

Celebrating Volunteers

The League's Volunteer Council turns 60 this year—and there's a lot to celebrate. For over half a century, the Volunteer Council has provided invaluable service to orchestra volunteers nationwide by sharing best practices, learning opportunities, in-person and online meetings, and more. The Volunteer Council is changing with the times and still going strong.

By Vivien Schweitzer

“Only in America will you find such a large group of women who enthusiastically pay their own dues to an organization each year for the privilege of working long hours at no pay for a symphony orchestra,” said William Steinberg, music director of multiple American orchestras, in the April-June 1964 *Newsletter of the American Symphony Orchestra League*.

Steinberg was referring to the Women's Council, founded to “strengthen and enrich symphony orchestras at the national level by using the experience and leadership of women dedicated

to the betterment of music in consonance with the principles of the American Symphony Orchestra League.” The Women's Council was the brainchild of Helen Thompson, then executive vice president of the American Symphony Orchestra League (now the League of American Orchestras). Renamed the Volunteer Council in 1980 to attract a more diverse group of participants, including men, the group celebrates its 60th anniversary at the League's National Conference this June.

While the days are long gone when members wore white gloves to chat all things orchestra over afternoon



The Volunteer Council at their 2023 Fall meeting in Houston, Texas. Top row: Laurie Skjerseth, Paula McReynolds, Charlotte Lewis. Second row: Marena Gault, Bruce Colquhoun, Janet Cabot. Third row: Kathy Leibrand, Darlene Clark, Maggie Stehman, Julie Brantley, Camille Williams, Irene Sohm. Bottom row: Venise Stuart, Florence McLean, Becky Odland. Not pictured: Loretta Davenport, Mary Fusillo, Kent McNeil, Becky Odland, Marylou Turner.

Jason Cohn



The audience at a session presented by the Volunteer Council at the League's 2023 National Conference, titled "Leveraging Volunteer Power to Amplify Orchestras' Fundraising and Community Outreach" and focusing on how orchestra leadership and volunteers can work together to achieve success.



Laurie Skjerseth, current President of the League's Volunteer Council and President of the Quad City Symphony Orchestra in Iowa.

tea, the Volunteer Council continues to share best practices and critical resources with volunteer leaders, reward exceptional volunteer programs and projects within associations, and strengthen communication among the League, volunteers, and staff at orchestras of all sizes and budgets nationwide.

Catherine French, President and CEO of the League from 1980 to 1996, says that when orchestras established marketing and fundraising departments, for example, volunteer associations no longer needed to use their Christmas card lists to send out brochures. As more sophisticated recordkeeping and direct mail methods were used, volunteers were instead utilized to add a personal touch. "A fundraising invitation with a handwritten message from someone you know makes a difference," she says.



Janet Cabot, President of the Volunteer Council in the 2022–23 season, advisor to the Madison Symphony Orchestra board of directors, and a member of the League's board, says, "Smart orchestras value their volunteers. Communication, mutual respect, and appreciation are key."

French says that the Council members, initially all female, "could move mountains. They did extraordinary things and were respected by the men on the boards," who were "a little intimidated. It worked out well. Those of us with a feminist bent hated the women volunteers being so deferential to the board."

Indeed, as a 1964 issue of the League's *Newsletter* stated: "The experience, vision, talents, and knowledge which this group of women will begin to bear on the problems and further development of symphony orchestras is unmatched in any other field of civic endeavor undertaken at the national level. The charter membership names form a veritable Who's Who of volunteer cultural achievement in the land."

About the Volunteer Council

The League Volunteer Council is made up of recognized community leaders who have demonstrated outstanding support for their orchestras and who are committed to the goals of the League of American Orchestras. Council members represent volunteer associations affiliated with orchestras from coast to coast and across the entire spectrum of budget tiers. Their leadership provides representation, support, and professional development to volunteer delegates throughout the country via quarterly publications, the volunteer project database, strategic conversations for presidents and presidents-elect (Zoom meetings on topics pertinent to their new leadership roles and responsibilities), and programming at the League's National Conference. In addition, the Council's Gold Awards of Excellence honor best-in-class programs and initiatives that have made a significant impact on their orchestras. The Council is committed to the ongoing education of its members to meet the current and future needs of volunteer associations in support of their orchestras.

Learn more at <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/volunteering/league-volunteer-council/>.

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At the League’s 2023 Conference, the “Leveraging Volunteer Power to Amplify Orchestras’ Fundraising and Community Outreach” session included speakers, from left: Robert Reed, Executive Director, Madison Symphony Orchestra; Janet Cabot, Volunteer Council President 2022-2023, Board Member, League of American Orchestras, and Board Member, Madison Symphony Orchestra; Marena Gault, Volunteer Council Member, Dallas Symphony Orchestra; Kim Noltemy, President and CEO, Dallas Symphony Orchestra; Larry Lang, Executive Director, Amarillo Symphony; Ginger Denney, President, Amarillo Symphony Guild; and Nancy Wrenn, Advisor and Parliamentarian, Women’s Symphony League of Tyler.



Archival photo of the president and executive board of the Women’s Council of the American Symphony Orchestra League. Seated, left to right: Mrs. Fitzgerald Parker (President), Mrs. J.D. Drake, Mrs. Paul G. Benedum. Top row: Mrs. Miles E. Hench, Mrs. W. C. Guest, Mrs. Gerald S. Greene.

In the 1970s, First Lady Betty Ford and many governors’ wives accepted honorary memberships, and in 1981, the Council was invited to the White House for a concert and reception hosted by President Reagan and Mrs. Reagan.

Laurie Skjerseth, current President of the League’s Volunteer Council and Past President and Member, Volunteers for Symphony of the Quad City Symphony Orchestra in Iowa, recalls a

League Conference in San Francisco in 1987 that was “packed with volunteers.” As more women entered the workforce, she says, the Council and volunteer associations have continued to adapt and find new ways to recruit members. While the expectations and activities of volunteers—and their demographic composition—have changed as society itself changed, volunteering remains an important way to foster meaningful

connections to orchestras and their communities.

There's certainly a lot less envelope stuffing in 2024, especially as many regional orchestras have small paid staffs. Yet many orchestras of all sizes continue to rely on volunteers for a myriad of essential functions. Those might include fundraising, logistical support such as picking up artists from the airport, serving as front of house staff, organizing educational programs and audience development initiatives, and contributing to one-off projects or events.

Janet Cabot, President of the Council in the 2022–23 season, current advisor to the Madison Symphony Orchestra board of directors, and a member of the League of American Orchestras' board, attended her first League Conference around 2015 and "liked the intellectual stimulation of other smart women. Smart orchestras value their volunteers," she says. "Communication, mutual respect, and appreciation are key at all touch-points."

Robert A. Reed, Executive Director of the Madison Symphony Orchestra, describes the Volunteer Council as "a great resource," and he emphasizes the need for recruiting volunteers from diverse backgrounds, especially given that an audience member's first encounter with the organization might be via a volunteer. "You want your organization to reflect the community it serves," he says. "Different people bring different energy and a diversity of ideas and experience to all their projects." He notes that today's orchestral volunteers are now often professionals with full-time jobs who tend to opt for project work instead of becoming career volunteers. Reed adds that volunteer organizations could work more closely with orchestral staff. "They are not in competition with each other and each needs to appreciate the other."

The Council recently participated in a cross-constituency discussion to facilitate the collaboration between volunteers and development staff. During the Zoom meeting, volunteers and development staff from more than forty orchestras gathered to brainstorm ideas and discuss how they can strengthen relationships and share creative examples of collaboration. This connection and communication create opportunities to support



Volunteers support orchestras and the League in many ways. A caption from the Sept-Nov. 1967 League Newsletter states, "Mrs. Howard Althaus (left), past president of the Jackson Symphony League and board member of Women's Council of the American Symphony Orchestra League, watches the transfer of keys for the new car from Mrs. Francis Eustis, President of the Council, to John S. Edwards, President of the League."

"Suddenly there was a clarity, a shimmer, ... and punchy impact to the sound."
 Richard Morrison writing about the new David Geffen Hall at Lincoln Center, *The Times of London*

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Sharing successful projects by volunteer groups from across the country has been a central part of the Volunteer Council's activities, as in this 1970s-era photo at a League Conference.

orchestras. More of these cross-constituency conversations are planned for the coming year.

The Council's recognition of outstanding projects highlights the work being done by volunteers nationwide and brings rewards beyond the intrinsic satisfaction that comes from working to support orchestras. The Council and Ralph Black, then executive director of the League, created the Gold Book in 1976 to highlight examples of innovative volunteer accomplishments. The Gold Book transitioned to an online platform in 2005. Each year at the League's National Conference, the Council gives the Gold Award of Excellence to exceptional volunteer programs and initiatives that have made a significant impact in categories including fundraising, membership, education, and communication/technology. Recent award winners include the Pittsburgh Symphony Volunteer Association, which explored new ways to grow the audience with a garden tour through a bamboo forest,

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and the Houston Symphony League's project "Growing Membership: Focus on What Works," which described how they revitalized membership with unique recruitment strategies. The award-winning programs and projects vary widely, and reflect the local styles and interests of the communities and orchestras that each volunteer organization serves.

The Council and volunteer associations continue to embrace change as a pathway forward. The pandemic shutdowns forced volunteers to adapt fast and use technology to communicate. Cabot recalls that the first time the Council talked about not mailing in the RSVP for a gala, members resisted. "Ladies, the era of writing a check is gone. If you don't adapt and change you become extinct," she says. Reed agrees that volunteers should embrace change and keep in mind that "there's always an expiration date for anything you do. Even the gala that used to be the talk of the town will become stale." How are things changing? The Volunteer Council's Gold Awards of Excellence, originally published as a hard copy book, is now available online as a searchable database. The cross-constituency discussion about facilitating the collaboration between volunteers and development staff is new this year, with more to come, and technology continues to be utilized to help with networking, recruitment, and engagement of volunteers.

Simon Woods, President and CEO of the League, emphasizes the importance of representing different communities. "It's important to recognize that volunteerism has to change and evolve without losing what is precious and wonderful about it," he says. "Patrons aren't generally aware of how much behind-the-scenes work volunteers do for orchestras. One of the amazing things about volunteerism is that it's a selfless pursuit," he adds, and that's true even more so for older volunteers less likely to promote themselves by posting about their experiences on social media. "I don't see young people today having the same concept of volunteerism as that generation. Inevitably, there's a question of what path it takes over the long term."

Woods, who is British and has been living in America for 27 years, says there isn't the same spirit of volunteerism in the U.K. "I'm always in awe of the spirit of volunteerism that is so deeply rooted in American cultural organizations, especially in orchestras. What people have done selflessly for orchestras is a remarkable thing, and I never take it for granted." 



VIVIEN SCHWEITZER is a writer and pianist who contributes to publications including *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, and the *American Scholar*. Her book, "A Mad Love: An Introduction to Opera," was named one of the *New Yorker's* "Best Books We Read in 2021."

Arts and Letters

2024 New Members and Award Winners in Music

New Members

Terence Blanchard
Anthony Braxton
Libby Larsen
Steven Mackey
Roscoe Mitchell
John Williams

American Honorary Member

Rosanne Cash

Charles Ives Living

Sean Shepherd

Arts and Letters Awards

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Keith Fitch
Stephen A. Taylor
Amy Williams

Virgil Thomson Award in Vocal Music

Rhiannon Giddens

Benjamin H. Danks Award

Aaron Helgeson

Andrew Imbrie Award

Anthony Cheung

Wladimir and Rhoda Lakond Award

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Žibuoklė Martinaitytė

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Luke Blackburn
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