# Leading Change Boldly: Transformation in a Complex World

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## Introduction

Thank you very much, Francisco, for your welcome, and good afternoon, everyone.

I am sincerely happy to be here in Santiago with all of you at this moment, which is, of course, historic. But not only historic: it is also inspiring for me. In the United States, we know very little about Latin American orchestras, so listening to the conversations from yesterday and today, and also understanding more about your organizations, your passion for music and for your communities, has been a great pleasure and, frankly, an educational experience for me.

That is why I am so excited that we are launching this new alliance between the League and RIOS. Francisco has already shared the basic information, and in a few days we will send out an email with directions on how to register.

For us, this collaboration has a very special meaning because it gives us the opportunity to more fully live out the meaning of our name: we are, after all, be the League of American Orchestras—not just the League of North American Orchestras!—and we hope that this is just the beginning of a long road of friendship between the orchestras of the south and north of our continent.

## Speech

I want to say first of all, that I love Latin America! Many of your countries still lie in my future, but the time I've spent over the years in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile has been enough to awaken my immense curiosity for what lies beyond.

There are of course big differences between Latin American and North American orchestras—especially in the way they are funded. Orchestras in the US receive on average only about 5% of their income from the government—compared to more than 75% here. So although I understand the anxiety about possible future reductions in funding, nonetheless it's still basically true that Latin American orchestras are mostly rooted in a public funding model, while North American orchestras function in a market economy, supported by tax incentives for private individual giving.

However, underneath the superficial differences, our situations are perhaps more similar than we might imagine. Something that has really become clear to me in the last two days, as these conversations here are so similar to those we are having in the US. In both our regions, arts organizations have a social responsibility to provide meaning and value to cities and regions, and to create places for people to gather around music. And while much of what I will talk about this afternoon arises specifically out of North America's social, racial, and political history, I believe most of it is universal—and in fact I believe fundamental to the way all orchestras must think in the 21st century if we are going to be successful. It's not a coincidence that I gave almost this same speech to the German orchestra association earlier this year.

The orchestra field in the US is huge—the League has around 650 orchestra members, from the very largest—the Los Angeles Philharmonic with its $200M annual budget—to orchestras with only one employee and budgets of just a few thousand dollars. There are orchestras in all 50 states, and we constantly remind ourselves that I and my team of 25 people serve the largest and the smallest of them. For all their differences, they, like all of us in this room, are united by the belief that music has the power to change lives and enrich communities.

And as we think about changing lives and enriching communities, I will note that orchestras across Latin America not only each have their own incredibly rich and individual musical heritage, but many of you have led the world in thinking about music and social transformation. El Sistema of course is the most famous, but there are many other examples for us to look to and learn from, some of which we have heard about in the last two days. But I know that in many parts of Latin America, running an orchestra means dealing daily with lack of resources, shifting political winds,

and daily difficult choices. Your perseverance and commitment to presenting great music year after year in the face of very challenging conditions is an inspiration.

Our stated mission is this:

"The League of American Orchestras champions the vitality of music and the orchestral experience, supports the orchestra community, and leads change boldly."

It's no coincidence that those last three words are part of the title of my speech today. They are at the heart of our daily work at the League. Of course we are a membership organization serving orchestras—but we are also a leadership organization. This means having the courage to propose ideas that may be unpopular in the short term because we believe that orchestras will not be successful in 50 years' time without them. The desire to make the world a better place through music echoes across orchestras everywhere, including Latin America. This is the **moral case** for adopting missions that go far beyond artistic excellence.

But it is only part of the story. It's not only a moral necessity, but also a **business necessity** for us to widen the net of who classical music touches. That business necessity is based on two things: first, the critical need to build a new, younger generation of concert goers, and second, to show that we serve the whole of the community, not just an educated and wealthy elite.

In all parts of the world, securing funding for arts organizations in the future—from both government and private sources—will increasingly be based on our ability to demonstrate a broader public value. Organizations who address a limited group of people who already love what they do, simply will not attract funding in a time when governments must make difficult decisions about how to address acute needs in society—from education to housing to health to security.

So today, I want to share with you four ideas that guide our work at the League—ideas that I believe can help all of us think boldly about transformation.

1. The first is about stating our intentions and committing to them
2. The second is about empowering people and developing great human cultures
3. The third is about challenging our assumptions about tradition and how relevant it feels to new audiences.
4. The last is about becoming true community resources through building authentic relationships beyond our existing audience.

## [1.]

So let's start with intentions. Every organization needs an agreed purpose and vision that defines its organizational priorities. That's why we have mission statements. In the US and the UK having a mission statement is a normal practice for a charitable organization. Whether or not this is the case in all Latin American countries, I'm not sure. But at the very least, I think we can agree about the importance of having regular, serious discussions about purpose and focus, which build a shared understanding across the organization of why we exist.

If you look at the mission statements of many orchestras, you normally see descriptions of who they are and what they do—descriptions of action, which usually means making great music at a high level of excellence, or perhaps something a bit more didactic about education. But if we are serious about having a larger footprint in our communities, a mission that only describes who and what is too limiting. What is needed today is to be explicit about the impact we make.

About ten years ago, when I was CEO of the Seattle Symphony, we wrote a new mission statement. It involved lengthy discussions among staff, musicians, and board members about how to express our aspirations in a few words. We landed in a beautiful place. And by the way, it's written in giant letters backstage, so it's the last thing the musicians see before they walk on stage.

I love this statement, not because of what it instructs us to do, but for what it allows us to do. It gives us permission to think about the many ways in which we can use the power of music for the widest benefit of society.

About a year later, the city of Seattle found itself in the middle of a huge homelessness crisis—which continues to this day. We decided that as the city's largest and most prominent arts organization we had a duty to help. We learned that the majority of people experiencing homelessness in Seattle were not the people selling drugs outside

the concert hall, but individuals who had had bad luck in their lives, made poor decisions, and found themselves with nothing. So we brought them into the life of the Symphony, on one occasion going so far as to display their art and poetry alongside our music on the main stage.

The program was called “Simple Gifts”—but when we started it, we didn’t know that the people who would receive the most gifts were ourselves. We were enriched as we helped those who were less fortunate than us. This program was part of a major repositioning of the Seattle Symphony as a community resource as well as a provider of great music. Of course some people said “this is not the correct work for a cultural organization” or “you are an orchestra not a social service provider” to which we simply replied: “We are guided by our mission—which excludes no one.”

## [2.]

My second idea is about organizational culture. Even with the greatest mission and purpose in the world, it’s unlikely that success is within reach if people are not aligned, engaged, and committed to the organization’s direction. Many, many books have been written on this subject! Our people—their commitment, experience, and creativity is our greatest potential, so how we care for them matters.

I’ll give you a corporate-style definition of organizational culture:

> The written and unwritten values that define the human ecology of a workplace and inform how people treat each other and their customers.

There’s clearly an ethical dimension about building great human cultures. It’s about allowing everyone to be themselves, find personal reward in their work and grow as individuals. Nobody chooses to work in the arts for personal financial gain; and this places a big moral responsibility on all of us to deliver personal satisfaction and meaning for those who work for us and with us.

But it goes so much further than ethics: building positive organizational culture has the greatest “return on investment” of anything a leader spends time on. Great organizational culture doesn’t depend on big budgets or modern facilities. It depends, very simply, on how we commit to treating each other. And it leads to effective and efficient organizations, to employee retention, to great music, and to a collection of people who apply their passion and skills to the organization’s mission. Without internal alignment and motivated people, no organization can achieve its dreams.

And great organizational cultures don’t happen by accident, they are created by people who decide that it is as important a part of their working day as putting great art on stage and creating financial stability. It means committing to valuing the individual, allowing information to flow freely, reducing hierarchy, increasing trust, releasing creativity, and helping every single person in the organization understand their role in delivering the mission and impact of their orchestra. Great human culture is an incredible multiplier of impact.

## [3.]

My third point is the need to challenge our assumptions about our traditions and how relevant audiences think they are.

In the US we hear often that concerts are too expensive—but truthfully, this is a distraction. Many people from younger generations are happy to pay hundreds of dollars to see Taylor Swift, go to a football game, go to the newest most fashionable restaurant, or to buy clothes they see their favorite influencers wearing. But if they don’t find relevance in what we do, accessible ticket prices will make no difference. People will pay when the value is clear. And for many people who are not already inside the tent of classical music, the value is simply not clear—which is a hard reality to accept for all those of us who have grown up with the assumption of the “universal power of music.”

I do think we have a relevance crisis—at least in the US, and probably emerging in other places in the world. North American orchestra audiences are now in most places larger than what they were before the pandemic, and the good news is that we are starting to see younger audiences too. But that new generation simply does not share the same expectations as their predecessors—and we won’t attract them through experiences that were built for their grandparents.

Some of us don’t need to look much further than our own families for proof of this. I am the parent of two young people in their twenties who were both music students in top colleges. One is a singer, and the other plays double

bass. Both love music and grew up backstage at concert halls, but neither of them is attracted enough to the concert experience to ever think of buying a ticket if I don't invite them.

This is a constant discussion in the US and there is lot of experimentation happening. Here are a few of what I think are the most interesting questions in welcoming new audiences:

- The first three are about formality:
    - Could our musicians wear clothes that are dignified, but of our time—rather than costumes from hundreds of years ago that signal elitism and exclusivity?
    - Could we relax the solemnity of the modern concert experience? In the US we now welcome applause between movements not as a breach of protocol, but as an important sign of social renewal in our concert halls.
    - Can we think again about length, location, and time of day? Most orchestra concerts today don't happen at the speed of life. Our biggest competition is not other artforms—it's digital media and the 90-minute restaurant meal with friends.
- Then there is the question of context, and how we help new audiences relate to the music:
    - Could our program notes focus more on engagement than information? Information is not normally helpful to someone who is new to the artform. They want to know how it relates to life today, and how it might speak to them personally.
    - Could it become normal for the conductor and guest artists to speak to the audience? In the US research tells us that the overwhelming majority of audiences like being addressed and hearing personal perspectives on the music—and feel disappointed when it doesn't happen.
- And some important questions about inclusion:
    - Can we invite the voices of younger generations into our planning, so that rather than just talking about them in their absence, we actually ask them what they would like from us?
    - And finally, picking up a theme from this morning's discussion, could we allow the 50% of our audiences who are women to see themselves equally represented among musicians, conductors and guest artists? It feels like the classical music world has simply exhausted the excuses as to why this is not possible. It is possible—and it's possible now.

I want to add: this does not mean avoiding important, difficult, and complex music. But it just asks us to be more aware. Habit is the enemy of relevance. Every day—consciously or not—we make decisions about who is allowed to belong in our concert halls, and who is left out.

## [4.]

And finally, let's think about all the people who might be inspired by what we do, but who are not able to be in our concert halls. Attending classical music concerts is still a privilege that some communities can only dream of. Which brings me to my last point: how do we reach less privileged people in authentic ways and become resources for the whole community, not just a portion of it?

Earlier this year I visited one of the most visionary orchestras in the United States—the South Dakota Symphony. Over the last 20 years, their music director, Delta David Gier, has built an inspiring collaboration with Native American tribal communities. Native American reservations are some of the poorest communities in the entire US, with about 35% of people living below the poverty line. But those communities—like indigenous communities in Latin America—are proud, deeply connected to nature and the earth, and have long musical traditions. Early in the partnership David and his team found a common thread, which was that both groups shared a deep reverence for their musical history. This allowed them to build the Lakota Music Project respectfully around the goal of exploring their histories together. This was not "outreach"—it was mutual learning.

Often in the classical music world we use the phrase "the transformational experience of music." I understand the good intentions of these words—and I've used them myself—but what always makes me anxious is the implication that "YOUR lives can be transformed by OUR music." It's not a great starting place. The essence of productive community work lies with dialogue; the questions of "How can we help?" and "What might we learn?" are the magic keys to deeper community meaning.

This is about defining ourselves not just as providers of great music for people who already love us, but as resources that serve an essential community need. It's a huge opportunity to make our case about why we matter: to government leaders, to foundation and corporate supporters, and to the general public.

## [Conclusion]

So to summarize: the arrow toward “broadening our universe” involves stating our intentions boldly, empowering people around us, challenging assumptions about our traditions, and fully embracing the idea of becoming a community resource.

Some of this probably sounds quite idealistic. Truthfully it is and I don’t apologize for that. But maybe you are wondering if I really do have faith and belief in the core artistic purpose of orchestras and the repertoire they play. And the answer is a big yes. In fact, it’s because of my deep concern to sustain this art form that I am so hungry for change and for us to adapt more quickly. I know that all of you in this room are here because of your love for music and the deep sense of purpose it brings to your lives. However challenging our environments, the music will always remind us of the privilege of working in this beautiful profession.

But we’re living in complex and changing times. The invitation in front of us is to innovate more courageously, serve more deeply, and welcome more generously—to be an integral part of our communities and to allow every person—no matter where they live or where they come from—to feel that music can be in their future.

In other words, to imagine new ways of being essential.

Thank you very much for your attention.