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League of American Orchestras to Honor Lee Koonce With Gold Baton at 2024 National Conference in Houston



Photo credit: Sean Olubode Brown

New York, NY (February 29, 2024) – Arts leader **Lee Koonce**, who transformed Gateways Music Festival from an all-volunteer local festival into an organization of national significance, will receive the Gold Baton, the League of American Orchestras has announced. The presentation of the League’s highest honor will take place on Thursday, June 6 at 4:15pm Central in Houston at Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts, the home of the Houston Symphony, at the Opening Session of the League’s National Conference, June 6 – 8, 2024.

“Gateways Music Festival’s tremendous contribution to the orchestra field is a testament to Lee Koonce’s vision and leadership,” said Simon Woods, League of American Orchestras President and CEO. “Gateways has showcased Black orchestral musicians and composers, provided a refuge where art is created in fellowship, and demonstrated the importance of inclusivity and representation to countless young people. From his many successes at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago’s Sherwood Conservatory of Music, and New York City’s Third Street Music School Settlement to his time at Gateways, Lee has always worked to advance orchestras’ work in the community. He has been an important member of the League community, serving over the years as League Board Member, Essentials of Orchestra Management faculty member, and leader of the

Community Engagement Leadership Committee, among other leadership roles. I'm thrilled that we are presenting Lee Koonce with the Gold Baton."

"I am deeply grateful to the League for this incredible honor," said Lee Koonce. "Being recognized in this way is a testament to the support and inspiration I've received from countless individuals throughout my career. I share this recognition with all those who have believed in me, contributed to my journey, and supported the organizations that are closest to my heart."

Gateways Music Festival's mission is to connect and support professional classical musicians of African descent and enlighten and inspire communities through the power of performance. Currently serving as Gateways Music Festival's Senior Advisor, Koonce has long been associated with the organization, both as a member of its board of directors since 1997, and as the festival's first professional staff member, President and Artistic Director, a position he held for seven years until stepping down at the end of 2023. Under Koonce's leadership, Gateways dramatically increased its programming capacity and established itself on national stages, performing its sold-out Carnegie Hall debut and setting up tours, residencies, and other activities for the coming seasons. In 2016, while remaining an independent non-profit organization, Gateways formalized its long-time relationship with Eastman School of Music and the University of Rochester. In 2021, the Gateways Music Festival Orchestra became the first all-Black classical orchestra to be presented by Carnegie Hall.

About the League's Gold Baton Award:

Given annually since 1948 for distinguished service to America's orchestras, the Gold Baton recognizes individuals and institutions whose far-reaching contributions to the field serve to champion and advance the cause of orchestras and symphonic music throughout the country.

Previous Gold Baton recipients include, among many others, Leonard Bernstein (1959); Pierre Boulez (2000); Beverly Sills (1980); The Ford Foundation (1966); Aaron Copland (1978); Betty Freeman (1987); Yo-Yo Ma (2018); Ann Hobson Pilot (2017); William Schuman (1985) and John Williams (2006). Find the full list of Gold Baton recipients on the [League's website](#).

About Lee Koonce:

Lee Koonce served as President & Artistic Director of Gateways Music Festival from 2016 through 2023. In 2009, he was appointed chair of Gateways' Artistic Programs Committee upon the founder's retirement and has served on the Festival's board of directors since 1997.

Prior to his appointment at Gateways, Koonce served as Executive Director of Third Street Music School Settlement, the oldest and one of the largest community music schools in the nation, for eight years. Previously, he was the Executive Director of the Sherwood Conservatory of Music in Chicago, Illinois. Prior to his appointment at Sherwood, he served as Director of Community Relations for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Lee Koonce earned a Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, a bachelor of arts in Spanish Literature from Oberlin College, and a master of music in Piano Performance and Literature from the Eastman School of Music.

The **League of American Orchestras** champions the vitality of music and the orchestral experience, supports the orchestra community, and leads change boldly. The only national organization dedicated to orchestras and their communities, the League supports the field through advocacy, research, convenings, leadership development, artistic programs, and grants. Founded in 1942 and chartered by Congress in 1962, the League includes nearly 25,000 musicians, conductors, orchestra staff, board members, volunteers, and business partners working within our membership of 1600 world-renowned orchestras, community groups, summer festivals, student and youth ensembles, conservatories and libraries, businesses serving orchestras, and individuals who love symphonic music. Visit americanorchestras.org.