

Lee Koonce

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LEE KOONCE: Thank you, Toni-Marie, for your kind words and for your more than 20 years of friendship. And thank you to Simon and the League of American Orchestras for this remarkable recognition. Honestly, I am still kind of in shock. Throughout my career, I've had the amazing opportunity to learn from so many remarkable individuals. Individuals like Jesse Rosen, who served as the League's first staff liaison to our fledgling group of orchestra community engagement leaders back in the 1990s. And Henry Fogle, who hired me as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first Director of Community Relations in 1996. Both played pivotal roles in my journey.

To my colleagues, especially those, many of whom I met this morning, community engagement colleagues, to my colleagues past and current at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, on the Chicago Symphony Orchestra staff, who have supported the arts and supported our efforts to bring everyone in and leave nobody out. I express my sincerest gratitude. Gateways Music Festival was founded in 1993 by the extraordinary African American pianist Armenta Cummings Dumisani. And Gateway's holds a very dear place in my heart.

Armenta was a top pianist in her Juilliard class. She was an award-winning concert artist, created Gateways to serve, as Toni-Marie has said, an antidote to the isolation and underestimation experienced by so many classical musicians of African descent. Her vision and her values continue to guide Gateways, even as she passed the baton to me. Our mentor told me once that she was simply following God's orders when she founded Gateways. I too felt called to have led this organization, compelled by the universe to continue its mission.

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Gateways is crucial for our field. Because its musicians serve as positive role models, demonstrating that classical music truly belongs to everyone. Representation matters. And seeing someone who looks like you playing this music can be beyond inspiring. It says, I can do that too. Over the past 30 years, which seems like it went by in a flash, I've reflected on our field's efforts to be more inclusive, and I believe we have great opportunities before us. If we can, as this week's conference implores us, dream big.

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I know there's a real commitment to making orchestras reflect the whole of our society, the whole of our communities, and more broadly, share this music that we love. Gateways will continue touring, proving that classical music belongs to us. Our nation's orchestras, many of you here will continue to provide wonderful opportunities for exploration, exposure, and education. However, the missing link is access and opportunity for more children, especially Black children, to learn to play a musical instrument.

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While there are many highly talented and qualified Black musicians right now today, the pool still remains too small to make significant progress beyond what we see today. Imagine a world where millions of Black children are learning to play musical instruments. Some will end up on our stages, others in our audiences. Some will become donors, and others will join our boards or our staff. This vision is achievable if we commit to it. I challenge all of us here this evening to become advocates for instrumental music instruction in public schools throughout the country, especially those serving predominantly Black communities.

An orchestra or foundation, for instance, might consider adopting or funding a local public school to provide music education, music instruction in those schools, especially instrumental music instruction. Together, we can create a future where classical music is truly, truly inclusive, is as vibrant, and reflective of the diverse world in which we live. I implore all of us here to be catalysts for this change, ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to experience the transformative power of music. Again, thank you so much for this award. And thank you so much for being here this afternoon.

[APPLAUSE]

END OF TRANSCRIPT