor in viola, playing as principal viola in different professional orchestras in my country, Colombia. And now enjoying here in the United States the amazing country, and learning from all of you.

[APPLAUSE]

JESSICA: So all of the young leaders you see here with me were with us in LA last year, and they've come back to be part of our student constituency, which is about 30 members strong led by Sonya Thoms. Super exciting part of my week to get to know them, and hear and be inspired by them. So I'm wondering, Diego, maybe you could start us off. Can you tell me, okay, so there must have been a moment at conference last year that was so inspiring to you that you learned so much from that you were compelled to come back to Pittsburgh. What was that thing?

DIEGO: Yeah, as you know, as we were talking that time with Simon, and probably some of you remember because he quoted us last year, I was impressed about that every single conversation we saw that the field actually understand the urgency that we have about real changes. We all need better sustainable financial models. We all understand that to get that we have to be more inclusive. And we also understand that is very, very important that we do it together as a whole.

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In my case as a conductor of color, and our ambassador working in making sure that we communicate through each other with the music, empowering communities to be part of the conversation, helping artists to become better and better in their craft. And helping organizations to be stronger and more broader. For me, this conference is amazing, because the way to do that is

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learning from each other, learning what are our goals, common goals, but also our own goals as a people, our own fears and have honest conversations around how we see the field.

Because when we understand each stakeholder complexities, we also start to understand the full field complexities, and that's when we are able to work together towards a single goal. And that's why I am here, learning from all of you, putting all of your input into the current research that we are doing in the formats that we are developing in my institutions to be sure we collaborate together and we hope for a better future.

JESSICA: Thank you, Diego. And I think I want to dig into a little bit of what you're saying there. So the complexity of this is — it's a weight, it's a burden, and lots of us, the more pragmatic of us, some might say cynical, but we're going to keep it positive today, would say, why are we working so hard to promote this art form that's been around for 400 years and has a lot more in common in some ways with the past than the future. So Lauren, what's your response to that? Why are we doing this?

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LAUREN: Yeah, so I think sometimes we get so invested in the micro details, right? We're in the trenches all day every day. We are spending countless hours. It's not the beautiful nine to five job that some of our friends and family have. And sometimes we need to remind ourselves to zoom out. And take a look at the art around us. And I'm not just talking about the performing arts, but thinking about visual arts, thinking about media, so like TV, radio, podcasts, thinking about fashion design, architecture, and thinking about how much of this world runs on creativity.

And it doesn't matter if we're more in the visual arts, performing arts, but this is what makes us human. This is how we can express ourselves or use it as a catalyst and a vehicle for others, whether it's young students, whether it's retired folks, whether it's the musicians on our stage, our donors. But a way for us to really tap into our creativity and keep that humanity. Because without any of these arts, I mean, it would be a pretty sterile and bleak world. So I think that's why we're working hard. The emotion, the humanity, and yeah, how we can express things especially when we don't know how to say it.

JESSICA: That's really beautiful, Lauren. See why I'm enjoying this so much, getting with all of these people? Don't you feel inspired just hearing these things? It refreshes me. So we know that on the topic of being refreshed and renewed, there's lot of talented people that leave our field every year because they're frustrated, they're burned out. And I guess without yielding to temptation to take this opportunity to vent, right? [LAUGHING] I'm wondering what are the things that you all are seeing

that maybe we who are in orchestra leadership are missing? Like what are the things that you're like, guys, I just want to shake you and say this? Christian, do you want to start us off?

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CHRISTIAN: Yeah, so prior to arts administration I've worked in a few financial institutions. And one similarity that I've noticed is how we treat people based off of how much money they have quite frankly. At the bank it was always evident when a colleague of mine would get a customer in their line, and they would immediately change how they responded to that customer once they pulled up their account, and saw how much money they had in their account.

And I'm starting to notice that about this industry, that we kind of tend to treat people a little bit different based off of if they're a donor or if they're a single ticket buyer and coming to a free concert. So that's one thing that I've noticed similarities between the two industries, is that, you know, if we're here to serve the community, doesn't that mean we should be treating everybody the same?

[APPLAUSE]

LAUREN: Yeah, if you don't mind, if I can piggyback off of that. So one of the courses that I took during my master's was about pedagogy within music history. But I think that one thing that the professor talked to us about in regards to our students, I think can really apply to the people that we're trying to reach with our art form. And he started the course off with the most important things that you can do for the people around you, whether it's your students, whether it's your staff, faculty.

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Do they feel seen? Do they feel heard, and do they feel loved? And I think that can help guide us towards a path of empathy, and a path of compassion. And I'll just give like one example for each. But for folks who want to be seen, are we really being representative for the folks on stage and our staff? Are children seeing our pool of diversity and being like, they look like me? I mean, what could that really offer to the folks that will be growing into our future, our citizens?

Are they being heard? Not just with a plain little survey, but are we really taking time to have authentic relationships? And I know, time is of the essence, and I wish we had 50 hour work days, maybe, of just having these authentic conversations. It's hard. But you know, it starts with one person and seeing what are the things we're doing well, what are things that we can improve on. And then are they feeling loved.

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And piggybacking off of what Christian said, are we really treating every single person, whether they're a volunteer, whether a five dollar donation, whether it's a child picking up their first instrument, or their \$10,000 fellowship scholarship to the orchestra. Whatever it is, are we really making sure that we take time so each person feels cared for, and that they matter to us? Because every single person that walks through our door really, really truly matters.

JESSICA: Thanks Lauren.

ALEXIS: Yeah, and if I may add to that. While I was an intern at Dallas Symphony Orchestra, I was in development, and my boss told me a story of how there was this subscriber, this woman who unfortunately passed away, and in her will she left a large — a substantial gift to the DSO, yet she had never donated prior to that. And so I wonder how different her relationship would be with the orchestra if they had taken care of her as a long term subscriber.

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But you know, she wasn't a donor, so there was a difference in the relationship between her as a customer and as, you know, a lover of the arts, and would that gift even be bigger if she had a continued relationship because of that.

DIEGO: If I can say something about — that is very interesting, is the relationship element. We are in the business of relationships. We talk with music, and that allow us to create relationships. We have to create sustainable relationships. And in order to do that, we have to figure out how our systems currently to create those relationships. Currently, we are just talking about top down accountability. And that's part of the problem of the sustainable relationship. We also need transversal accountability, and down top accountabilities. Because that's the way when a person is a donor or is a single ticket owner, they all are crucial for the enterprise.

Do you remember the [UNINTEL] concert? Amazing concert, and how the hall was full as because of the relationships. And the experience that we had in an artistic perspective was possible because we all were there. If the hall was empty in the house, the experience was different, you know? We need each other to be able to continue. And this kind of difference of getting every single one accountable and collaborating with each other, that is relationships, is — we believe should be the future of our field.

JESSICA: And that's an important observation, and sometimes I think that in our day to day we — it's good to be reminded of that, the relationships being the basis of all of that. And that — I'm excited about the relationships that we're all building at this conference today. One of the primary planks of the league's youth development and participation focus as part of the strategic framework is to 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, which we're excited that we're doing right now.

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But we have a program at the Greenville Symphony called Student Ambassadors, and it's a really cool program where the kids get to rub shoulders with the musicians, perform at events, and interact meaningfully with our donors and our patrons. But I keep thinking that really the next step for us, if we want it to do better, would be to find a way to include the voices of those ambassadors in our governance. So I'm wondering from all of you, talk to me about how, like just help us here, how do we create a fertile environment for all of you to really be able to share your observations and convictions with us?

DIEGO: Yeah, I guess it come to the same element. When — the amazing thing about having across accountabilities, peer to peer even is more important. And the part of the decision making power, not only talking, but also making sure that you are part of this decision, it gives you a sense of belonging. Right now is not your boss say do it, it's actually you put yourself in this position. Now, do it. And keep working on that, and help each other to become better and better. Therefore, if we want to continue involving youth voices here — it is amazing what is happening today.

Remember, we started with a young concert. We are ending this with youth people. That's amazing what you are doing, and I really say thank you to the league for doing that. How we are going to keep working. I am conductor, I always — if I am here, I need to go here, that's my role. Therefore, it's part of the — now it's put us in the decision making power. Be sure that we are — we participate in that. We learn from all of you. Because you are going to have — you must be our mentors in order we don't make the mistakes that you already learn from. Therefore, help us doing that, and help us being sure that the future is better for all of us.

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JESSICA: Okay, I love this. The future. Okay, let's zoom out then. Let's think about conference in 2043. In 20 years, what's the conversation? How is it different? What do you think, Christian?

CHRISTIAN: So in 20 years, I think with the advancement of technology, I think it's going to be very important for us to have a space where people can disconnect from all the technology. And Dr. Jackson talked about this on Wednesday about the power of music and healing. And I think that's where we're heading towards. I think music is going to be more about healing versus entertainment for those communities who are just involved so much with technology. I think they're going to need that space to really disconnect from all that stuff.

JESSICA: I just got chills. I think that must be resonating with me on some level. What do you all think?

ALEXIS: Well, it's really hard for me to think about the next 20 years when I don't know what I'm doing next weekend.

[LAUGHTER]

JESSICA: I do. No. Just kidding. I'm probably at a concert working or something, right? Okay, go ahead, Alexis. Go for it.

ALEXIS: But if I had to really decide, I would love to see that, you know, orchestra concerts or other performing arts, or you know, in the forefront, top of mind for audience goers, that just very much like in a — like a European kind of feel where it's so ingrained in that culture that, you know, you want to go to the orchestra on weekends with your family and really celebrate that. And also with that have those barriers between the musicians broken down with the audience as well. Kind of being integrated into the entire community where the audience and musicians, they get to know each other and they can really celebrate in the music making together.

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JESSICA: Love it, Alexis. Thank you. So let's — how are we doing on time there, David? Five. Okay, so now we're going to really think big. What's our hope for the future? What's the dream? I want to hear from each of you. Do you want to start, Lauren?

LAUREN: Sure. I think for me, the future is leading with curiosity. That it's leading with compassion, leading with authenticity and honesty even when it's difficult, or things don't quite work out the way we want them to. But I think the most important thing for me at least is for us to lead and to take charge and not to be so afraid of taking a risk.

JESSICA: Anybody else want to take that question on, the dream?

CHRISTIAN: I hope in the future — I hope we don't have anymore DEI roles. I hope we don't have any more of these conversations, because it'll just be so much intertwined with everything that we do, that we won't need those specific roles anymore.

[APPLAUSE]

JESSICA: Wow. I think this is an amazing place for us to wrap up, and I think we have to thank David and Sonya and Simon and Heather, and all of you again. And we're all just excited that we got to open for Byron Stripling. Thank you so much for today.

[APPLAUSE]

END OF TRANSCRIPT