

Making Audience Development Everyone's Business

2026 National Conference

SIMON WOODS: Good morning, everybody. I'm Simon Woods, I'm President and CEO of the League, and it is wonderful to see you. How is everybody this morning? Good? Excellent. Thank you.

Well, I'm impressed. It looks like there are a lot of people interested in making audience development everyone's business. This seems to have definitely hit a nerve. So that's fantastic. Thank you very much for being here. We have an awesome panel. We were just saying, it's not only an awesome panel because of their content, it's also a very awesomely presented, dressed, well-dressed panel. In fact, I'm by far the most conservatively dressed person on this panel, I will say. Anyway, we have a really, really great presentation for you and great discussion for you this morning. I want to just do a sponsor call-out, first of all, to the Wallace Foundation. We're very grateful to them. And also to the sponsor of this session, which is PatronManager. Elise Rebmann from PatronManager, are you here? Elise, do you want to say anything?

ELISE REBMANN: No.

WOODS: Okay. Great. Well, I'll read my blurb here, then, and we're very grateful to you. Thank you, Elise, so much. So PatronManager is revolutionizing the performing arts and non-profit entertainment industries by providing organizations with fully integrated customer relationship management, ticketing, fundraising, membership and marketing solutions built entirely on the world's most advanced cloud-based CRM platform, Salesforce. By the way, we'll say the League is a Salesforce company as well, just FYI. And so Elise, thank you very much. We very much appreciate the support of you and all our business partners here today. Thank you so much.

[APPLAUSE]

So, when we were working on our strategic plan, which we're just about to issue, and the issue of audience development, it comes up time and time again. It's one of the central issues that orchestras are dealing with. You know, those big questions about relevance, welcome, inclusion, reach, they're actually life and death issues for our field when we think a decade or two out.

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And we spend a lot of time talking about it from a marketing perspective, campaigns, platforms, conversion rates, and all of that stuff. But what we tend to spend less time is on

the more fundamental stuff of what audiences are we trying to build and who owns it within our organizations? And I will say across my career leading organizations, I've so often seen organizations not being joined up in the way that they could be. I've seen marketing teams taking responsibility for trying to build audiences with a product, a concept product that is not suited for the purpose at hand. And I've also seen artistic teams working in a vacuum without enough participation in the strategic thinking about it.

But there are some orchestras and probably some of you in this room, and we're going to get to some conversation in a little while. Some of our orchestras who are doing it extremely effectively and, you're going to hear some great examples of that today. So we're going to look at this topic through a few different lenses from three executive directors and a music director for very, very different orchestras. And I want to, at this point, introduce the panelists and thank them very sincerely because this is really their session. They conceived and dreamed up this session. I'm really just an interloper because somebody had to facilitate. And I do happen to care a lot about this subject. It's one that I think we've still got work to do on.

But anyway, a stellar group of presenters, and I'm going to go in order here starting from your right to left. Erica Bondarev Rapach, executive director of the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra, which is a Group 4 orchestra. John Gennaro Devlin, music director of the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra, which is a Group 5 orchestra. Anwar Nasir, executive director of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, which is a Group 3 orchestra. And Ben Newman, executive director of the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra, which is a Group 6 orchestra. And it's great particularly to have two Baltimore area orchestras here represented. So please welcome the panel.

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[APPLAUSE]

And I also want to do a quick congratulations to Anwar, who was just appointed two days ago as the new president and CEO of Grant Park in Chicago.

[APPLAUSE]

So, well done to Anwar. Louisiana will be sorry to lose him, and you'll have to find somewhere in Chicago to get those sazeracs, Anwar.

ANWAR NASIR: Just one.

WOODS: Okay, so first of all, before we get started, you can get your phones out because we're going to do a quick thing with Mentimeter. We're going to do a little quick bit of

opening polls. So we've got two questions for you to understand the current landscape of where audience development sits in your organization. So two questions, and I'm going to go, the QR code is on the next slide, as well. Here's the first question: Who has primary responsibility for leading audience development in your organization? So let's see what happens here. You can't see it.

Okay. Thanks, thanks. Okay. Everybody good? So overwhelmingly marketing, closely followed by executive director, and relatively few organizations said board, music director, and community engagement. Okay, interesting. Let's do the next one, the second slide. This is who else is involved in audience development strategies in your organization?

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So the first one was the one who leads it? The second one is who else is involved in it? Okay, so quite an even spread. Interesting. Four organizations said nobody else is involved in it. See me afterwards. [LAUGHTER] Very interesting. Quite an even spread. Actually quite surprising, I would say. I don't know what you guys think. Quite surprising, boards are quite high on this, perhaps higher than I would have expected. Quite a lot of involvement of music directors, which is really encouraging, but not as high as some of the other areas. So that's very interesting. Good. Very good stuff. Okay.

So thank you for taking part in that. So here's what we're going to do. We're going to do four presentations from each of the panelists. And then after that—so we'll go through that for about half an hour. After that we're going to throw out some discussions for you to talk at tables, and then we're going to do a bit of feedback from the tables, and we're going to have a discussion with the panel. And we're going to get that all done in the next hour. So with that, Erica, first up. Please welcome Erica.

ERICA BONDAREV RAPACH: Thank you, and thank you for being here. My name is Erica Bondarev Rapach. I am the executive director of the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra, just about 40 minutes from here. I have been in the role about a year. So as you just explored with the survey, we are here to talk about audience development. And I think to start, it would be important for us to define it.

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So I'm going to offer a definition, which is that it is not a department. It is not a marketing campaign. It is not a budget line, and it is not just part of someone's job description. Audience development is a challenge for the entire organization. Many of you may be familiar with this feeling, that we treat audience like a marketing problem. Whether you call it "audience development," "audience engagement," "audience growth"—sometimes we call

it "community engagement." Sometimes we call it "community outreach." Anything to do with audience is generally assigned to marketing. When attendance doesn't meet goals, subscriptions decline, or audiences complain, our instinct is usually to ask: Do we need better messaging, more advertising, a stronger social media campaign, a bigger marketing budget? And yes, marketing matters. I say that as someone who comes from marketing and communications. I spent 15 years as a marketing director, but marketing cannot solve for an experience the organization hasn't collectively designed. Because audience growth is not only a marketing challenge—better emails, better ads, better social media, better messaging—those things matter, but they are only part of the relationship.

If the experience for the audience is not aligned or doesn't feel relevant, marketing can only do so much. Audience growth is an organizational challenge because the audience experiences the full organization. This is what we look like now, or most of us, or many of us, and I'm calling it the "old model" because we are moving to the new model. We divide the work into departments because we have to. But audiences do not experience departments. No patron leaves a concert saying, "The marketing was excellent, but operations was disappointing." [LAUGHTER] Or, "I loved the artistic vision, but interdepartmental coordination seemed weak." This is not how human beings experience culture. People leave asking, "Did I feel welcome? Did this feel meaningful? Did this organization feel like it was for someone like me? Was this worth my time, energy and money?"

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Audiences don't experience org charts. They experience how we make them feel. So the question to consider is not who owns audience or who develops our audience. The question is how does every part of the organization shape audience relationships, because the audience experience is how the mission actually lands. We can create extraordinary artistic work, but if people feel intimidated, confused, unseen, unwelcome, disconnected, or uncertain about why it mattered, the relationship stops there. And if the relationship stops there, our mission stops there too. Audience experience is not separate from artistic excellence. It is how artistic excellence becomes meaningful in someone's life. This is not about making art more commercial. It is not about chasing trends, and it is not about programming by committee. It is about recognizing that every person in the organization shapes whether someone feels a sense of connection and belonging.

Because audiences are not buying a ticket to a department. They are entering into a relationship with an organization, and relationships are emotional. We all know that, right? People come back because of how someone made them feel—inspired, welcomed, moved, included, curious, or seen. And they quietly decide not to return because they feel confused, uncomfortable, out of place, unimportant, or disconnected.

This emotional experience is everyone's job, not because everyone works in marketing, but because everyone contributes to the relationship. And if audience relationships are essential to sustaining our mission, then audience experience cannot belong to only one department. Different departments need to ask audience-centered questions from their own vantage point. Artistic planning asks who are we for? Marketing asks how do we build trust? Development asks how do we deepen value and belonging? Education asks how do we create meaning? Community engagement asks what makes for a sustainable connection? And operations asks how do we remove friction? The goal is not for everyone to do the same job. The goal is for everyone to understand their role in the relationship.

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These questions should be asked early and often in any planning process, when choosing programming, when designing a marketing campaign, or a brochure in a development meeting, when thinking about the lobby experience. This is especially important in artistic planning. Of course, repertoire matters. The art matters. But repertoire alone is not the whole experience. So instead of asking what should we perform? We should, instead, ask what relationship are we trying to build and what kind of experience are we designing for the audience? This doesn't weaken artistic ambition. It gives the art a stronger point of connection. So the good news is the new model does not require a new hire or more money in the budget. This is not about more work. This is about working differently. It requires putting more audience-centered questions into meetings and decisions where they may not have been before.

It is a shift from the handoff culture, where one department makes a decision and another department has to sell it to shared ownership. And this shared ownership of audience requires new habits. Simple questions change habits. Habits change culture, and culture changes outcomes. I'm going to give three very quick examples now of how we're doing this at the Annapolis Symphony. This is very new to our work at ASO, and so I'm eager to see the outcomes, and I promise I'll come back next year and present on what happened. But this is where we are. This is as simple as it gets, as we added a meeting. Now I know we all hate meetings, but this is one of the most important meetings I think now at the ASO, which is that we have what we call a "hot wash" after every concert, where artistic operations, artistic planning, marketing, box office development, community engagement, the music director and the executive director are all in the room, and we use ticket data, audience surveys, staff experience and audience interactions to debrief on the performance.

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This is the start of how we work together to think about our audience experience, and then how that relates to artistic planning and the product we offer. We are testing something next

year. We are calling it the "Sunday Matinee Pilot." We have a signature series concert on Friday and Saturday evenings. This next season we are adding two matinees on Sundays. We were trying to answer the question—well, the old question is how do we sell more tickets to new audiences? And the new question we are thinking about is how do we redesign the experience to better meet audience needs? So these Sunday matinees we are adding next year are less than 90 minutes, no intermission. It will be the same program as Friday and Saturday, without the guest artist. It will have lower pricing and because it will be in the afternoon, we hope to offer a wrap-around experience. One of them happens to fall on Mother's Day, so you can imagine what we might do with that. This isn't just a marketing initiative. It is an organizational pilot program. We will be testing lots of things, and they will not all just be marketing-related. So again, more to come next year after we've tried this.

And the last example is our Annapolis Symphony Academy. Our academy program, which is our education and youth orchestra and music education program is an audience development strategy. Too often education sits beside the institution, rather than inside its audience strategy. At the ASO, we are increasingly thinking about the academy as not separate work but as relationship infrastructure. A student violinist is also a future subscriber. A parent is a future donor. A family recital visit is often someone's first relationship with the orchestra. So you can see here that this is the journey that we are hoping to put our academy families on. And we imagine that there is an experience for everyone and a way for them to have a relationship with the whole organization. Thank you.

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Oh, no, sorry. Sorry. No thank you. Audience development is not only selling tickets today. Audience development is building relationships with the organization over time. So I'm going to end with this. I promise this is my last slide. Audience centered, because this is the rub. Many of you probably feel this, that audience-centered organizations do not abandon mission or artistic ambition. Audience-centered organizations design experiences that help people connect to it. Artistic planning and programming is relational design. Becoming audience-centered does not mean compromising our artistic standards, programming only what is familiar, only doing what sells, becoming transactional. This is not what I'm talking about. Audience-centered organizations do not abandon mission. I would argue, in fact, that they become more intentional about both, because this work is not about changing the art to chase audiences. It is about designing experiences that help people connect to it. That is a very different thing. Artistic planning and programming is not only repertoire selection. It is relational design. We are shaping not only what people hear, but what they understand, what they feel, and what they remember, and whether they choose to deepen a relationship with us. And now I am done. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

WOODS: Erica, I have one question for you. To what extent, as you've changed the culture in the organization, did you encounter resistance to it, or was this just something that everybody embraced?

BONDAREV RAPACH: My board chair is in the room. I have a fantastic board chair.

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So I had the sort of what I would call the "luxury" of coming in as interim executive director for the ASO. So I had a six-month trial period. And what I loved about that, in fact I think this is how we always should hire—different presentation. But I had a chance to both see what it was like in the organization and have the organization learn something about me. And there's something a little different about when you go into an organization as interim because you're there to work fast and dirty. And I did. And so they knew who I was and that I was there to be a change-maker. So I kind of came in with that intention. Having said that, that does not mean I'm not met with resistance. And I do understand that organizations—the ASO is not a small institution. We have 70 union musicians. We have this academy program with 150 students. We have 10 staff. Things happen slowly. I am an impatient person, so the hardest part is the waiting for the change, but I think it's just a matter of making the case and finding your allies in the community to do this.

WOODS: For those of us who are impatient people, I always like the words "strategic patience." And by the way, the quote from Erica that I want you to take away—this is a great quote. She said, "Audiences are not buying a ticket to a department." Very good. John. It's great to have a music director.

[APPLAUSE]

JOHN GENNARO DEVLIN: Hi, everybody. My name is John Devlin, and as Simon said, I am the music director of the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra, which is about 45 minutes outside of Pittsburgh in the northern panhandle of West Virginia. Even though we are a Group 5 organization, which means we have a substantial budget, we have 25,000 people that live in our city and a 2,400-seat concert hall to fill. So this work is really important. And you can imagine that if we get 1,000 people to our concert, that means 4% of the city is there.

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So our numbers matter a lot. And we love the fact that the city is so invested in what we do. Now, there are not a lot of people in Wheeling, West Virginia that can hum a tune from a Tchaikovsky Symphony or that have a favorite Beethoven Symphony, which gave us a lot of

opportunity area because there's not a clamoring from a majority of our audience for a standard repertoire in the same way that we think about it. So if we do standard repertoire, we need to contextualize it. If we do non-standard repertoire, we need to contextualize it. But our audience has an appetite for both. And so we concertize about once a month. And what we decided to do, in our ambition to integrate different types of marketing and departments into our artistic success and to grow our audience, was to say, "How can we provide that context in the most interesting way possible?"

Our marketing person is here today, and she does an amazing job at writing emails, posting on social media, and providing our story through those channels. And we have traditional marketing as well. But what were other ways that we could use the weeks we don't concertize to inform our audience and deepen the impact that our concerts would have at the end of each month? And we decided to go about this in an organized way that we called "the festival of ideas."

So we started with the intended impact of a particular concert. How can the context that we build around that impact better our community? And we decided to do this by picking one concert a year where we will have this festival of ideas and involve scholars, politicians, different types of academics, our musicians and unexpected types of people like the poet laureate of West Virginia, in deepening that relationship to the audience through programming that also serves as marketing. So we're taking the off-weeks and providing programming within our community. And we are also using dollars that may previously have gone to Facebook ads or mailers, and instead providing live events in the city in the weeks that we don't have a concert in our hall to deepen our relationships.

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So the festival of ideas model has resulted in a 31% increase in our Masterworks attendance over the last five years. And that's a number we're very proud of. These events are all free to the public. We have scholars, artists, clergy, teachers and students and many civic partnerships that have deepened these relationships with the constituents throughout our city, many of whom don't come to concerts regularly. We go to them, then they come back to us. And at these events we have chamber music, panels, readings and these types of talks that will expose the ideas behind the programming and the impact we hope to have. So what I'm going to do today because there's a lot we could go into is just give you a few examples of the ones that we found most successful.

So the first was a music and politics intersection, and the three composers featured on that concert were Wagner, Shostakovich, and Florence Price. So we had our Rabbi, who is a big fan of the symphony in Wheeling, talk about the types of conversations you need to have

responsibly when you program the music of Wagner for an audience who's unfamiliar with his story.

Shostakovich, this was incredible. Five days before the concert took place, and we're talking about the intersection of politics and religion, Ukraine was invaded. So not only did this have an overarching viewpoint as to why politics and music intersected so often in history, and we're talking, of course, about the 1940s, then all of a sudden we could talk about the 2020s through the same lens.

And then Florence Price, we had a couple of Florence Price scholars, including one from Howard University, very close to here in Washington, DC, come and talk about the impact of her legacy. And the types of themes that we explored nationalism, oppression, identity, resistance, these politics, these political themes resonate today, and we loved the impact that that concert had. So this was not about what we programmed, but it was about why we programmed it, and what type of liberal arts experience can we provide our audience that deepens the impact of the concert that happens at the end of the sequence?

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This is the one I'm the most proud of. How many of you have heard of Walter Brecht? I see three people raising their hands. This is why we do this. Walter Brecht was a composer who, despite being a Jew, was so popular in the 1930s and '40s that Hitler offered him honorary Aryan status, to become the official composer of the Third Reich. Speaking not a word of English, Brecht declined this offer and moved to West Virginia. He started a conservatory in our state capital of Charleston, and just like you all, I didn't know this story either until we started doing liberal arts research into the significant stories of our community. Now, Brecht's music is basically unknown, but we went to Vienna and found in an archive that is dedicated to preserving artifacts of artistry from the Holocaust era, an unpublished piano concerto. It turned out that his daughter and granddaughter lived in Bloomington, Indiana where Brecht eventually moved to be on the faculty at IU, and we got permission to notate the concerto from the manuscript into official publication. The piece has been published and is available for rental now, and we performed the premiere of this concerto in Wheeling with his daughter and granddaughter in the audience using the Violins of Hope.

So this is the type of thing—many of your organizations, of course, have partnered with Violins of Hope, but because we have so much space before our concerts each month, we were able to do a deep dive into the impact of Brecht's legacy. His daughter and granddaughter were part of that exploration, and we loved the impact that it had on our community.

Next, Wheeling has a storied artistic past. The three figures that you see here, Eleanor Steber—Eleanor Steber was the prima donna at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1950s and 60s, and Knoxville, Summer of 1915 was commissioned and premiered by her.

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She's from Wheeling, West Virginia. Chu Berry was the saxophonist in Benny Goodman's band, the lead player in the famous Carnegie Hall Concert, and he died at 33 years old. His legacy was largely lost outside of our city. And then Everett Lee, on the bottom there, just died three years ago at the age of 105 years old. He was the first Black man to conduct an orchestra south of the Mason-Dixon line, the first Black man to conduct the New York Philharmonic. And Leonard Bernstein himself handed him the baton to On the Town and became the first Black man to conduct on Broadway. So these are the types of stories that we are discovering and we built presentations that went into our city in all sorts of ways to pay tribute to these three legacy artists and this concert was one of our most successful ever.

Recently, we just did a concert that reflected on five years after the period that ended, thankfully, with COVID, a retrospective. So we brought back the soloist that was to have performed with us on March 13th of 2020. We performed the same symphony that was to have been performed on that day as well, and we brought together psychologists, academics in this space, educators that looked back on the period of COVID and thought about the impact that it had on everyone's psychology and the changes that artistic organizations went through at that time. This was incredibly impactful, and lots of people were moved to tears as the poet laureate of West Virginia read a poem that was published on the front page of The New York Times about loss and remembrance during that time.

And next year, another Wheeling-born composer that has basically been lost to history is Will Dixon. He moved to New York right about the turn of the century and was displaced from his home in the San Juan Hill area when Lincoln Center came into that area. Then the Black artists largely moved to Harlem, the Latino artists largely moved to Washington Heights, and we have also similarly discovered his estate. We've worked with the executor of that estate to find many pieces of his that have not been published. And next year, this is our planned festival of ideas where we are going to shed a light on his story.

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We're going to bring his manuscripts and artifacts to Wheeling, West Virginia, and throughout the month before the concert, we are going to have a discussion about his life and legacy and what artists went through in New York City at this time of great transition in the artistic setup of the West Side of Manhattan. So this through-line is something that we

love to see, where we take artistic stories, connect them to our city, and deepen the impact not only of the concert but on a number of audience members that come and join us. And this is a beautiful way I think that my area of artistic planning can work with marketing, can work with education, can work with community engagement to create holistic experiences for our audiences that start well before the concert, and their impact continues far after they are over.

So as far as conclusions, we start with the impact that we want the concert to have from a liberal arts perspective. As a regional orchestra, we use the down weeks in between to create programming that is inexpensive and impactful, and then all of the departments that can come together to produce these events have a mutual goal that we've agreed on, and like I said, the impact has been about a one-third increase in our Masterworks attendance over the last five years. So we think that the types of results we're looking for, we're achieving, and it's something we're very proud of in West Virginia. That's it from me. Thank you so much.

[APPLAUSE]

WOODS: That's very impressive. We've seen some of our largest orchestras in this country take this kind of humanities-based approach, but to see an orchestra in a city your size—by the way, 4% of the city population in the audience—that's it. Who wouldn't love to have that, right? But it's very, very impressive. And I wanted to ask you a question, John, which is, you know, we think of music directors as people who bring very strong artistic visions. They know what they want to conduct. They know their repertoire. How has it been for you to kind of move from being that kind of figurehead leader to being a collaborative person in, you know, playing a part in such a collaborative endeavor? How's that been? What has the experience been like for you?

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DEVLIN: I had a lot to learn when I got to Wheeling. I had never lived in a city anywhere near that size, anywhere near that political stance, anywhere near the care that it has for its orchestra. It's really the only major performing arts organization, not only in our city, but in our entire region of the Ohio Valley there. And so, the thing that I needed to do was learn the stories of the place. What type of thing keeps people living there? Many people leave for school, return. What is the civic pride? And that was what we captured. After people learned these stories, the civic pride that they have in the significance, not just locally, but you can see nationally with those stories, like I told you about Everett Lee being the first Black conductor to do so many things, or Eleanor Steber being on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. If you're from Wheeling, and you think the orchestra is not for you, learn these stories and understand why your city matters, because the population of Wheeling 50 years ago

was 300,000. And coal, steel, oil, and gas left, those industries left, and all of a sudden the opioid epidemic reached its epicenter there, and the population precipitously declined. So we're trying to be part of a rebuilding, and that civic pride was something that I learned and engaged with, and we love seeing those results.

WOODS: Well, it's really incredible. It's fantastic seeing you have that sort of humility to come into the environment, and want to learn, and want to turn the organization into this kind of hyper-localized agent of change. It's a really beautiful thing, so thank you very much for that, John. Brilliant work. Yeah, great.

[APPLAUSE]

WOODS: Anwar.

ANWAR NASIR: Hi, everybody. You still with us? All right. John, that was great. And Erica was great too. And Simon, you're doing wonderful. Everybody's doing great.

WOODS: Affirmative leadership.

NASIR: Yes, yes, I'm practicing for my new job. So I'm Anwar, the executive director of your Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra in New Orleans, Louisiana.

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I like to say your Grammy Award-winning orchestra from New Orleans, Louisiana. It's something I'm really proud of, and we'll talk a little bit about that.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. So when we talk about audience development, we often start with tactics. How do we sell more tickets? How do we attract younger audiences? How do we improve retention? As a reformed marketer, those are all questions that we would ask all the time, and I try not to bother our marketing folks too much with all of those questions. And these are all important questions, and we all need to ask them consistently. But I've come to believe that those are secondary questions to what we need to be focused on. The first question is who are we for? Before we can grow an audience, we need to understand who we're trying to serve. And at the LPO, that question has increasingly informed how we think about programming, partnerships, and resource allocation. For us, audience development begins not with marketing, but with identity. Identity is really at the core of who we are as an organization, specifically in a music city. If we are clear about who we're for, many of the other decisions become easier to make. So once we've answered that question, the next challenge is building relevance. Audience development starts there, at relevance to your

community. And relevance starts with listening—listening to your audience, listening to your funders, listening to your partners, and finding out what do you need from us as an organization, not what we can provide for you.

Communities know when an organization understands them genuinely. And they know when institutions are strictly trying to market at them. Not to them, but at them. Trust can't be manufactured through a marketing campaign. No matter what some advertising agencies may tell you, some of them may be in the hall today. They're good partners, and they will help you, but you have to decide what you need from them. But trust is earned through consistency, through cultural understanding, through demonstrating over time that people and communities matter to the institution. People really support organizations when they feel seen by them. And that trust becomes the foundation upon which growth is built and how we built our future with the LPO.

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So when we start to think about what are our priorities, this is when the conversation becomes a little bit more difficult. We start to see our audiences and audience development, if that's the priority, then something has to change. We all have heard time and time again, you want to get different results? You've got to do something different. You want to see the same things? Keep doing the same things over and over again. Unfortunately we're in an industry that is really built around tradition. And it's not to say that we need to abandon tradition. Every organization has its finite resources—limited budgets, limited staff capacities, limited organizational attention, maybe even a small audience, in a small city.

So when we start asking the question, what are we willing to stop doing in order to start doing something new? Now, not every legacy practice deserves a future audience. It's intended to serve a future audience. We have to think about what audiences needed from us a hundred years ago. It was going to be very different from what they're going to need tomorrow. Time, attention, the way they relate to the art forms change over time. When it was the only thing that you had in town, there was no Netflix. There was no television. There was no radio when many of us were founded years ago. So this isn't an argument against tradition. I always say in our community, we're not going to stop playing Brahms. We're not going to stop playing Beethoven. We're not going to stop playing Mahler and Copeland. I'm a Philip Glass fan. We've played Philip Glass one time since I've been there. So even as the executive director, I don't always get to be in charge of what we play. But what I can say is this is what I'm hearing from our community. And this is how they're wanting us to show up, what they're wanting to hear from us. And this isn't an argument about intentionality. Our budgets, they reveal our priorities. Our calendars reveal our priorities. Our programming reveals our priorities. So, if you say as an organization that audience development matters,

those priorities have to be reflected in the decisions that we make on a daily basis. And it's a lot of small questions that we have to ask.

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I was in a finance presentation this morning, and they were talking about how to spot the red flags. And pretty much everybody in the room noticed that we all have red flags in our organization. And a lot of it starts with finance. I don't know if anybody in here feels like they have enough money to do what they do. I know I sure don't. I often hear from the league that we're a large budget orchestra, and I'm like, "Where is the budget?" [LAUGHTER] We don't have it. But we understand that we're all making changes together, and we're all in this industry together, and we're working forward on change. So, the approach that we took was centering our local artists and our cultural identity. And this is really a commitment to us. I say in New Orleans we have two audiences, those that are in the audience, and then the rest of the musicians that we have in the community as well. They're paying attention to what we're doing. They're not something that happens on the side, whereas a lot of folks would say that the orchestra is something that happens on the side with a lot of the musicians in our community.

I often tell a story about, you know, you can't walk more than two feet and throw a rock, and you'll hit a musician. Don't throw rocks at musicians. That's generally frowned upon, I've learned. But I found that New Orleans is definitely one of the most culturally rich regions in the world—not only in the city or the state, in the country, but around the world. Everyone has this affinity for New Orleans, and I really have grown to appreciate it, and I will honestly miss it very much. But when audiences walk into an LPO concert, and they see artists like the Marsalis family, they see P.J. Morton, they see Tank and the Bangas, they see Big Freedia or the Lost Bayou Ramblers, the album which we won the Grammy for. It's really, really fantastic. But they see something larger than the guest artist. They see the people that went to their high schools. They see the people that shop in the grocery stores. They see the people that they also see on TV, which is really great in understanding that there's a connection between what we're putting on our stage and what they're seeing in their community. The best part about it is that these are all artists that are from New Orleans, from Louisiana, and we allow them and create space for them to be the artists that they need to be. And I hear a lot from artists that the LPO, historically even orchestras as a whole, didn't care about artists like them.

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They felt as though it was something that needed to happen off on Bourbon Street or on Frenchman Street. They said that the orchestra didn't create a place for me to express myself artistically. When we think about someone like Terence Blanchard who's been

nominated for several Academy Awards for Best Score, who has won numerous Grammys, said he had to leave New Orleans in order to get his music played. The orchestra was one of the first ones to commission him to write something else other than jazz. But we weren't telling that story, and it's something that we really needed to relate in everything that we're doing.

So when we start to say and make decisions around what it is that we're doing as an organization, we pick and choose what we're putting on our stages. And those things are really important. So when our audience, again, sees these artists on stage, they see themselves, they see their city, and they see their culture reflected on stage. Speaking of culture, does anybody know what this is? A Mardi Gras Indian? Absolutely, absolutely.

So this is one of the most proud projects that I've had a chance to work on. I have to say even bigger than the one we won the Grammy for. This is Big Chief Juan Pardo of the Golden Comanche. They're a Black Masking Indian or a Mardi Gras Indian tribe. And the piece that we commissioned with them is telling the story of the Black Masking Indians. And what you see with that is during enslavement, when the African Americans were escaping from New Orleans, they went north, and they mixed with the Native American tribes. And when they were able to come back to New Orleans as free people, they brought a lot of those traditions along with it. So you have this beautiful culture that you see both from an African American tradition and a Native American tradition existing right here in New Orleans. And a lot of times you hear that like America's like a melting pot, right? In New Orleans we say the country's like gumbo. You put all the ingredients together, and they don't lose who they are.

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They make it something better when they come together. So this was a subscription concert. This wasn't something that we did on the side. Other things on the program was Arlene Sierra's *Kiskadee*, which we got through a Toulmin Commission with the League. And it was followed by a preview of Wynton Marsalis' *Blues Symphony*. And this was on the second half. It was a subscription concert. So the folks that normally come and hear Mahler or they come and hear Beethoven, this was in their package. We didn't want to diminish this work. We didn't want to make it seem like it was less important than any of the other things that we were doing. And then we repeated it for a family concert. And then we also repeated it again on our parks concert, our big parks concert where thousands of people come out.

And this investment in the work made the community feel seen. We know that we don't get all of our audiences to come to our subscription concerts. We know that the family audience is very different from who we are, from what we see at our subscription concerts. And we know that our parks concerts are, like I said, the biggest things that we do every year. So we took this work and we spread it out over multiple series and put it in front of as many

audience members as we possibly could. So this did two things for us, or three things. One, again, all of the audiences were able to see it. Family audiences were able to see it. But the program was also supported by the city, the state, and the NEA, back when they were giving out grants for things like this.

But it also helped on our finance side. You know, commissioning new work is very, very expensive. So when you take it and you say, "All right, we're going to spread this across three lines of business for us." And we were able to go out and fundraise on different stories. If folks were really caring about family audiences or parks audiences, we were able to say, "We're doing something really important in our community. Will you help us support it?" I don't know how many people in here—if subscription concerts make money. Ours do sometimes, not all the time. But because we didn't have that heavy lift of that commission just in that subscription concert, it made the numbers look a little bit better.

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So that was helpful for us. So again, who are we for? When we ask the right questions from the beginning, the conversation changes. Audience development stops becoming something that's exclusive to one portion of the organization. It becomes everyone's responsibility. Artistic leadership provides the vision. Marketing builds trust and communicates the value behind what it is that we're doing. Community engagement helps ensure that the institution has earned the right to be able to tell community stories. The orchestra has to show up in those places for them to feel like we're not just doing this for a cash grab. Finance creates a path, a sustainable path forward for these things to make sense. And development builds the philanthropic support that allows that work to happen. Audience development really becomes an organizational commitment rather than something that's a departmental function. And even if a department has its own role in it, they understand that we have to drive from our chair, you have to drive from your chair, and you have to drive from your chair in order to make it work.

Ultimately, I believe that organizations will thrive when they're willing to reflect the people, the cultures, the histories, and the communities that they serve. Because people will support an institution when they feel seen by them. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

WOODS: So, that idea of being seen by the community is incredibly profound. A question I want to ask you, and just real quick, because we really do need to move on, but I do want to ask you this. You've shifted the center of gravity in the organization as to how it thinks about what is played on stage. How have you brought the musicians along in that story, and to what

extent have you experienced—I bet there's a lot of people in this room thinking that. To what extent have you experienced any resistance there? Quick answer.

[00:44:04]

NASIR: There's always a lot of resistance. And for those of you who don't know, the LPO was a musician-owned and governed and collaboratively operated institution. So we are always talking about all the things. But one thing that I think helped bring on the folks that were really to the furthest that did not agree that we should be doing this. As I said, we're not going to stop playing the core repertoire. We're going to keep doing that. And we're going to do it in ways that we're going to invest in it. We're going to make the right support. We're going to hopefully see the audiences grow because of this. And we're not taking away anything from what you're already doing as an institution. And I made that commitment, and we've stuck to it. So that has been, I think, the part about earning trust from administration to the musicians was we're going to talk about what it is that we're planning to do. And I'm not, again, taking anything away from what you've come to know and love. We're just adding on top of that. So that was really helpful.

WOODS: And you're so right because fear always comes from the sense of loss, and what you've said, we're not losing anything, we're adding. So let's go to Ben. We're going to a very small organization now, taking an example from a very different context. Ben, over to you.

BEN NEWMAN: Good morning, everyone. Thank you all for being here. Thank you to Simon and the fantastic panelists for your great presentations. I'm going to keep this short and sweet for the sake of time so we have more time to focus on some of these things. Some of the things we were working on when we were designing this session was just trying to create as many solutions as possible. There are a lot of ideas, a lot of great examples here that hopefully you can all take with you back to your own orchestras, but we also wanted to just provide some tangible solutions. And so that was really at the heart of everything that we were trying to do with this session. And you'll see that reflected in my presentation. So one of the things I want to start with—I'm curious. How many of you are here representing an orchestra with one, maybe two staffers?

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Great! This is going to be mostly focused for you because I am one of those organizations. I'm the only full-time staffer. So when you are the only full-time employee, you are all of the departments, right? You are responsible for almost everything. You're constantly balancing multiple priorities. And it's an incredibly difficult job to try to organize everything when you're constantly dealing with a million demands, whether it's the board or marketing. And so for me, this presentation isn't actually focused on innovative ideas or strategies that

we're doing at the BCO focused on marketing. It's actually focused more on how, when you are running a small team, a way or different ways that you can strategize or orient your operations and your approach to running your organization, so that way you are set up for success.

So when you're running any organization, especially as the leader, you have to be reactive, right? There are always going to be different things that come up and require you to respond to, whether it's a musician who's dropping out at the last minute or a guest soloist who's flight didn't arrive on time, a board member asking you for something at the last minute. There's always the need to be reactive, and it's much harder to be proactive. But if you're not proactive, then you're just constantly in the snowball effect of being reactive. And I found this for myself. This is what was happening to me constantly. I've been in this role for three-and-a-half years, and when I first arrived, I found that I was just trying to learn the role, and different things were coming at me from a million different directions, and I was just trying to respond and respond and respond. So after I got to my first off-season over the summer, I said, "Something's got to change because I can't keep working in this way where I'm having to constantly react to things, and I can't execute a strategy." Personally, I'm very type A, and so not having that ability to sort of create a strategy and execute was very challenging for me. And so I really tried to focus on this idea that I learned from my grad school program director, a fabulous woman some of you may have known named Diane Ragsdale.

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She actually presented at a League conference session that was done online about four days before she sadly passed away of a heart attack. But she was my grad school program director and helped me research Maki Kaji, who was a puzzle maker and the godfather of Sudoku. And he came up with this formula for all of the work, all the puzzles that he would design. And the idea is that you have a question mark, right? What is the basic thing that you're trying to tackle and the answer you're trying to seek? The forward arrow is the process that is figuring out the answer to that question. And then the exclamation point is that eureka moment, right, where you go, "Ah, I finally made it through the path and I found my eureka, my exclamation point that gives me the answer that synthesizes everything I've learned along this journey. And I basically applied this to every single aspect in what I do on a daily basis, whether it's creating different departments, trying to go deeper into those departments, where as the executive director you get spread thin across all the different layers, so it's hard to go deep down.

So what I really try to do is use this idea of what is the question, what is the journey that I can take with limited time and resources to try to find that exclamation point? And so to be able to do that, at the beginning of the fiscal year, I outline all of the season's major events on a

calendar, and I create a season plan. So depending on how your fiscal year and your seasons are oriented, you'll know how to do that best. But I find that this really helped me to be able to organize myself and be proactive as I was getting ahead. And I know many of you already do this, but I just want to share just an example of what this looks like for me, and I'm happy to share this as well with anyone who's interested as a template. Basically what I do is I just outline it by month. I outline the different events that are happening. And don't worry about the content here, it's really just meant to be an example, a visual example for you to see kind of what it looks like, but I find this to be a really helpful visual framework to just see it month by month.

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And then the different activities that are happening—concerts and events, focusing on artistic development, grants, marketing. Because again, when you're the only person, you're being pulled in a million different directions, trying to stay on target and realize all those goals can be immensely challenging. And so I created this system for myself to help me know whenever I'm responding to a problem how do I then go, "Okay what was I working on before I got thrown off track?" I was working on that thing, and this helps me stay organized in that way.

So what I wanted to next show you is a case study of what this looks like when you do have to react to when something comes up. So we perform at Goucher College, which is just about 15 minutes north of here in Towson, Maryland. We do five concerts a year up there. And next season, they are going to be going into renovation. We're going to need a new concert hall. So how do I, as the only full-time staffer, manage every aspect of what's going on, make sure my board is involved and integrated into the conversation of a new venue search. What I do is I literally create a new section into the season plan, and I look at where I have gaps that will give me more time, so that way I can build this into my overall plan for the entire season, to make sure that I can add a new priority, in this case the new concert venue into the ongoing work that I'm doing on a daily basis.

So the real conclusion here is I find that for me, this creating of a season plan has allowed me to become more confident as a leader because I'm able to respond more effectively, because I have a plan that I can then refer to and know how to respond to. It's allowed me to be agile in how I manage every single department and the myriad responsibilities I have and to adapt when different crises emerge. I have less stress as a result. It doesn't mean I'm not working hard, by any means.

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But it has helped me to not feel like I'm constantly under that pressure of reacting and not knowing how to manage a million things. And as a result, it has led to better results for us. We just made our Meyerhoff debut here on Sunday evening. We had a fabulous gala here on Thursday. We're going into our third season with a brand new music director, and I'm thrilled with the results that we've been seeing in the forward direction of our organization. I hope that this helps those of you running small organizations to be more effective with your practices as well. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

WOODS: So Ben, I'm in awe of the self-discipline you have there. It's really impressive. But my question is, when we're doing something like we're trying to build audiences, there's a lot of creativity in that. And you don't have a team around you. How do you kind of get over that sort of what I would call kind of executive loneliness? How do you create a creative environment for yourself?

NEWMAN: I really rely on my board. That's really the biggest thing, because I am the only full-time employee. I depend on the resources around me in the interactions that I do have. So I'm in my office by myself. I've got a quarter-time operations manager that's sometimes with me and an intern from Peabody who's been absolutely fabulous for the last three years and just graduated. Memphis, you're very lucky you're getting her. And so I really rely on my board, and then whatever audience interactions I have, a big priority for myself actually is hospitality. I spent a lot of time working in fine dining. So one of the things that I do for myself just as a practice is I greet, and I say goodbye to all of our audiences when they leave. We've got an accessible entrance that a lot of people come in and out of. And I stand there, almost like a flight attendant, "Thank you for coming, thank you for coming." But really just to create that consistency of an experience so that way they feel more comfortable with us and feel like they can talk to me.

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WOODS: That is audience development. Okay, so we want to have a little bit of a discussion. Thank you all. Great presentations. It's interesting the way we talked about structure in a couple of places. You know, Ben and Eric are talking about structure, and then the middle two presentations were talking more about this idea of localization and creating meaning in the community. You know, it's really great. So now we want to push it out to you. We're going to have about ten minutes for quick table discussions. And I'm going to put up in a second, I'm going to put up four questions. I'm a little concerned that it's going to be quite loud in this room. So what I'm going to suggest is that rather than doing table discussions, we do half-table discussions, right? So like, perhaps, you know, groups of four on either side of the table. I think it'll be a little bit easier to communicate. So here are the questions.

First of all, if you had no marketing department, how would your organization grow its audience? Second question, when your organization plans a performance or a season, when does the question, "Who is this for?" get asked, and by whom? Third question, what might be getting in the way of attracting audience segments you would like to attract? And fourth question, to what extent is your music director actively involved in discussions with marketing?

So what I'd like—So groups of four, ten minutes, pick one question. Just one question. Just among you, just pick a question and talk about it. And then after ten minutes, we're going to harvest a few. Now, this is when the people leave the room who don't want to engage in the discussion. But all those of you who are staying, we're going to then pick up some of those themes, okay? Go for it.

Okay, thank you. Thank you so much. It sounds like we could have gone on for a long time here. Okay, I'm going to walk down the floor, actually. Okay. What I'm looking for here is not a full report out because obviously we've got ten minutes.

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I'm looking for, like, quick insights, one quick insight. And we're going to do one on each of these questions. Why don't we start at the bottom? Who had the music director conversation? Who would like to share something about music directors? Okay. Over there in the corner. I'm coming with the microphone. Right. One insight from your table.

JOSH TAGUE: That's some nice meandering right there. We, at the Omaha Symphony, Josh Tague is my name, marketing director. Our former music director with us for five years started meeting with marketing every so often, so we could sort of get on the same page about what the mission was. But then I started the Four M, the Marketing and Maestro's Monthly Meeting. And that became something that really endeared them to him, to what marketing was doing. Because, you know, the peanut gallery is like, "Hey, have you guys thought about flyering before?" And it starts to, like, get them to respect what we're doing, but also gives our marketing department insight into their process and to what they have going on and really brought things together. His social media went up, his social media use, him sharing what he had going on outside of what we were doing went up, and it just helped us endear our audience to him more, and him to what we were trying to do.

WOODS: Wonderful. That's a keeper, actually. What was that? Marketing Maestro's Monthly Meeting, four M. I love it. Yeah, very good. John, do you have one of those? Yeah, good. Excellent. Okay, so let's do the next one. What might be getting in the way of attracting audience segments you would like to attract? Who has got something to say on that subject? At the front here, okay.

[00:58:02]

FEMALE VOICE: Madison Symphony Orchestra League. We have a 23-year-old building which is incredible, and it can be very intimidating to people who aren't used to coming into these temples of culture. Big, grand marble. So what we try to do is, you know, greet people. We're also taking many of our—not many. We're trying to get out into the community and perform at high school performing arts centers, things like that. But the building is part of who we are, and I think we just need to continue to do our best at having it feel friendly.

WOODS: That's actually a really interesting question. Does anybody else feel that their venue is getting in the way of that? I wondered about that, especially if you're not in a kind of a very modern venue that is kind of accessible. But if you're in an old venue, it's very hard to bring a younger audience or a different audience, right? Anybody got anything they want to add to that discussion? Yes.

FEMALE VOICE: My co-worker raised her hand very fast when you said that too. We're connected on to a high school. Okay. So it's really hard because a lot of people don't even realize we're there, let alone when we do connect with them, it just feels like a high school. So we really have to try and push away and identify as our own thing. And we've really been struggling with that lately.

2nd FEMALE VOICE: Well, at the same time, making the community that's part of the high school feel equally welcome, but understanding that it is a different space.

WOODS: Yes. It's really hard. I mean, I think what these guys were talking in the middle, one of the solutions to that is actually going out into the community, right? If your hall doesn't do it for you, then you've got to go to them, right? Let's look at the next one. When your organization plans a performance or event, when does the question, "Who is this for?" get asked and by whom?

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Who wants to have a shot at that? Okay. I'm coming over there.

BRYCE DAVIS: I think this question really points to maybe what you shouldn't—the answer shouldn't be, which is—Oh, Bryce Davis, Rochester Philharmonic. The answer should not be once the season is scheduled by the marketing and development teams. And I think, you know, you can run into this issue because the artistic planning cycle, you just don't have enough lead time or by the time you haven't had your season locked in, marketing and development, then have to think about what it is that we need to do with these given programs. And I think hearing from some of the folks here about the collaborative

approaches, I think that that needs to be something that's built into your season planning process and incorporating perspectives from around the institution, and not having it be a siloed process.

WOODS: Let me do a quick straw poll. How many people in this room think that the question, "Who is this for?" never gets asked early enough? Right. I kind of had that feeling. So what are you going to do about that? Because there were some great clues here. But I think it's so important to start, but that question never gets asked before artistic planning starts. And I think particularly the examples that Anwar and John gave, well actually all of them, about those questions are being asked by these organizations right at the very beginning. And I just love that. I think it's so good. Yeah.

RENEE: Could I give an example of where it worked for us? Last year for the 250th—I think all of us kind of did something with that—we thought, well, who, in our region, how could we approach that? And we decided we have this rich community of century farmers and farming communities. So we decided to do The Tender Land. We partnered with an opera in order to do that. And then we went out and did a documentary with all of the families and recorded them. And we're going to make it full. We did it during the concert. But we're also going to put it on TV. And it was great. We did two shows, and it was a huge response. And it included the whole community. There was a lot of historical stuff. So figuring out how to relate something to your community is really important.

WOODS: Thank you. And you are? Renee from Warburg. Great. Thank you so much. If you had no marketing department, how would your organization grow its audience? Kind of an interesting, complicated question. Okay. I'm going to the back of the room.

MARKO BAJZER: Hi, I'm Marko Bajzer. I'm a composer who works with the National Park Service. And what we would talk about is if you don't have a marketing department, you use other people's marketing departments. [LAUGHTER AND CHEERS] For example, many of the pieces, the music that I write is about the National Parks and, for example, Joshua Tree National Park has half a million Instagram followers, which is a lot of free marketing that you can get. And we also reached out to biology departments, university geology departments, hiking groups, fishing groups, all kinds of people who are interested in the outdoors to make those community connections. So leveraging other people's interests and really integrating with other things that people care about.

WOODS: Great example. Any other examples about alternative approaches to marketing departments? Who else has got something to add on that?

[01:04:02]

No takers? Okay. Last couple of minutes, who has a question that they would like to ask to the panel? What burning questions do you have that you would like to ask?

FEMALE VOICE: In relation to questions two and four on there, and then a big common theme that you all have talked about as far as your programming really being steeped in your community, the needs of the community, the culture of the community, the people that you want to reflect in the community. How do you see a change in organizations moving towards this with music directors and smaller organizations that are flying in before your concert a week before performances? They don't, you know, spend a lot of time in the community. They are busy in multiple communities all throughout the year. I'm just curious with the programming part of that, if you have any experience with that?

DEVLIN: What I would say is to think about who are your other partners that you can use? I use our board a lot. One, because myself as executive director and the music director, we both report to the board. So if the board is also hearing this and saying, "This is what the community is asking for the organization, relaying that to the music director specifically if they're not active in your community the way that we would like for them to be, then it's becoming clear to the organization that this is where we need to go. So the conversations will start to happen across the organization and hopefully, if you have a good partner, even if they're not in the community, they'll start to hear that and say, "How can I do better in the job that I have here?"

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Specifically in smaller orchestras, I think that that's really important to use the other folks that you do have right in your backyard that are going to be there, be able to show up and go to the churches, go to the community centers, go to the schools and really hear that feedback directly from people. And it's also a great board engagement tool, too. So, because they're being utilized for something that they can feel that's helpful, and it's bigger than just writing a check to the organization.

WOODS: And actually, that's a really nice note to kind of wrap up on, because what I think I heard from everybody and what I heard from out on the floor is, it takes a village, right? And so, audience development is a team, it's a team sport. And what I've heard from everybody is, use the people around you, use your staff, use your musicians, use your city, use your community, use your other organizations you can collaborate with and make it just, you know, don't think about it in a room, but think in a room with a bunch of people in a boardroom.

You know, there was somebody who—a quote I love, which is, "Dry, dead conference rooms produce dry, dead outcomes." And I think what we're talking about here is that, like,

audience development is about getting out there and collaborating with a lot of people. And you all demonstrated it so wonderfully, so thank you for being a wonderful audience, and please thank this absolutely awesome panel. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

[01:07:32]