

Closing Session: Lara Downes and Arturo O'Farrill Sneak Peek of "The Declaration Project"

League of American Orchestras Conference
June 3, 2026 | Baltimore, MD

[PIANO]

LARA DOWNES: Thank you. Thank you so much. That is a song called "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free." I learned that song from Thomas Hampson, the baritone many years ago. I was still in school, and I had curiosity about American music, and I found my way to Tom's work. He was busy being the tallest, handsomest, famous-ist baritone on opera stages around the world. But he was also doing scholarship into American music and gathering his findings in the Library of Congress and really advocating for the history and the stories of this country through its music.

And then many years later, Tom and I met, and apparently he was a fan of my work in American music, which was only started because of him, and we started working together. And we would perform this song. And I share it with you today because here we are marking the 250th anniversary of this country, and this song is often called the first American song. It was written in 1759 by Francis Hopkinson, who later became one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

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So my introduction to American music, via Tom Hampson, set me on a life path. And the moment that I started sharing our music and our stories, I became fascinated and obsessed and dedicated to the power that lives within that. What I could do in communities, what I could feel as a response to this music that does gather us in these beautiful meeting places and crossroads and on common ground, despite all of the confusion and division that has been so present for at least the last 10 years. But honestly, always.

And so now at this moment, this historic moment—and who could have imagined that the arts, music and the arts, would find themselves so firmly at the crosshairs of everything that's happening in our country? I think it's such a powerful and valuable moment to hold on to this common ground that we can create, this connection that we can create, and really double down. And I am doubling down, and every day I'm out there in communities across the country sharing the truth and the beauty and the connection of American music.

And what I love about that the most is that from the beginning, American music has connected us across geographies and experiences and traditions. And so I find my happiest place in collaborating across those traditions. I just did a show with Judy Collins out in California a couple of weeks ago. That show also had a gospel choir on it, and an Americana quartet out of Austin. One of my best new musical friends is a 17-year-old bluegrass mandolinist who I met via the Knoxville Symphony about a year ago.

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I work with Christian McBride, I work with Rhiannon Giddens. I just love sharing our different perspectives on this music. And one of my favorite people to work with sort of encompasses the world of music just in his being. A pianist, a band leader, a scholar, an advocate, an activist, and a composer, and I'm going to invite him to join me on stage, Arturo O'Farrill.

[APPLAUSE]

Arturo, we're going to talk about this briefly because we could talk about it all day, but people have flights to catch. Why is that not actually the first American song?

ARTURO O'FARRILL: Well, I believe this was an indigenous country before. It was taken over by people who came from Europe. So songs and music of the people of the Americas goes back thousands and thousands of years.

DOWNES: And I'll say this is called the first American song because it's the first documented, notated song by an Anglo person born on American soil. Francis Hopkinson was born in Philadelphia in 1730-something. But there's a lot of music that predates him. And I think that's your stomping grounds.

O'FARRILL: I still think that's a beautiful message. Because if you think about it, the thing that makes America wonderful is the geographies that have come together from throughout the planet to make this a unique and special place. This may be the most diverse country in the world and yet we're so scared of diversity. We're so scared of acknowledging our differences.

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DOWNES: Well, you're not scared of that in your music. And when I listened to you, when I was at your show on Sunday night at City Winery, every note that you play embraces all of that. So I would love for you to share a little bit about how you do that in music. I mean, all of the influences that are constantly coursing through you when you're composing and when you're playing, it's really extraordinary to witness it.

O’FARRILL: Thank you, Lara. I don’t like to stay in my lane. I know I’m a mambo person, but I’m a composer, a classical composer, a pianist, a jazz pianist, and I don’t believe in lanes. I think music is a universal thing that we must embrace in order to really discover. And so for me, I think of myself as the Bad Bunny of jazz, for instance. [APPLAUSE]

What we call jazz is music that’s an inheritance from a place called Mother Africa. And in that sense, Mother Africa, wittingly or unwillingly, was brought to shores throughout the indigenous world. And everywhere that those beautiful people were brought, miracles — musical miracles took place. So I love the music of Peru. I love the music of Puerto Rico. I love the music of Colombia. I love the music of Canada. I love the music of all this polyglot, this incredible, rich framework that is the Americas.

DOWNES: Yeah, and I think that when we’re out there sharing this music, it’s exactly those journeys also that resonate with so many people. So this project, this Declaration Project, it’s a commission from Lincoln Center. They asked me to curate a list of composers who would write three pieces called “Life,” “Liberty,” and “The Pursuit of Happiness.” And, of course, I came to you for a piece called “Liberty.” Because I think that your music inherently is freedom. It expresses that freedom of geography and of evolution, just the flow of it. I would love for you to share with everybody a few of the ideas that you’ve captured in this piece that I’ll be premiering in just about exactly a month.

[00:08:08.6]

O’FARRILL: I will be happy to. Sure. That would be wonderful. Thank you, Lara. The first thing I want to say is that it begins in a very typical orchestral manner with a tremolo in the low strings and brass. [PLAYING] And then some piano dramatics. [PLAYING] And this piece is basically a backwards history lesson because it begins with Cecil Taylor and ends with Scott Joplin. Hold on, okay. [PLAYING] That’s the way it begins.

DOWNES: Wait, wait, wait. And that’s the part that—we had a little work session the other night and I had my score and I had to play it. He’s like, “No, you just play whatever you want.”

O’FARRILL: It works its way towards— [PLAYING]. Real typical Scott Joplin. And along the way, it really visits a lot of incredible jazz artists. It visits Charlie Parker. I’m sorry, Charlie Parker. Charles Mingus. Hamiet Bluiett, which—a lot of you may not know who that is, but he’s a free jazz baritone saxophonist that I absolutely adore. And I’m going to get the orchestra musicians to actually really play these roles. And I look so forward to that, because the changing of languages is so desperately needed. “Jazz musician,” “classical musician,” “Latin musician.” What a bunch of nonsense.

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And I know, because I've worked with orchestra music. I had the privilege of writing a piece for the San Francisco Ballet Symphony Orchestra and they couldn't wait to be cut loose. I had them laughing into the phone.

DOWNES: It's true. It's true. And the other—remember when—so two years ago, when “Rhapsody in Blue” turned 100, I commissioned this new orchestration from Edmar Colón, who's a Puerto Rican composer. And we premiered that at the San Francisco Conservatory with the musicians there, the students there. And then we also brought in a bunch of Afro-Caribbean percussionists. And I remember the first rehearsal and this kind of standoff. This fear thing, where nobody understood what anybody else was doing. And Edmar just got up and he came to the center of the stage, and said, “Just listen. Just listen. It's all the same.” It's a beautiful thing when that happens.

O'FARRILL: It was a beautiful moment when I was working with the San Francisco Orchestra, because I had brought in some Cuban percussionists, some real Cuban percussionists. And they kept looking at this as the beat, as opposed to this. So that took a minute, to explain to them how to follow the conductor. But then the conductor started explaining “clave” to the string section. He looked at them and he said, “It sounds like they're rushing, but they're not.”

And I just love that moment because it just speaks to the wonder. And in fact it's interesting, because the piece that I've written also kind of confuses the beginning of jazz with the beginning of Latin music. And at the end, when we get to the Scott Joplin section, it kind of does this. [PLAYING]

[00:12:16.5]

DOWNES: Okay, so we're going to wrap up because I have to go practice.

O'FARRILL: I bet you didn't think Lara could throw down a montuno. She's going to throw down a fierce montuno.

DOWNES: So we obviously needed an orchestra to play this piece with me. And I'm going to be partnering with the American Composers Orchestra. And we would love to tell you about how we are building this concert. And I would love to invite to the stage Melissa Ngan and Curtis Stewart, the president and CEO and artistic director of ACO. [APPLAUSE]

So when we started talking about this project, we were not talking about just a performance. We were really talking about how to build this project together within New York City. I have been—I mean, I'm always all over the place. But everywhere I've been for the last two years, I've brought this project with me. And I've worked with many of you along the way, just going

deep into communities and actually gathering material that fed into the piece. So these prompts, “What do life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness mean to you?” Those have been shared every place I've gone, and have actually provided not only inspiration for the composers in creating the works, but also a whole multimedia component of the concert. But also, then we started talking about, how do we enact this in New York City? How do we engage, invite this community in advance of the July performance? And yeah, we've done it.

CURTIS STEWART: Did it.

DOWNES: So we have a little video to show you of some other things that we've done, but maybe you can just talk briefly about what ACO does on a daily basis in New York City in terms of education and community invitation.

STEWART: ACO has two programs that we run through schools all around New York. Our great education director, Kevin James, runs the Sonic Spark, which is geared for elementary and middle school students and it's creativity-based for students who don't need to have any prior knowledge of music. It's based on improvisation. And it gets every student in those schools in the Bronx and Brooklyn and in Queens to think of themselves as a composer.

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The other program is called Compose Yourself, and it's for high school students and it's basically a notation program for these fairly serious composers to learn how to notate for others and for themselves. And actually, the kids who go through that program have 100% attendance at their college of choice, and 70% of those kids go into music. So those are the two major programs that we run. We went into schools at the Lenox Academy in Canarsie, Brooklyn. That was a Sonic Spark program.

DOWNES: Which is the farthest I've ever traveled on the subway. It is the last stop on the train.

STEWART: Is that before Coney Island or after Coney Island? I don't even know. And at Talent Unlimited in Manhattan. And our teaching assistant that goes in those schools noted that there was a huge change in the before to the after. There was a question—

DOWNES: Don't give it away.

STEWART: Don't give it away.

DOWNES: No. But the thing is, the point is that what I was stepping into is a practice already in place. And these kids are really habituated and excited and energized by weekly interactions with these teaching artists. So it was a really beautiful thing to bring this project

into a space where there was groundwork laid and a culture of curiosity and knowledge seeking through music.

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And I think especially because this project is so specifically focused on American stories. Everything that our tour was saying, all of this flow and all of this confluence of American stories. For these kids, it's very meaningful, and to bring them into that discovery process was a really beautiful thing.

MELISSA NGAN: Absolutely. So one thing that I'll say is that, again, to drive the point home, these are creativity-based programs. It's a different result when you ask someone to imagine something and make it real in the present moment. So before we start these programs, we generally will be asking students how comfortable they feel making music. But in particular, in preparation for this, we were asking how comfortable do you feel making change in the world around you? Do you feel that you have the power, the ability to influence what the world around you looks like? And overwhelmingly, the answer was no.

And we have many years of research that shows that when you do creativity-based work, which is different from teaching someone to play an instrument and replicate the sounds of someone else, but rather use their imagination to bring about their own ideas in the world—this is empowering them to recognize that creativity is not just about making art, it is about creating the world around you at every moment. And that is what citizenship is in this moment. So our goal here, and what we saw happen, is that after these residencies, when we asked students the same question again, it was an overwhelming yes.

DOWNES: And in this video, we're going to start with yes. [APPLAUSE] And thank you. And it's a short video, so I just want to acknowledge some of the folks that are in it, even for just seconds at a time. Some of my partners along the way have been the Philadelphia Orchestra, the LA Chamber Orchestra, Knoxville Symphony, been in Austin. You guys. I think that's probably everything in the video. But I've just been—I've been working with so many of you and it's been such a great year, in such a hard time. Okay. Roll video, please.

[00:18:21.6]

DOWNES ON VIDEO: One more time before I leave, who has been charged of changing the world?

KIDS: That's us.

VOICES: The people.

DOWNES ON VIDEO: Yay!

DOWNES VIDEO, VOICEOVER: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? You know, practice, practice, practice. But how do you change the world? Well, that's a whole other story. I travel a lot all over this country, often as the guests of American orchestras. And we always work together to accomplish everything we can, both on stage and outside of the concert hall. It's a question of sharing the music and the stories behind it with intention and conviction. It's an invitation.

A big, beautiful orchestra hall like this, maybe people are saying to Florence Price, "You don't belong here." But she brings us the music of her ancestors into this concert hall. And so she's saying, "I do belong here. We do belong here. My story is important. Our story is important."

This year, I've been partnering with the American Composers Orchestra, building a project that's destined for Lincoln Center this summer. A commission of new works that mark the 250th anniversary of this country by celebrating the democracy of American music and envisioning the possibilities of the future. So we're out here touching the future in schools where ACO has built ongoing, deep, life-changing partnerships throughout New York City.

Music doesn't have to be of a particular moment to be music that serves that moment, right? Changing the world.

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Every artist who's ever lived has done it in one way or another. Made something, left something behind that touches humanity in real time and for the future. Maybe we should lean into that legacy, to the lineage of American music. Music that has changed the world. One of the best things we do, one of our most meaningful and beautiful exports, music that tells our story and teaches the truth of our history so much better than words.

When I think about the music, I realize that the music, the happiest music, always comes in the most difficult times. And it's like our superpower.

VOICE ON VIDEO: I feel free when I play music and make music. It also makes me happy, too.

DOWNES ON VIDEO: Maybe we look out into the landscapes of our country and our communities and we find connection with this place through its music, the voice of its people, the sound of its time, and an invitation to imagine change. [APPLAUSE]

DOWNES: I've had my share of down days this year. You know, you wake up and you read the news and you don't feel great. But going out there and working with these kids, it's been lifesaving. And you see the energy and you see what we can make happen in a classroom in a 45-minute session.

You know, I forgot to mention Detroit. And that was a really special interaction. I remember after that concert—that was a few years ago, as you could tell by the masks. I think it was 2021, maybe. And it was the first school concert back in the hall after the pandemic. And I said that thing about Florence Price. And then I remember going back to my dressing room and just sitting on the couch and realizing the impact that that moment had had.

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Because all of these kids, all of these Black and brown kids from Detroit, were in that hall for the first time hearing a symphony concert. And just to hear that music and to hear that story, I realized this is setting them on a relationship with this music that is so powerful, so welcoming, so strong.

I think we've all been thinking a lot about music as ambassadorship. Not just here at home, but around the world and what we can do. I mean, I think that the concert last night here, the symphony concert, was such a beautiful example of that, of using our music to really just show what we can do, what we have done throughout our history. How, as I said in that video, the strong music, the beautiful music, the music that lasts, it comes in really difficult times like this one. And I want to just talk about how we're all accomplishing that. How we're using the music, and who we're working with to bring the music to where it needs to be. Arturo, you want to talk a little bit about Casa Belongó? I've had some conversations just today and yesterday about what community means. Where we find community, where we actually go to find community and invite community in. And you've been doing that in such an impactful way with this huge project to show for it.

O'FARRILL: 18 years ago, I began the greatest composition in my life and it did not involve a single note. I created the Afro Latin Jazz Alliance, precisely for the beautiful work that you all are doing. Going into schools. We began with one school and a pre-professional training program. Last year, I think we had 59 teaching artists in 27 New York City public schools. A pre-professional training program. A presence in the incarcerated population. We've engaged the language of what Latin Jazz is in places as far away as Saudi Arabia, Veracruz.

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And all of this work, it's tireless, because it's the most beautiful thing you can do. But this led to this. Because in February 18th, we broke ground on 118th Street and Park Avenue in

Harlem on a performing art center called Casa Belongó, with the Afro Latin Jazz Alliance Community Culture Hub.

But the beautiful thing about it, for me, was the marriage of my beliefs as a human being, married to my creative practice. Because Casa Belongó is in the hood. It's not in some pricey neighborhood in Midtown. It's also precious to me because Casa Belongó is in a 19-story affordable housing building in East Harlem. Ninety-seven units going to people who are transitioning out of being unhoused. [APPLAUSE]

And I think that's the power of music. That music builds community. Music changes the course, the physical course of human history. And we need to be responsive to the reality that we have the power in our hands to change the narrative.

DOWNES: I don't know if you noticed in that video. One of the classrooms that I visited, Atlantis Academy, I thought there was going to be a piano or a keyboard or something. And I had a whole plan, and there was not an instrument so the plan changed. And I ended up showing them Nina Simone videos. And I'm thinking—we're all thinking so much about these artists who, in their own time—Leonard Bernstein, Nina Simone, Duke Ellington. Everybody who came into a moment of, what? Change, confusion, difficulty. And stepped into it, stepped up. And believed. I mean, I think you had to believe. I think you always actually have to believe that what you're doing in that moment, in that classroom, on that stage is making change. We can all do it.

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We're running a little bit out of time. I want to ask each of you—and I want to ask all of you to think about this. So, the beautiful thing about the pursuit of happiness is that it never meant, like, “You be you and live your best life and buy everything you want.” It meant the pursuit of well-being for the common good. It meant the pursuit of the common good. I think with music, we create that space all the time. I want to ask each of you how you pursue that reality in your art-making and music-making.

O’FARRILL: Say that again. I was listening, but I couldn't quite grasp it.

DOWNES: The pursuit of happiness. If the pursuit of happiness is the well-being—

O’FARRILL: Oh, wow. My mother used to say, “Mi hito, are you happy?” And I'd look, and I'd say, “Ma, is happiness a thing?” And it took me decades to realize that happiness is not owning, possessing, or controlling, or having. It took me decades to realize that happiness is quite the opposite. It's the ability to give. It's the ability to reach others and to help other lives better lives. That's not easy. And that's not a pill. That's not an app. That's not AI. What

that is, is a day-to-day giving of yourself. And it's not easy. Because every day you want to take care of number one. But I really found that in my life, happiness is the contentment knowing that you're serving others. [APPLAUSE]

DOWNES: Well, you're doing it.

STEWART: As a performer and composer, there's so much time spent alone. And there's so much time on stage. Even when you're on stage right now, I'm looking out and I see so many people I know, and I still feel quite alone. Because I'm doing this thing that's being watched. But I'm not sure if I'm feeling seen.

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When I'm in community and talking to students, and their words then affect my playing, and my words—I see their eyes light up. I see them go like this when they hear some squeaky sounds. I feel seen. And I think that's a revelation for me. Every time I'm speaking or around community, it's a revelation for me. And that is happiness. [APPLAUSE]

NGAN: For me, happiness is the belief that creative acts can transform the world. And as we think about, and as we leave this conference, wondering about all the things that we take with us, in our worries and in our hopes and in our aspirations and what we hope to give to the world, we have to remember that the act of music making has always been part of how we heal the body, touch the spirit, pass language. And these are not performative acts. They are participatory ones. [APPLAUSE] So to the degree that we can remember that our greatest joy is in helping others engage their own creativity and remember their role in creating our experience, that, to me, is happiness. [APPLAUSE]

DOWNES: I will say that for me, the pursuit of happiness is the pursuit. It's that we all keep trying. At that concert last night, you know, everyone had been in talks all day, working all day. Do you remember how happy we were in that room last night? All the musicians on the stage, all of us jumping to our feet. The noise, the sound that came out of me when that woman opened her mouth for her first song is just, like, joy. I mean, we would all be doing other jobs if we didn't really believe in this.

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So I guess I just want to say to all of us to keep trying and to believe that our pursuit is making a difference. It really, really is. It's so wonderful to see all of you here. I want to leave us with another piece of music, but it's the same piece of music. So, "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free." Seventeen fifty-nine, the first American song, or maybe not. I thought that it would be a beautiful moment to reimagine that piece of music. So I went to my friend,

Shawn Okpebholo, and I asked him to rework the song. And he has, and it's the title track of my next album that's coming out on July 3rd. It's called "Wondrous Free" by Shawn Okpebholo. [APPLAUSE]

[00:30:46.8]

[PLAYING]

[00:34:22.0]

[APPLAUSE]

DOWNES: Thank you so much. Thank you all for joining me. Thank you, Simon, and everyone in the League. Thank you, Erin is here. I want to say thank you to Lincoln Center for helping us build the Declaration Project. It's been such—it is—such an ongoing effort. And I hope if—any of you around or in New York City on July 1st, you'll join us. It's going to be a pretty spectacular evening. I need to say thank you to Yamaha for the pretty piano. And yeah, it's just so lovely to be here. I'm looking forward to talking with all of you. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]