

Gold Award Presentation

New Electronic Newsletter: The Guild Gazette 2024/25

League of American Orchestras National Conference, Baltimore, June 1–3, 2026

Strategy & Rationale

1. What limitations or challenges in your previous newsletter prompted a full redesign?

The Guild had no consistent, outward-facing communication channel. What existed before reached only paid Guild members — a small, already-committed audience. There was no way to reach gala invitees, donors, life members, or the broader circle of people who support the ISO through attendance and philanthropy but aren't formal Guild members. We also had no way to track whether anyone was reading what we sent, no ability to include links or multimedia, and no path to building anything lasting. The Guild was doing remarkable work — hosting events, awarding scholarships, supporting musicians — but that story wasn't being told to the people who needed to hear it. The Gazette was a direct response to that gap.

2. How did you determine that a complete rebuild rather than incremental improvement was necessary?

The timing aligned with a pivotal moment for the ISO. The organization was completing a new website and had just concluded an extensive two-year international search, hiring a new Music Director, Taichi Fukumura — a unanimous choice by the search committee, the musicians, and the board. That kind of generational moment deserved a communications platform worthy of it. A patched-together approach wasn't going to serve that story. We needed something consistent, professionally designed, broadly distributed — and increasingly, connected to a digital presence that could grow over time.

Program Design

3. What process did you use to deconstruct and rebuild the publication?

We started by mapping the audience — Guild members, gala invitees, donors, event attendees, life members — and worked backward to ask what each group needed to know and feel after reading the Gazette. We chose Constant Contact for its professional design templates and analytics, which allowed us to track open rates and adjust content based on what was resonating. The workflow was built around a clear monthly schedule for content submission, editing, design, and distribution — all coordinated by a single volunteer editor.

But the model has continued to evolve. The most recent development is one we're particularly proud of: with the launch of the ISO's new website, we now publish full-length feature stories — with photos and depth — in the website's news section. The Gazette has become a curated digest, with a compelling short paragraph on each story and a "Read More" link driving readers to the full piece online. That means readers who want the headline get it in the email; readers who want the whole story find it on the website. And those stories don't disappear — they become a permanent, searchable archive that generates ongoing SEO traffic. The Gazette and the website are now a single integrated system.

4. How did you approach content strategy, editorial voice, and audience segmentation?

The editorial philosophy was built on a key insight: storytelling creates stronger emotional connections than announcements alone. So rather than filling the Gazette with event listings and committee reports, we led with narratives — event recaps, volunteer profiles, scholarship spotlights, staff features, and behind-the-scenes stories. The April issue, for example, includes a staff spotlight on ISO Marketing Director Beth Wakefield, a recap of Pi Day/Pie Day that raised \$1,500, coverage of the Music Matters education program, and scholarship audition highlights — alongside the season's major gala preview.

The digest-plus-website model has deepened this approach considerably. A story like the Beth Wakefield profile or the Music Matters feature deserves more than two paragraphs. Now it gets the full treatment on the website, with the Gazette serving as the invitation to read it. That's good editorial strategy and good digital strategy simultaneously — each story builds the website's content library while giving Gazette readers a reason to click through and engage more deeply.

Impact & Outcomes

5. What changes have you seen in readership, engagement, or member response?

Readership analytics from Constant Contact show open rates of 60% — nearly double the industry average — with consistent engagement from the start. But we wanted to go deeper than open rates, so we conducted a reader survey. The results were striking.

When asked whether the Guild Gazette makes them feel more connected to the ISO and its musicians, 93% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Asked whether it strengthens their sense of belonging to the ISO community, 85% agreed or strongly agreed. On visual appeal and readability, 97% rated it positively. And when asked to rate the Gazette's overall value as a resource for staying connected to the ISO on a scale of 1 to 10, the mean score was 8.46 — with a median of 9.

Reader sentiment tracks with what we hear directly: people feel more informed, more connected, and more proud of what the Guild is doing. The digest model has added a further dimension to engagement — click-through rates on “Read More” links tell us which stories resonate most, which in turn shapes editorial planning. We're not guessing what our audience cares about. The data tells us.

6. Has the newsletter influenced donor communication or event participation?

The survey data answers this directly. When asked whether reading the Guild Gazette had influenced specific behaviors, 51% of respondents said it left them feeling more motivated to support the ISO's mission generally. Nearly 45% said it prompted them to share ISO news with a friend, family member, or colleague — organic word-of-mouth from a newsletter. More than 27% attended a concert they might not have otherwise, and over 26% made or increased a donation to the ISO. Nearly 22% volunteered for or attended a Guild event.

The Gazette was never designed as a direct sales tool, but it functions as a powerful cultivation vehicle. By keeping donors and community supporters consistently informed — about Guild activities, scholarship recipients, ISO milestones, and the people behind the music — it

maintains a warm presence between formal fundraising asks. The website integration deepens this: stories about named donors, musician and staff profiles, and scholarship recipients now live permanently on the ISO website, not just in an email that gets archived or deleted. That permanence matters to people being recognized. And it matters to prospective donors researching the organization before they give.

Sustainability & Replicability

7. How do you maintain consistency and quality over time?

The foundation is the workflow. A clear monthly schedule — when content is due, when editing happens, when distribution goes out — removes the scramble that kills most volunteer publications. Having a single volunteer editor coordinate all contributions creates accountability and a consistent voice. Constant Contact's templates mean every issue looks polished without requiring design expertise.

The website integration has also strengthened sustainability in a way we didn't fully anticipate. Because full stories now live on the website, the Gazette itself stays lean and readable — it doesn't have to carry the full weight of every story. That makes each issue easier to produce and easier to read. And as the website's story archive grows, it becomes a resource that serves the Guild and the ISO well beyond any individual issue's lifespan. We're building something permanent, one month at a time.

8. What advice would you give to organizations considering a similar communications overhaul?

Three things. First, expand your definition of your audience before you do anything else. The Gazette became something special the moment we decided it wasn't just for Guild members. Second, invest in storytelling — not announcements. Readers disengage from bulletins; they stay connected to narratives. Third, think beyond the email. If your organization has a website — and it should — your newsletter and your web presence should work together as a system. Use the newsletter as a digest that drives readers to deeper content on the website. Those stories become evergreen assets: they generate search traffic, they serve as a permanent record of your organization's vitality, and they give donors and community members a reason to visit your site beyond buying a ticket. The newsletter gets people in the door. The website keeps the door open.

9. Are there plans to expand or replicate the Guild Gazette model?

Yes — and it is no longer a plan. The Bloomington-Normal ISO Guild is adopting the Guild Gazette model in August 2026. What began as an exploratory conversation has become a firm commitment.

Their newsletter currently exists as a PDF distributed exclusively to Guild members. At a recent meeting with their newsletter committee, we walked through the full editorial workflow: monthly content calendaring, the interview and profile process, the Constant Contact template structure, and the hybrid digest-to-website publishing model. The response was immediate and enthusiastic. Their Guild President embraced expanding the newsletter's audience beyond current Guild members almost at once — and from that moment, the conversation shifted from whether to adopt the new format to how: timeline, editorial roles, list management, and a launch target.

One of the most significant decisions to come out of that meeting was the agreement to retain the Guild Gazette name for the Bloomington-Normal edition. Both guilds felt strongly that a shared name was important: it establishes a unified voice for ISO Guild communications across central Illinois, operating under the ISO umbrella. Rather than two separate newsletters working in isolation, the Guild Gazette becomes a recognizable, credible brand that speaks on behalf of the ISO Guild community — in Springfield and Bloomington-Normal alike. The LAO Gold Award of Excellence, earned by the Springfield edition, lends immediate credibility to the BN launch and reinforces why the shared name matters.

The Bloomington-Normal edition will carry its own distinct identity within that shared framework. Their masthead will appear in coral — their established Guild communications color — so readers will immediately recognize it as a BN publication while still feeling connected to the same editorial family. Same name, same model, same commitment to storytelling. Different community, different voice.

Several content areas were identified as natural crossover opportunities between the two editions:

- Musician profiles and ISO musician features
- Youth program coverage (ISYO and education initiatives)
- Host family stories — identified as particularly strong storytelling material
- Music Matters program features

The 2,500-recipient reach of the Springfield Gazette made the case for an expanded audience model concrete and compelling. The BN Guild also recognized the newsletter's potential as a recruitment vehicle for host families and new Guild members — a natural extension of what the Springfield edition already does. The Guild Gazette is becoming something larger than either guild alone.