

Opening Session Remarks by Simon Woods

June 11, 2025

Maurice Abravanel Hall

Each year in this opening session I share a few thoughts about what's going on in the world of orchestras, connecting it to the themes of Conference. I would be lying if I told you that these remarks have come easily this year. We find ourselves at an intensely complicated moment in the cultural life of this country—a moment that challenges us, both as individuals and institutions, to find a suitable response.

In moments like these, I think it helps to return to first principles. The arts are embedded in every corner of American life and transcend political and social boundaries. The creation and enjoyment of art lives not only in concert halls and theaters, but in schools, churches, homes, community centers, parks, in the streets, and in fact anywhere where people gather. The arts are foundational to human culture and identity—and for decades we have been able to call on the broadest possible coalition of support to sustain them.

As you all know, the League—and your orchestras, as 501(c)(3)s—are nonpartisan organizations, and have a long history of partnering with political leaders across the aisles to advance policies that support the arts. Time and again, threats to the NEA have been vanquished through bipartisan solidarity—and we should remind ourselves that the pandemic relief that was so essential to the survival of almost every orchestra represented here today was a product of cross-party collaboration.

In normal times, our shared values bring us together across differences. But these are not normal times, because today those values themselves have become battlegrounds, not common ground. And while we can't oppose candidates or parties, we most certainly can oppose policy that hurts our field. And there are policy questions right now that risk creating genuine harm: questions about whether the arts will continue to be funded at a federal level; about whether our first amendment freedoms of artistic expression will be honored; about our ability as non-profits to function free of political interference; about how travel restrictions may impact visiting artists and our own employees who are on visas; about the health and survival of classical public radio; about how we are perceived in the international arts community; and about whether the important steps we have made in diversity and inclusion in the orchestra field will be sustained.

As a field our collective response matters deeply and we must make our voices heard. Please: speak regularly and urgently to your elected officials about the role of the arts in our communities; celebrate our indispensable contributions to civic pride and identity; resist any attempt to undermine

our legitimate quest for broader participation in classical music; and stand up for the freedoms of our art and of our people whenever they are called into question.

One of the great privileges of my role is traveling around the country visiting orchestras in their homes. This year has taken me to Arkansas, South Dakota, Rhode Island, California, Tennessee, Kentucky, and North Carolina, among many, many places. What I see everywhere is orchestras using music and artistry in myriad ways to build more vital connections among us.

A few weeks ago I heard a performance by the Nashville Symphony under Giancarlo Guerrero of Copland's Third Symphony that touched me deeply. Nothing in American music communicates Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness like Copland's Third. There is a lot at stake for the arts in this country right now, and this piece hit hard that night, as a vivid reminder of what music can do: celebrating life and freedom, invoking wonder at the talent and creativity of artists, and drawing us together in our humanity. This is not idealistic: this is just what we do.

So a sincere thank you to every single person here today for the many ways you personally support the inspiration, creativity, and craft of our field. The music has never mattered more. This week we will search together for strategies to improve financial resilience, increase our philanthropic base, welcome new audiences, and, ultimately, to create ways to matter more to more people. Through this work, we will weather the uncertainty, we will resolutely continue with the important work that we have committed to—including the quest to make this field an ever more inclusive place—and we will fiercely protect the gifts our art form offers the world.