

Orchestras Deepening Relevance, Connection, and Public Value

2026 National Conference

LAURA REYNOLDS: Our topic today is Orchestras' Deepening Relevance, Connection, and Public Value. And this conversation is going to be with these four incredible leaders, and I thought I'd just take a moment for them to share their name, their title, and the organization they're with. So I'll start with you, Evin.

EVIN BLOMBERG: Good morning. My name is Evin Blomberg. I'm a violinist with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

JUAN FELIPE MOLANO: Good morning. My name is Juan Felipe Molano, Seattle Youth Symphony Music Director.

JENNIFER BOOMGAARDEN DAOUD: I'm Jennifer Boomgaarden Daoud. I'm the President and CEO of the Omaha Symphony.

KAREN YAIR: I'm Karen Yair, and I'm Vice President for Research and Resources at the League.

REYNOLDS: So for me, I feel like this is one of the most exciting and wonderful, if not terrifying times, to be working in the orchestra field. As we've been having conversations all week, the world is changing around us at such a rapid pace. Technology is changing the way audiences engage with us, access music. Audiences are really looking for different kinds of connections. And we're being asked big questions about the role we play in our society.

At the same time, we know that there are lots of constraints that exist in our institution, rules about how our institutions operate, perceptions about who we are and who we are for, and systems that can be slow to change. Luckily, already in our institutions, we have incredible practices that are ongoing in our education, community engagement, and youth orchestra work. And so, today's conversation is really going to look at that foundation that we already have and think about how we can leverage those skills, those practices, those ideas, and bring that into the center of our work so we can really tell a compelling story and really have high impact around our public value and connection with our communities.

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This last fall, the League of American Orchestras did a big national survey, really looking at that work. We're going to kick off this conversation with a look at the results of that survey

and ask the question: How might we build on this strong foundation of work with our communities and bring it to the center of our practice to deepen our relevance? Before we get started, how many people in the room are in the EdCE or YOD constituencies? Look to these people because they are the experts in your organizations. So, without further ado, I'd like to turn it over to Karen Yair.

YAIR: Thank you, Laura. And thank you to everyone who took part in the survey; 128 orchestras took part. We'll be publishing the findings over the summer, so this is a sneak preview. Just to let you know who's represented in this dataset, we have 100 adult orchestras, all operating NCEA programs, and 45 of those also run affiliated youth orchestras. So that's the equivalent of 24% of the League membership of adult orchestras. Then we had 28 independent youth orchestras, and that's 15% of the League membership. We had great representation across budget groups as well. We don't have enough data to do a lot of passing out or disaggregation, but we certainly feel that this tells a reasonably representative story of the field as a whole.

These are some of the headline figures that speak to the kind of reach and investment that's made in this work and tells you something about how much it's valued. So each year, just the 128 orchestras who respond serve over 2 million EdCE and youth orchestra participants. So that's obviously not the entirety of the communities that we reach, but it gives you an indication of the scale of the work. Together, they're offering nearly 1,300 programs of work. So that speaks to the scope, not just the scale, but the scope of the work. A lot of different programmatic models that meet different community needs and are suitable for different organizational capacities—and we'll come back to that in a bit.

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In terms of the investment that's made, 78 of the respondents gave us their financial information, and collectively, they invest 72 million per year in this work. So obviously, the actual figure is much higher than that. Some more big numbers here, and I think these are things that we all already know about, but it's really interesting and powerful to see these high percentages next to them. 92% of our participants are engaging free of charge. 90% of activity is taking place in schools and community settings. So if you were to travel around the country looking for this work, you wouldn't be spending much time in the concert hall. You'd be out in hospitals. You'd be in parks. You'd be in breweries. You'd be in malls. There are all kinds of places where this work is taking place—care homes. And what we're seeing is that the free-of-charge dynamic is different for independent youth orchestras, of course, because they've got earned revenue from tuition fees. But still, 6% of independent youth orchestra musicians are taking part free of charge, thanks to sponsorships and bursaries. And many independent youth orchestras are working very actively to promote that kind of

financial access. And many have built new programs that are specifically addressed by rates to participation.

Partnerships. We all know that partnerships are intrinsic to this work. They may take many different forms. What was interesting to see was that, on average, our respondents had three formal, ongoing partnerships each, which I think speaks to the kind of maturity that has grown up around this work in recent years. We all know that partnerships can be challenging, as well as expanding our horizons and allowing us to engage and respond more authentically to community needs. There's a need to manage those partnerships carefully, if they're going to run smoothly and to provide value for all partners and participants.

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So it's interesting to see how they're being formalized across the sector. Here we've got some pictures from Summermusik's We Are One: Hope festival for immigrants and refugees that's delivered with an array of community partners. And we're also seeing Houston symphonies work with Texas Children's Hospitals. So it's a nice visual indication of how partnerships can take us beyond the traditional work of orchestras and into new areas of practice.

We also looked at what it takes to deliver this work. And really it's very clear that the work is powered by people. So 75% of EdCE expenses and 57% of independent youth orchestra expenses go directly to the staff, teaching artists, musicians, and other people who work to support this work. A finding that I think was somewhat surprising to us was that half of all musicians from responding adult orchestras contribute to this work, and that volunteers play a really significant role. We'll line out the hours that are put in by volunteers, and it's much more substantial than we imagined that it was going to be.

We also saw—we looked at the extent to which these costs are covered by earned revenue. 60% of independent youth orchestra expense—obviously that's those tuition fees again—and just 14% of EdCE expense, meaning that in order for this work to thrive, it needs to be prioritized both in terms of contributed revenue and in terms of organizational strategy. The new thing that we did with this research was to dive a little deeper into the range of work that's taking part across the country, and what we saw in terms of EdCE work is a kind of continuum from presentational activities to participatory activities to co-creation.

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The orchestras responding to the survey, two thirds of them primarily deliver presentational work, so that's concerts in schools, it's sensory-friendly concerts, family concerts, small

group performances where people are receiving the music and not actively partaking in it but receiving the benefits from hearing it.

Participation. This is where people are actively involved in making music, so youth orchestra ensembles, community ensembles, side-by-side performances and rehearsals, and then co-creation where the participants have an active role in creating new music and new repertoire. So the proportion of the work goes down as we progress along this continuum because presentational work is obviously the most accessible for orchestras to produce. It engages a lot of people really quickly. Participatory work deepens engagement but is more resource-intensive to produce and co-creation even more again. And I've listed out here the kind of skills that are required for this work, so on the presentational side, it's artistic and production capacity. The participatory work also requires teaching and coaching capacity, and when we get to co-creation, it's all about relationship building and partnership building. So you can see why the cost is more extensive for co-creation.

When we asked orchestras which work they were most proud of, they most often pointed to the co-creation work. That may indicate that they think it's more impactful or that it's more innovative or that it's work that they had a strong contribution to personally. We don't know, but it's interesting to us to see that that work is really valued by colleagues in the field. When we looked at youth orchestra program models, we saw many youth orchestras combining elements of these two models, the first of which is what we're calling "pathway" youth orchestras, which support progression towards higher levels of achievement.

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They prepare students for advanced ensemble work, and they require intensive instructional models and capabilities. So there's a really high cost per participant there. We also identified a category of gateway youth orchestras, which are primarily concerned with broadening engagement with music tuition and often offer wraparound supports to help young people from communities that may not previously have been engaged to stay sustained and engaged with the program. And that requires a lot of family engagement and community partnership, and may engage large numbers of participants.

I don't want to inadvertently suggest that this is a binary, because there is in it a lot of overlap, but those are the two distinct approaches that are being followed by youth orchestras. So I think what came out of the research, apart from the numbers around scope and scale, is that there's a myriad of different approaches to EdCE and youth orchestra work, and they all create different types of value. Some of them engage large numbers of people and give entry points into orchestral music, and that's valuable. Some of them work intensively with people who have made very distinct individual needs and coach them through a process of gaining agency through musical engagement. Each of these different

models requires different expertise to deliver. They all require investment, but the challenge is for us all to think about how we not only leverage that investment, but how we target the work that we do or diversify the work that we do in order to meet our community's needs and to deliver on our own missions and to be in alignment with the capacity that we have. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

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REYNOLDS: Thank you, Karen, and thank you to all the orchestras that participated in this survey. You know, what I find so powerful when I see these results is it really demonstrates I think what many of us might have known or felt, which is this work is happening at a huge scale. It's not a side activity in our field. It is really core to what it is that we do. We're already reaching millions of people, most of them at no cost. We're working in deep partnership with schools, healthcare systems, community organizations, and largely doing so outside of our concert halls. I like to think of this work as the R&D team for our orchestras. We meet audiences where they are. We really experiment and learn how to connect in new ways and think both about our audiences of today and tomorrow.

So if we go back to that question that I posed, how do we build on this foundation and move this work to the center of our practice? It's already happening. The expertise is already there. And the investment, as we've heard, is significant. So how do we connect this, elevate it, move it beyond programming and turn it into practice, to help shape who our institutions are and how we define success? So I'm going to turn it actually to one of our musicians on stage, to really kind of dig into this with us.

You know, Evin, you sit at a really compelling intersection between being a musician in the Cincinnati Symphony and also founding the Soli Music Society, which is really this venture that's focused on impacting lives through this creative engagement work. Tell us about your experiences and what it looks like when this kind of work is fully integrated into your work as a musician.

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EVIN BLOMBERG: Thank you. It actually took a lot of effort to develop that side of my identity as a musician. And I don't mean that I had any resistance towards it or anything like that, but it's just, as a musician, I've already had 30 years of training on an instrument. And a lot of that time was spent just figuring out how to master the skills of physically playing an instrument or developing musicianship. And this idea of performing and impacting the lives of others through those skills on the instrument and how that translates to others, that

didn't really become a priority to me until much later when I started my professional career, finally. So that took effort to have that sort of switch in my mind and really start to think about why am I doing this thing that I love to do? It's not just to play in tune. That's not my "why." It's a much bigger picture than that.

And it was through, actually, a lot of the community engagement work where I started to really feel this connection to that why. And sometimes it's hard to feel that onstage in a symphony hall when people are sitting really far away from you, and it looks like kind of a sea of black, and you see the stage lights, and you kind of lose that connection even though you can feel the energy and the impact. But through the symphony, doing different educational programs and different community programs and getting to talk to people and answer their questions about the music, or even just answer questions about my life as a musician. And then through Soli Music Society, which is an organization that I started, where the performances are really focused on going into the community and meeting people where they are and sharing music on their terms. I really started to get a clearer picture of the why and the reason why I love playing music, and I love sharing music with others—and the impact that that has on the community and on others.

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REYNOLDS: Can you share a little bit about—so this is connected to your why—but we all know that there are a lot of other systems and structures that need to be in place in order for that to be successful and for you to be able to make those kinds of deeper connections. Can you talk about some of those things that have really helped you as an artist prepare for this kind of work?

BLOMBERG: Are you asking about tools, maybe?

REYNOLDS: I think tools or practices that you have used in order to do this work, or what ways could our audiences think about engaging musicians more deeply in this kind of activity? What were the things that were helpful for you, especially as you were getting started in this work?

BLOMBERG: The things that were the most helpful for me were—well, the first thing was to have absolutely no sense of fear, just throw it all out the window. I started my first few community engagement performances on my own, just literally cold-calling schools and libraries and other places, just saying, "I'm a musician, and I really love to share music and would love to come perform for you." And I had this idea in my mind like, "Oh, my gosh, everybody's going to say no. They're going to think I'm crazy." But not a single organization said no to that, and actually they were so appreciative to receive that offer and to be able to

start that relationship, and I think that's something for me that was the most useful, to just get rid of that sense of fear.

REYNOLDS: Are there any kinds of practices that you do as a musician that are different in these community spaces than when you're on the concert hall stage?

BLOMBERG: I think it's really healthy as a musician to have this type of work be a part of what we do.

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Because, again, in a lot of the training that we go through so much is focused on perfection and skills and maintaining this sort of facade of you know everything, and you know how to do everything. But going into a community or a more casual space or an intimate setting, or maybe a setting where a lot of aspects of the situation are out of your control, you have to let all of that go, and it really boils everything down to the true purpose behind why we play music. It's not to play everything perfectly. It's not to play the best version of the piece that you can. Sometimes the best performances I've had in these settings, I've made the most mistakes, it has maybe not gone as well as I would have liked, or sometimes I have to use my secondary outdoor instrument, but sometimes what I get back from the audience, and on the receiving end of that is a much more powerful experience than those performances where maybe technically I played the most perfectly, but it was lacking that connection.

REYNOLDS: And is there anything about this work that has changed the way that you approach your work when you are on stage playing a subscription concert?

BLOMBERG: Absolutely. One of the great things about doing community work and education work is— So with the symphony, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, a lot of times now I recognize people in the audience, and I will see sometimes the students that we've visited, or I'll see audience members who, for example, we went to an assisted living facility and did a chamber orchestra performance there a few months ago. There were a few people there who came to the symphony concert, and we can see them waving, and it's just such a nice feeling to know that they appreciated that experience, and it was that valuable to them that when they came, they got excited to see us, not just to hear us, but to feel that connection to us as people.

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REYNOLDS: I love that. And I love the fact that you talked about how it's connecting to your why and the purpose of music, but also really the relationships that you're building that maybe started in a space outside the concert hall, but then when they came to you, then you

have this much deeper connection to all of the people in the room, and that's really exciting to hear.

I'm going to switch gears a little bit and move to Juan Felipe. So Juan Felipe, you are working on the daily with our youth and at the Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra and at a really formative moment in their lives. They're developing as musicians, but also shaping their sense of identity and responsibility in the world. So from your perspective, how do youth orchestras create this foundation, both musically and as a space for young people to really understand themselves as part of this broader community?

MOLANO: So I would start saying that the three elements we have for musicians are or for, let's say for concerts, are always an individual musician, a collective, which is the orchestra, the ensemble, and the performance. So we always need those three elements. I even call them the ABCs of the orchestra. So the A because we are advancing artistically. And with these, I'm not talking only about the students, even professional musicians, we always feel that we are advancing with every concert. The broad community, which is the ensemble, that basically is one individual playing one instrument that joins another one for the different instrument within the same family, and then all those families together make an orchestra. And the C that I call the continuum, the legacy of performances, which is the performance. But basically, those three elements are interacting and need each other. So they are always depending on each other.

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And don't forget that all of the three need to be nurtured. Yes, the individual. And again, even not only youth orchestras, but professional orchestras, the individuals need to be nurtured, need to be sometimes, not only us, let's say, note players, but actually they are individuals who want to continue to advance. And the repertoire plays a huge role. I think the repertoire that we propose, again, professionally [?], in my case, youth orchestras, it's vital to not only reflect their interests—musicians want to see their interests reflected in what they play, not only, let's say, on what they like currently, but also literature, or they like dancing, we're doing a ballet next week in the pit. And many of them actually have done ballet and different dances. So they see themselves playing on something that they feel comfortable, that they feel very close to. And then, of course, performances.

And for us, performances are really great, because we have the luxury of youth orchestras to gather all those generations in one place. So having the senior generation who are ours in community and professional orchestras, donors, board members, the parents who come with their students and connect those both worlds, who will become those senior donors and concert-goers very soon, as their kids go to college. Me included, I have my oldest going to college, so any advice is appreciated. [LAUGHTER] If I can skip the therapy, I would really

appreciate it. Otherwise, I will go. I will make it. So it's only one of two. So we will become those donors. We will become the concert-goers, and sometimes it was our kids who took us to the concert hall for the first time. But most importantly, the young generation, the young artists, the colleagues, my young musician colleagues, your young donor colleagues. Those are our colleagues, but they are just young. They happen to be young.

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And they are the ones we have to really nurture and say, "This is the whole scope, and this is why everything is important." And as I said, it goes through the repertoire, but many more things need to be very explicit, and it comes sometimes from the podium, as we conduct, but it needs to be also how they see the concerts when they see all those generations interacting, when we talk to our donors, when we talk to our parents. So conductors, teaching artists, when they see that connection between the conducting fellows, so it's not like just conductor plus conductor, but it's a conducting team. When they see all of us interacting, I think that's a very important message for them.

REYNOLDS: I love this idea of the ABCs and all of the practical tips that you gave, really looking at the repertoire, really looking at the connections and being intentional about the work. Now, I'm curious because you also guest conduct with adult professional orchestras. So how does this philosophy that you bring into your work with youth orchestras, how does that connect when you go to a new community and do your work?

MOLANO: I would say first, when we're doing collaborations, collaborations are vital for all of us. And I think for youth orchestras specifically because they connect not only the students coming from different places, musicians coming from different backgrounds, but also different disciplines when we have dancers and actors, and all of them coexisting. Something important I've seen as a guest conductor is that even for guest conductors, most of the time their entry place for a professional orchestra is conducting those community concerts, the ones that either the music director doesn't want to conduct, or that they say, "Okay, we just have a music director. Find a place and a time for them to shine. So I did that many decades ago. I know I look young, but I started guest conducting professional orchestras when I was like 18, and I'm 51. So it's been a long ride, and always I've seen how much these collaborations, these partnerships need to be from one side very human, even when you have a side-by-side with professional and youth orchestras.

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It's a rather personal connection with the musicians, rather than a technical connection. So it's not that you're playing with someone and showing, "Okay, this is how you have to do it." It's how they actually talk as human beings. And I'm going to share a very short anecdote. It

happened a few years ago when a student playing the horn who was having no idea what to major in music. He was thinking about some science, and he was doing this side-by-side with the Seattle Symphony. And a horn player asked him, "What are you playing? Where are you going for a conservatory?" He's like, "No, I'm not playing horn. This is my thing here in high school." And he's like, "You're really loving this." And he's like, "Yes, I do." "Do you want to consider it?" "Yes."

So he got back home asking the parents, "I was never thinking about this, and these professional musicians said he saw something in me that might ignite something. So he ended up actually going to major in horn, and now he's about to graduate. And I've seen so many of those histories. It was not what he taught the student about, "You have to do this with the horn." It was more like a close connection. And I do think the more we—also partnership needs to be nurturing both sides. So I think musicians and audiences, both need to be empowered and excited about playing the concerts. So the rep again plays a huge role. Musicians, we want to really be engaged with the music, but the audiences as well.

REYNOLDS: I think, you know, before we move to our final speaker, I'm curious. You talk a lot about the humanity of the work and the humanness of what you do. Are there any sort of practical skills or techniques or strategies that you use to intentionally infuse that into your way of working? Because I just want to note that despite the fact that we're working in the arts and music, sometimes that human connection gets lost within our institution. So I just want to note that.

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MOLANO: Yeah, a few things, a few tricks under the sleeve. I do call the youth orchestra my colleagues. Like literally, I try to avoid words like "kids" or like "work in progress," but it's everything about my colleagues, my young colleagues. The language is extremely important, both with adults and young musicians. So I think it's extremely important to really keep an eye on what we're saying because it implies so many things. Indeed, it will inspire them, it will motivate them or de-motivate them. Or even being biased with what we say. So I think three, four, five times before I speak, and I always make a mistake. Or I just say something I didn't want. So if I did not think five times, it would be even worse. So that's something I do recommend.

The second thing, again, time goes very fast, and we see them in those little dresses and in those little jackets as, "Oh, they will grow up eventually at some point." It's a blink of an eye, and they are our bosses, they are our colleagues. And I've seen so many times the same story. So I would just say language matters, and the rep. I think the rep needs to be very motivating for everyone. And yes, so I think that's very important in terms of how to make music the center of what we do.

REYNOLDS: Thank you, Juan Felipe. Now, Jennifer, in Omaha, you have been really infusing these ideas deeply into your entire strategy for the organization. And I think it's no surprise, considering you were Omaha Symphony's very first Director of Education and Community Engagement. So in some ways, you are our case study for how you take these ideas from a program department lens and really infuse it into all of your work. Can you tell us about some of the work that you're doing in Omaha to deepen relevance and connection with the community?

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BOOMGAARDEN DAOUD: Yes, absolutely. As Laura said, Omaha Symphony has been invested in community engagement work since 2004. And I know that because I was the Omaha Symphony's first Director of Education and, at that point, Community Partnerships. And it was very new 25 years ago. I said to the CEO at the time, I said, "Hey, great, I'm super excited about my new job. What's this Community Partnerships thing?" And he's like, "I don't know. That's for you to figure out." And so I had an opportunity, and I think the first step for this organization actually happened 25 years ago when they elevated the Education Community Engagement Department to a senior management level position. So that was really the first step there.

We were able to build incredible partnerships with organizations really across the community, but it very much lived over here. The organization was doing all of this work and then big concerts on the main stage and big performances across, you know, great classical repertoire and big choruses and all these things. And this community engagement work was just sort of percolating over here, and we'd talk about it when we needed to, occasionally here and there, and we would invite people into the concerts, but it really wasn't institutionalized per se.

I left that role in 2010 to move to South Dakota, to be the Executive Director of the South Dakota Symphony, and I returned to Omaha in 2018 and found still great work happening, but it's still existing kind of over here. And so as we went into the next strategic planning process, we pulled together a strategic planning task force, a broad base of folks, so it had board members on it, it had staff members on it, it had musicians on it. It had some of our advisory board members on it, as well. And I think the first real linchpin for us was articulating a new vision for the orchestra, and that vision is to be an adaptable, innovative and relevant resource for our community, and to foster inclusion.

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And I think that becoming the line at the top of the 2019 strategic plan allowed the organization to then pivot, right? And so then the question became, well, how are we going

to do that, right? And yes, it's in some of the work that's happening on our main stage, but here we have this amazing work that's happening over here. How do we lean into that and how do we invest in that? And so the first thing we did actually was we branded it. We gave it a name. We took all of these things that were happening, right? A ticket access program, and we're going to work with the libraries and work with the other nonprofit communities, and the bigger programs that we were doing. And we put it all under the lens of Forte, Amplifying the Strengths of our Community. And so it gives us an opportunity now to talk about it. It's a program, it's real, and then we built it its own strategic plan.

And we were able to identify what are the imperatives of Forte? The imperatives of Forte are collaborative experiences. They're ensuring our stage reflects our community. They're all about access. And again, we're able to talk about the plan. But the plan came together through really the administrative team, but then it went to the advisory board, and the advisory board pressure tested the plan. And they had a chance to say, "Well, I don't really understand what this means. And what about all this work we're doing over here? How can that be part of the plan?" And then ultimately, we went through that round of changes, and then it went to the board. And the board had to approve the strategic plan for Forte. And so Forte really is how we realize that vision. But the real linchpin, I feel like, was now because it's how we're activating the strategic plan and how we're living those values, it's now in the budget. So for the longest time, the Education Community Engagement Department would be working with a partner, and they'd say, "Hey, we want to do this super cool thing with you."

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And the department would be all in. Yes, yes, yes, we work together. We create this big thing. And then we'd have to say, "I'm sorry, we're going to have to do it next year because we don't have the money." And so it really wasn't until Forte became a line item in the budget, and we gave the Community Engagement team the resources to make those things happen. And I think that was really the defining moment that now has allowed that program to grow and to root and to pull up through the organization. And it makes us a better partner because we're able to be consistent. We're able to be reliable. We're able to build that really deep trust with these communities.

REYNOLDS: I love how you've talked about the structural changes that you've made within your institution in order to make this work visible, invest intentionally in the work, and to create that consistency and trust with your community. I feel like you also, in our planning call, were talking a little bit about how this is starting to come into even the job descriptions that people have within your institution. I think sometimes this can be work that's seen as like, "Oh, that's that other department's work." Or, "Oh, is there a community we want to connect with and invite in?" "Okay, at CE, who do you know?" And instead of that being

owned by everyone within the institution. Can you tell us a little bit about that work that you've done inside your organization?

BOOMGAARDEN DAOUD: Yes, I think when we think about how we take Forte and how we amplify it, it happens on our main stage. So we're bringing now Forte partners to our main stage. Our Marketing Department, our Director of Marketing is sitting right back there, and he will tell you that they are as passionate about making sure people know about the Forte events that are going on, even though they're free, as we are about the things that we're doing on the main stage of the concert hall.

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So there is the expectation that the Artistic Department is involved, pulling these things up to a main stage level. The Marketing Department is involved by getting the word out about those. We now have about 65% of our musicians participating in this work. It's outside of their collective bargaining agreement work. It's paid separately, but about 65% of the orchestra now participates in this work. We're also able to amplify the work that our partners are doing through our digital initiatives. So when we do our primetime NBC broadcast, we always have a partner segment, where we're able to say, "What is this partner doing for this community, and where can you find them?" And so we're able to really lift up all of the work that's going on.

REYNOLDS: I love that you're able to spotlight all of the other groups in the community as well. It helps, I think, everyone see how we're connected more deeply in the broader community as well. What is maybe one of the biggest impacts that you've seen within your institution? Is there a change in terms of the way people see their roles, or a change that you've noticed in how the community sees the orchestra?

BOOMGAARDEN DAOUD: So what's really interesting is our strategic plan has, of course, all the things that your strategic plan has, right? Your imperatives, your strategies, your tactics. Ours also has what we call the "bold box." And the bold box is things that we don't feel like are going to be accomplished in the life of the current plan, but that we don't want to lose sight of, right? Things that we want to make sure that we're working towards because they're a longer-range goal. Well, one of the bold box things in the current strategic plan is to be the go-to partner, right? We want people to see us as a trusted collaborator, as somebody they want to work with, that if we create a relationship, we're going to be together for a while.

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And we're going to be able to not just do a one-and-done, right? "Hey, wasn't that great? Bye!" Right? It's, "Hey, wasn't that great? Well, now do you want to be part of this?" "Hey, wasn't that great? Now we got this thing coming onto the main stage. We'd love for you to join us here," right? And we're finding that we're becoming the go-to partner. And now that's becoming its own bit of challenge, right? So how do we increase our capacity to manage now the people that want to partner with us? And so it's a really exciting, new challenge to have. And I think people are embracing that and excited about it.

REYNOLDS: That's very exciting and very inspiring to hear the work that you've done and the change that you're seeing, and how quickly that change has manifested itself. So I have a couple of questions to ask the panel, but I also want to give you all fair warning that we are doing a Q&A. I saw everyone's heads look up. "Oh no, what are we going to have to do?" So Q&A will be coming afterwards. So if you have a burning question or idea, you can start marinating on what that is, and Najean will be bringing around a microphone, so you'll have a chance to ask these amazing people about all of their experiences and ideas. So we'll just go maybe down the row, and we can start wherever. But I thought, as we think about these ideas and the scale of the work, the depth of the work, the different ways in which each of our institutions and each of the different stakeholders really are engaging in bringing community engagement and this idea of deep relationships and deep connection into the center of our work. Two things come to mind to think about how the folks here might be able to bring ideas back home.

[00:40:00]

So the first thing that I'd like you to sort of think about or share is, where do you most often see misalignment between what our organizations say we value and what we actually do? And then the second one is if anyone in this room were to take one step in the next six months back home that would take them towards this direction, what would you recommend that step be? So whoever feels like kicking us off.

BLOMBERG: Well, I think of what Jennifer just pointed out, which is a lot of times I think there's this risk of having your general operations, and then community engagement and education is kind of on the side. And if it's made clear that that's a priority, and that becomes really part of the essential operations that happen, and this is something that needs to be done in order to become a core part of the community, then I think that signals to everyone that it's a priority, and it has value, and it's something that everybody should really be focused on and invested in.

MOLANO: Oh, the things that sometimes—two things. One is really logistical, which is we want to go into different communities, but big orchestras don't fit everywhere. And then it comes down to, okay, we have to come up with a chamber orchestra or a chamber ensemble. In our organization, we do have a chamber component, but many more don't. And even for us, sometimes to take ensembles into different places is a huge challenge just logistically because we don't fit in different places. So I think infrastructure is something we all agree needs to be really keeping an eye on. And then maybe the second thing is always about inclusion. I think we all want to be very inclusive. We want to reach very out, I mean, out loud to our communities.

[00:42:04]

And sometimes when I see the numbers, like, for instance, we have, let's say, students coming, or we actually impact 256 schools throughout the whole area. And it seems like a huge number. And it's not, because it's still not enough. Because some of the students coming from those schools are just representing some others that we just said yesterday, we don't know who are not here. So we don't know who they are. I think that's a huge challenge. And the takeaways—should I just pass on the microphone?

REYNOLDS: Sure, we'll do the mismatch, and then we'll do that.

BOOMGAARDEN DAOUD: I would say the two places I see the misalignment most is in the funding it, right? So, "Hey, we want to do all these great things, but there's no money." And so you just can't. So unless you're going to kind of put your money where your mouth is, it will be very difficult to move this work forward in a meaningful way. That was really the change for us when we branded it and funded it. Because it gave our Community Engagement team the flexibility that they needed to build the trust in the relationships and not be pulling out on these partners, not be, you know, "those guys," right? And then I would say the other place that is what we're working on is how does it become even more ingrained in part of what our musicians do? And so that's an ongoing topic of conversation. We actually have a task force now that has some board members on it, has musicians on it, has the head of our Education and Community team, myself and someone from our artistic team that's really talking about how do we think about this becoming even more a part of the work of our musicians? And so that's kind of an ongoing process.

REYNOLDS: That's great. Karen, is there anything you'd like to add?

YAIR: Yeah, I think what the research shows us is that when we ask EdCE leads about the work that they find most rewarding or that they feel most proud of, it's always the work at the co-creation end of the spectrum.

[00:44:06]

And that, of course, is the work that's the most expensive and intensive to develop, and the most difficult to sustain. So that's a misalignment that came out really clearly from the research. And I've heard of other orchestras who have achieved that success when they've centralized that work within a budget, with the board's approval behind it. So it's really interesting to hear you say that, Jennifer.

BOOMGAARDEN DAOUD: Well, and the other piece to that is if you have that, you can talk about it to funders. It has a strategic plan. It has goals. It has metrics. This is how we're going to be successful. And then they're funding a program instead of like this little project. It's overarching. We've also found people kind of coming out of the woodwork to fund it.

BLOMBERG: Yes, and I think what we're hearing is, "How is this baked into the way that you operate as an institution?" And so I think sometimes we see a lot of talk about the importance and relevance of this work. And yet, are these programs, are the people that are doing this work involved in your season planning? Are they involved early in conversations as you're beginning to explore these ideas? And, you know, I think what we're hearing from this table is that that's essential.

REYNOLDS: Okay, so what can people do when they go back home? What's the one piece of advice or one step people can take to kind of work in this direction of building these practices and how they operate?

BLOMBERG: I'm sure there are so many great steps that can be taken, but I'm going to just speak from a musician's perspective since that's my point of view. I would say involve musicians in the conversation, or even your young colleagues. I think you would be surprised by a lot of the ideas and also connections, actually, within the community that musicians can offer.

[00:46:03]

Also, I think it's important, especially since from my perspective and my experience, those have been some of the most valuable and rewarding performances that I've done, and I would love to do more of them, but sometimes I just don't know who to talk to or how to make it happen. So, to make it clear to musicians that if you have an idea or if you want to talk about something or start a conversation about how you could get involved in this program or this type of work, this is the person to go to. And that way, there is really a clear pathway to move this work forward.

MOLANO: Two quick takeaways would be—or actually two takeaways. One is the definition of communities is something we usually go by location, by some interests, by some different—and there are so many different communities intersecting with each other that it's just very important that we actually go down all those categories of what a community is. Because we might be going to play a concert in a community, in a location that we think it's really relevant, but is that community comprised by different communities? Yes. So then what kind of community do we want to reach out?

And the second one is I do recommend, strongly recommend that we, instead of supporting youth orchestras, we partner with youth orchestras. I think that's my request. Collaboration is about, again, a partnership rather than supporting. I think that implies so many things.

BOOMGAARDEN DAOUD: This probably goes without saying, but if you haven't already, elevate the leader of your Community Engagement Program to a senior management level.

[APPLAUSE]

Oh, applause! If that person has a voice at the table, you're going to make those connections just within your team, and you're going to elevate the work. I mean, 25 years ago, that's what this institution did, and it absolutely elevated the work. And then how many of you in here are doing community engagement work right now?

[00:48:05]

Okay, so lean into what you have. Just build some infrastructure around it as a starting point and start to elevate the conversations, right? Build it its own strategic plan. What do you intend to do with it? And then get all the voices into that. And then it keeps elevating from there. Community engagement comes up at every single board meeting at the [UNINTEL]. It's at every single board meeting.

REYNOLDS: Karen?

YAIR: I know for a lot of organizations it can feel like you're in a trap of being tied to legacy programs and to always wanting to be doing new things. And it's really difficult to prioritize and make decisions. And I think something that comes out of the research that's helpful is that model, that taxonomy of programmatic types and the understanding of how they interrelate with capacity needs. So I think from a leadership perspective, thinking about how community needs, organizational capacity, and mission come together in informing how you prioritize is something that's helpful for us all to take into consideration.

REYNOLDS: All right. Now it's the audience participation moment for this session. So what questions are coming up for you? What ideas or thoughts do you want to add? Yes, over here. And Najeen will bring up.

MALE QUESTIONER: In some of the work that I do, I kind of broker relationships between orchestras and community partners for locally inspired projects. And I found that there is a lot of momentum up front with these types of projects, because everyone can get behind something that's local. But how do you sustain, once the project is over, how do you in your various capacities sustain this kind of momentum with these community partners, who may not necessarily be involved in the arts. They might have their own fires to fight. They might have their own budgetary concerns, et cetera—constituents.

[00:50:05]

How do you all approach that to kind of create a longer relationship with those individuals? Because that seems to be kind of key to not being siloed within kind of just purely the orchestra world, but actually achieving the community engagement.

REYNOLDS: Can I ask a question? When you say that you "broker the relationships," can you explain what that means?

MALE QUESTIONER [CONTINUING]: Yes, I do like multimedia projects, where there's like a community component, where there's a collaboration between orchestras and community members of various sorts depending on the project. And so oftentimes I'm kind of in the middle of trying to keep this momentum going because we're relying upon the community partners to provide us with something for the creative portion of the project and kind of that aspect. But also, yes, I'm also looking at it from a bit of a bird's eye view in that regard too, and seeing these two moving parts. I would love to be able to give pointers to the orchestras that I work with because they're doing their own thing, as well, and how to maintain those relationships. Because that spark is important, but at the same time, once that goes away, then what do they do from there basically? I want to provide more value in that regard.

REYNOLDS: Yes, so how do we sustain relationships even sometimes beyond the life of a specific project?

BOOMGAARDEN DAOUD: So one of the biggest assets we have is our Director of Education and Community Engagement, and she is the pivot point for all of this. So the relationship, I think, is part of it. I think we go in with the intention that our relationships are long-term, right? That it's not a one-and-done. They tend to start, though, with small things because we recognize that our partners, to your point, have so many other things on their plate, right? And then they kind of grow from there. So, for example, we did a Trap Symphony

collaboration with five local hip-hop artists, right? But it was with a string quartet. It wasn't with the full orchestra.

[00:52:02]

And so it was kind of a test case. Several of those artists want to work with us again. So now they'll be on our One Community Culture Festival free concert down at the big Gene Leahy Mall. We'll use the same music. They'll do the same stuff. But kind of plotting out and thinking about setting that intention up front, and then thinking about what is the next step before you come to the end of the first step, has been, I think, helpful for us.

REYNOLDS: I think something I think about too is, you know, like any relationship, there are peaks and valleys sometimes. And so you can stay connected and find—you know, I loved what we were looking at in terms of that, as Karen pointed out, the taxonomy of different kinds of programs. And so sometimes a relationship might live in that sort of maybe "free ticket" space or invitations to activities. So you're staying connected. And then there are moments when the institutions, both institutions have the same priorities to do something bigger. And so you can modulate between that different kind of depth of a relationship but still sustain it. So I think as you think about all the different ways that you might stay in partnership, it's not always at, like, the super deep level. So I think that—but it doesn't invalidate the work that you're doing to sustain and just kind of steward that relationship going forward. Yes?

MALE QUESTIONER: Good morning, and thank you all. Jennifer, if I may, I want to thank you for a takeaway that I'm going to bring back to my orchestra based on something you said. I'm just finishing my 32nd year with my orchestra. I just signed a five-year extension on my contract, so heaven help them. But I've been involved with so many strategic planning initiatives over the course of these decades, and we've always had on the side, after you're planning everything over the five years, the wish list.

[00:54:01]

I love the bold box thought, because that really suggests action. So it's not just having it there, but just keep it on the forefront. So I'm taking that back, and I want to thank you for that.

FEMALE QUESTIONER: Thanks, Najean, for the run. Thinking about what you've said about dedicating the funding in the budget, not just waiting for the funding to happen, and the fact that half of the musicians in the orchestra typically tend to be involved in these programs. Do you think that there's maybe a little bit of a relationship between the contractual arrangements for how musicians work in these programs And that incremental funding

problem that suppresses orchestras' commitments to their education programs? And what do you think we can do about it?

Maybe a follow-up question for Karen. Among all of the orchestras that you've studied, how many of those orchestras have their education work as part of the initial contract, as opposed to being incremental costs with additional activity?

BOOMGAARDEN DAOUD: I think it's something we're exploring right now is how—right now it is entirely separate from our CBA. So when we hire a musician to do X, we pay them Y for this particular thing. So I think what we would like to ultimately see is how could that work become more core and central to all of our work together as part of that? But we're still working on that. I think there are some orchestras that have some of that. Just in our conversations with my colleagues in the last few days, there are some that have some of that work in their contracts.

[00:56:00]

REYNOLDS: Yes, I mean, I can speak for San Diego, for example. You know, there are some activities that are part of the guaranteed service weeks for the orchestra, and we have certain provisions that are written into the contract itself that are specific to family, school, and community work. In addition, we have a side letter that outlines the way in which we work in chamber music environments and other things that are outside of the work with the full complement.

BLOMBERG: I can just share from my orchestra in Cincinnati. We do a little bit of both, so musicians are able to select different types of programs that they like to do, but there are also some included in our season—throughout the season. So like YPC concerts, Young People's Concerts, we also have music and wellness programs that happen throughout the year, and actually starting tomorrow are Brady Block Parties series, which is the orchestra going out into communities throughout the summer, and a lot of these communities don't really have access to the hall and don't really come to the hall, so we're able to go there and perform for them. Tomorrow will be the Pride performance. But I think it is important to begin to include that type of work into—I don't want to use the word "required," because that makes it sound like you don't want to do it, but musicians, I think, do want to do that type of work, and that also again signals that the work is important, and it's a priority, and it's essential to everything that happens within the orchestra. It's not just an added-on thing.

MOLANO: If I may, what is in the contract with all our students, and don't laugh—it is. Because every student coming to any youth orchestra knows that this is so vital for what they do, even though they don't get compensated with cash, they get compensated with so many things they actually get out of the teaching network. I want to say it is highly important

for youth orchestras, that community engagement, and he's asked, as we have rehearsal agreements, and we have code of conduct, but anywhere we actually are able to talk to them, especially from the podium, this is a privilege I have as a conductor, but of course teaching artists also during the sectionals, and we always address this in a very open, direct way. We are here because we are preparing a concert for an audience, and that audience happens to be the community.

BARBARA SCALES, QUESTIONER: Hi. Sorry, I was on the floor, so I had to stand up. This is a very popular session, and for good reason. I'm Barbara Scales, I'm from Montreal, my company is Latitude 45 Arts. I work a lot with composers, and I wanted to ask about the ways in which orchestras might introduce new works to youth orchestras, to communities, etc. And I just wanted to mention two things, if I may. One is that while I was here, I was absolutely stunned to have a short conversation with somebody in the Education and Outreach Department of a larger orchestra, who, after a couple of exchanges said, "Would you know any composers interested in writing for a youth orchestra?" And I thought, "Oh boy, I've never heard of a commissioning—well, I had discussed it in Canada, but I hadn't ever heard about it in the U.S.

The second thing I wanted to mention is that the National Arts Centre Orchestra had a composer in residence in the '90s, named Linda Bouchard, who started a series called "The Double Take Concerts," where she would have weekday afternoon access to the orchestra. She would do concerts, I think, once a month, and she would do a single piece by a living composer—about 20 minutes—and then the composer would come on stage, discuss certain thematic or rhythmic or whatever developments in the piece with the orchestra playing selected excerpts.

[01:00:09]

And then 20 minutes of hearing the piece again, as if it were a totally new piece for the audience. So this was not selected for a community outreach context, but it became a very special interaction with members of the community who were interested to come to this. So I just wanted to ask if that's of interest, and if you do anything special with—

MOLANO: If I just may. So yes, this is a field that I am really close to, which is commissioning pieces to composers and interacting with composers. I think back to the title, so it's relevance, connection and public value. And these go all the way through the musicians while we just are performing for the hundredth time The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra or Peter and the Wolf. And we actually are playing a living composer who actually sometimes is premiere, sometimes is not, but we are able to connect, give relevance to what we do, and in that public value we've been centuries interacting with conductors and composers at all times. I think we came to a point historically where we have so much

information just in my phone that we sometimes think, "Why should we actually bother to come again and commission the piece? And I do think that it gives a lot of relevance and representation in connection with the audiences, because the topics that we might do—and yes, mostly in community concerts, but also in the concert hall. They are relevant to what we are doing. I do a lot of series of community concerts or let's say "family concerts," and every year we commission a piece. And those are relevant to something specific, like protecting the environment. And when we did [UNINTEL PHRASE], we just commissioned another piece about the birds. These kinds of things, I think, are extremely relevant, and it connects all those worlds.

[01:02:04]

I do think, to your point, we do need to continue to connect with the composers and have the composers connect with the musicians. That way, the audience is looking at this as, "Oh, this is a very organic communication and connection.

REYNOLDS: Yes, new music is essential for us to really think about how we stay relevant and hear the music of today. In fact, I know we have a few composers in the room who may have done some of this work before. So if anyone, if you want to just stand up or raise your hand really quickly, then people can come and find you if they have questions. Yes, okay, so there are at least three here that have been doing a lot of this work deeply in the community and in education work, so find them, and they can be your new best friends.

MALE QUESTIONER: Hi, I'm the finance guy at the Orchestra of St. Luke's in New York City. It's safe to say that the work that we do with our youth orchestra and our community concerts really pulls at the heartstrings and is very meaningful to a lot of our constituents. We were lucky enough to have one of our board members support our Youth Orchestra Program with a million dollar gift over 10 years, so it's named after him now, which is wonderful. Our goal at the Orchestra of St. Luke's is to have our EdCE programs fully funded through dedicated funding sources, and I'm curious what ways you have found to communicate that message more fully. I was very taken by a full strategic plan as a way to do that, but I'm curious what other ideas you may have for us. Thank you.

REYNOLDS: One thing, I mean the League has a ton of resources too. Something like this survey that Karen shared today is a really excellent tool to show the public value that exists across the field and why it might be specifically important to your institution.

[01:04:13]

You know I think really like, "How does this work fulfill your mission? How is this work deeply connecting audiences, changing lives? What is that change that you're seeing in the people

that you're serving through the work that you're doing that is unique and special and really specific to who you are as an institution? I think this idea that it's separate from who the orchestra is, is what we're trying to get rid of that idea. This is part of who you are. And if it's part of who you are, then it is essential to you achieving what it is that you need to achieve. And I'm sure that your team—I know some of the folks on your team, and they're amazing, and I'm sure they have really, really powerful testimonials from students, teachers and community members that can help support exactly that.

YAIR: And just to underscore that, Laura, I'd advise you looking at the League's Public Value Toolkits or talking to our colleague Heather Noonan, who's over there in the corner. The Public Value Toolkits are a really practical resource to help with articulating that case.

BLOMBERG: If I could add just one experience to that. I'm also a musician representative on our board of directors, and I'm on the Education Committee. A lot of times it's difficult with the education work to bring donors or board members along with that type of work and what exactly is involved in that, because a lot of times the concerts are just the parents who come, and the rehearsals are just the kids that are there. And what we did was we started to invite board members to sit in on some of the rehearsals or visit the chamber groups or send out invitations to come to those youth orchestra concerts which would have probably not happened otherwise.

[01:06:06]

A lot of those board members who started to come had a completely different experience than they would have expected. So I think it's important to also have them experience that in person.

REYNOLDS: I think we have time for one more question.

FEMALE QUESTIONER: Hi. My biggest question is, there's—I thought it was incredible that 60% of your musicians are taking part in the community engagement and the education side of the programming. But was there a culture of that before, when you initially implemented it? Or was the culture something you had to build up over time? And then a side, second part of that. Is there something from the youth orchestra side that we can do to help further the progress of that culture-building along, because we do talk with a lot of the professional musicians in the professional orchestra, and there is a lot of word that it's split. Half of them want to do it, half of them couldn't be bothered. But I just want to know on the youth orchestra side, is there something more that we could or should be doing? Because right now with all of our collaborations with the professional orchestra, it's very much us pushing them and leading the charge. But I didn't know if anyone had any feedback on that.

MOLANO: I think when I mentioned that rather than supporting from professional orchestras, supporting youth orchestras, partnering, it's like a better way to go. I do think that first and foremost we always need to see collaborations being coming from both sides. And even asking like, "So what do you have to offer?" It's not just we are bringing these professional musicians to teach or to coach your students, but it's more like, "How can we just partner?" So that's the first thing. And I do think there's very intentional in the program that we do in youth orchestras, we need to make sure that both the program and the repertoire, but also the concerts and the concert venues we pick are always connecting with those extended communities.

[01:08:08]

Because it's very easy sometimes to go to the places we know we fit. We know supposedly the community is, and the question is, what community? And you ask me, okay, I'm Hispanic, 51 years old, living in North Everett, so many different communities connected with my kids' schools or connected with my preference or a church or who else? So I would just say be very intentional with young students about why we do this and how we do this, but also on the leadership team, making sure that we put concerts everywhere, that we actually connect and partner with not only our musicians. And I think that's something I'm very proud of, like sometimes we do in youth orchestras, is actually having collaborations with dancers, with poetry, with so many different disciplines that really broaden the scope of the musicians.

REYNOLDS: Well, thank you all so much for spending your morning with us today. You know, I think, as we've heard, there are so many great examples of ways that we can bring this work into our practices and the way that we operate. I think one of the reasons why this is so amazing is that it means each and every one of us in every single corner of this country can add a unique value, can reflect our communities in really special and different ways, which means all of us have to be there. It's important that we exist right now, so that we can build these connections and really think about our communities through the lens of music.

Anyway, I just want to thank our panelists today, thank all of you, and I look forward to seeing what you all do back at home. So, thank you so much.

[APPLAUSE]

[01:10:00]