

# League of American Orchestras

**Simon Woods, President and CEO**  
**League of American Orchestras**  
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## **Written Testimony in Support of FY2026 Funding for the National Endowment for the Arts**

The League of American Orchestras urges the House Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee to provide no less than \$209 million for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in fiscal year 2026. The nonprofit arts sector is grateful for steady bipartisan support from House and Senate Appropriators – and the full Congress – for the NEA. The federal investment has enabled the NEA to provide national leadership, research, and grants to support public engagement with the arts throughout the country. With greater support, more people of all ages can experience excellent artistry, creative opportunity, and connectedness.

**For more than fifty years, the National Endowment for the Arts has held a unique federal leadership role. Its direct and indirect grantmaking as well as indispensable research advance opportunity, learning, and provoke important action by arts organizations, practitioners, other federal agencies, as well as the public.** The NEA awards 60% of its grantmaking budget directly to arts organizations and 40% to state and regional arts agencies, in a strong demonstration of efficient and effective partnership. Furthermore, the NEA’s research reports offer key insights that benefit the entire arts sector. Since 1982, the Arts Endowment has partnered with the U.S Census Bureau to produce the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA). These periodic measurements of the nation’s arts participation help arts organizations, policymakers, and the public understand patterns and methods of arts engagement, and the reports provide insights into popular formats and settings of arts engagement. In all, these services bring numerous benefits to Americans in every Congressional district and play a key role in spurring responsive and innovative artmaking.

Every orchestra—in all fifty states and several territories—is a vital part of its local community. An award from the National Endowment for the Arts comes with a significant reputational endorsement that assists orchestras of all sizes to leverage additional funding to present concerts and unique experiences to Americans from all walks of life. A direct grant awarded by the NEA has long been a highly sought designation that demonstrates an organization offers a level of artistic engagement that has passed a rigorous panel review process.

Grants for Arts Projects (GAP) is the NEA’s primary grantmaking category, providing funding for public engagement with the arts and arts education, for the integration of the arts with

strategies promoting the health and well-being of people and communities, and for the improvement of overall capacity and capabilities within the arts sector. GAP awards range from \$10,000 to \$100,000 and require a matching nonfederal cost share or match of 1 to 1.

**GAP grants have helped make possible a wide range of activity for orchestras, including free public concerts and educational events, master classes with professional musicians, new commissions by living composers, recording and streaming projects that reach audiences far and wide, innovative multimedia productions, creative artistic partnerships with other disciplines, powerful storytelling that develops and teaches civic pride, and more.** Residency programs allow musicians to bring their professional skills to schools or community settings so that musicians have an opportunity to spend more time in a specific location. This can either be dedicated time to develop new work or offer more in-depth teaching to students who are learning instrument techniques, how to read and interpret music, and prepare to perform. Grants have also supported teaching young people the business side of the arts, to offer career paths and skill development that could lead to future professional employment not only as a musician but as a producer or administrator. The production and presentation of all NEA-grant supported programs is a boost for local workforces, frequently resulting in increased tourism and economic activity, and are strong civic investments that enhance livability.

A commitment to reaching underserved communities—geographically, economically, or due to disability—has made the Challenge America program beloved by smaller and mid-sized arts organizations whose projects are ready to implement quickly on a relatively small budget. Many funded projects bring musical experiences to isolated regions where the experience of live arts can be rare. Thousands of students ranging from elementary through high school, as well as adults in care facilities, have been able to attend orchestra performances free of charge and without the need to travel far distances. While programming is often in Title I school districts, numerous projects have also served homeschooled students as well as their families.

Over the years, orchestras and other arts organizations have begun offering more sensory-friendly concerts, which are designed to create a welcoming and comfortable environment for individuals with autism, cognitive impairments or disabilities, or other sensory sensitivities. These concerts are curated in consultation with experts and frequently use lower sound levels, reduced lighting, and provide freedom for patrons to move and talk. Orchestras have utilized NEA grant support to produce sensory-friendly concerts for both students and adults to overwhelmingly positive community feedback. One such orchestra received this note of gratitude from a caregiver: “Thank you again for the music and education you all provide. Thank you also for the hearts that go into the ‘smaller house’ of the Sensory Friendly concert. **I’ve experienced many musical performances in my life, but this one was the most valuable to my life, and is the most cherished.**” Expanding access to the arts does not just mean growing the number of people in attendance at an event. As evidenced by these programs, the crafting of a concert experience can provide meaningful, deeply appreciated inclusion of individuals, who for any number of reasons, might find it difficult to enjoy a more traditional

concert environment. Nonprofit orchestras deliver on their mission when taking the extra step to identify and respond to some of the hurdles that would otherwise prevent more people from experiencing educational, culturally vibrant, and inspiring music.

Another testimonial about the profound impact of music-making occurred some years ago in Alabama. After receiving a visit from an orchestral music director, the band director of a high school shared: **“In a rural and somewhat remote section of the county, our students rarely get an opportunity to interact with someone who makes their living in the arts, especially one who has traveled around the world...** [Students raised questions about] the education and skills required to be in his position as conductor. He reminded them that everyone involved in music has to 'put in their time' in the practice room, and success doesn't happen overnight.” Being able to meet and learn from working professional musicians in one's own school opens the door to interacting with music in an exciting and potentially life-altering way. This program and countless others like it work hard to ensure more young people can envision new possibilities.

Our country's arts ecosystem is complex and relies on several elements to provide as robust a level of support as possible. The NEA is an essential component of this system. As the largest public funder of the arts and a leader in arts education in the United States, the NEA reaches communities often underserved by private dollars, and its awards generate support from other sources, including private foundations, corporate donors, and individual contributors. Its leadership role is invaluable. **Orchestras in all fifty states have received direct and indirect NEA support over the years, and these awards have helped produce thousands of programs in a wide variety of settings. Moreover, this support has helped orchestras and other nonprofit arts grantees provide essential employment in fulfilling their core purpose of educating and serving.**

Thank you for this opportunity to highlight the importance of the National Endowment for the Arts. We applaud the NEA's consistent leadership in promoting public engagement with all forms of art and for its model responsiveness to the sector and country during critical times. With Congressional support for an annual appropriation of at least \$209 million for the National Endowment for the Arts in FY2026, more communities throughout our nation will be able to experience the life-changing and affirming benefits of the arts.

*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.*