

Supporting Orchestras in a New Era

A Strategic Direction for the American Symphony Orchestra League

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

For the past two years the American Symphony Orchestra League has been engaged in an intensive planning process—more comprehensive than any such effort in the League’s 64-year history— involving extensive consultation throughout the field and beyond. From that process a strategic direction has emerged that will enable the League to transform itself to better help orchestras meet the challenges of the 21st century.

THE LANDSCAPE

Through extensive consultation with the orchestra field, the planning process informed the League of the critical challenges and opportunities facing orchestras today. A variety of environmental changes are having a significant impact on the arts, including orchestras: shifts in community demographics, culture, values, and priorities; evolving technology; changing consumer patterns and tastes; and competition for philanthropic funds, leadership resources, and the ever-scarcer leisure time of audiences. These circumstances may indicate the end of a field-wide growth cycle and the emergence of a new one, yet to be fully defined.

The 1970s through the 1990s saw a period of major growth for orchestras—longer seasons, more concerts. During this time orchestras concentrated their efforts on delivering wonderful symphonic music onstage. As the supply of musical product increased, the audience was expected to consume more of it and, increasingly, to give enough money to cover the shortfall between earned income and growing expenses. They did both. Orchestras’ standard of performance improved steadily; audiences filled the halls and loved what they heard.

Even as orchestras burgeoned in the 1970s, music education in the nation’s public schools came under the budgetary knife, with inevitable consequences for classical-music institutions. In response, orchestras have exponentially increased their traditional commitment to education.

Meanwhile, signs of strain on the financial model appeared, though they were initially masked by the surging economy of the 1990s. Today, there is a pervasive sense of apprehension among orchestras about their future organizational and financial health. While the standard of today’s orchestra performances is extremely high, concerns have surfaced about an overall loss of personality and electricity—concerns that are often cited alongside the routinization of performances, the homogenization of repertoire, and a gradual decline in attendance.

Orchestras have begun to realize that nothing can be taken for granted—least of all their audiences, their donors, or their larger communities. They are now recognizing that they must connect more closely to their communities and redefine their value as civic institutions; and are trying to cope with this changing environment through a wide variety of innovative approaches—new governance models, experimental pricing strategies, innovative concert designs, and fresh approaches to education and community engagement—with varying degrees of success.

VISION AND MISSION

Through its study of this landscape, the League’s Planning Committee developed a vision and a mission for its work and for the work of the League going forward.

Vision

For orchestras:

Orchestras and their communities are vital to each other; and orchestras are essential to the evolution and vitality of music.

For the League:

In a rapidly changing environment, the League must become a transformative and unifying force for the field—a catalyst for understanding and innovation, a place for the conversations that matter, and a champion for orchestras.

Mission:

The League will lead, encourage, support, and serve orchestras as they assure the vitality of the musical experience, strengthen the entire orchestral organization, and deepen their connections with their public and their communities.

GOALS

In the course of its research, the planning committee identified three core challenges of vital importance to orchestras. Orchestras are challenged to achieve **civic stature**, becoming vitally engaged, connected, and meaningful to more of the public. They need a better understanding of current artistic, business and organizational models and the creation of viable new ones, allowing them to **model the future**. And they need to achieve **common cause** among their stakeholders, aligning and connecting them.

The League Board has adopted three goals intended to support orchestras as they meet these challenges.

- **Civic Stature:** The League will be an irreplaceable resource to orchestras as they shape emerging new relationships with their communities.

- **Model the Future:** The League will be a catalyst and a primary resource for the understanding of artistic and operational models that will retain and enhance the vitality of orchestras.
- **Common Cause:** The League will lead, encourage, and support orchestras in the work of building mutual understanding among orchestra stakeholders, fostering collaborative environments, and bridging differences to achieve optimum alignment around common purposes.

These goals provide a template to focus resources on the most critical issues and opportunities for orchestras.

STRATEGIES

The League's work and activity must be realigned, prioritized, and scrupulously focused and disciplined to provide the results and impact needed in this new cycle. The League plans to address its new goals through four overarching, interrelated strategies.

Be an expanded source of talent and leadership development

The League must significantly increase and strengthen the cohort of visionary leaders qualified to meet the challenges described in this plan. It will devote more time and attention to identifying and recruiting leaders from inside and outside the field; and will focus training on the challenges of strengthening community relationships, developing effective organizational models, and internal alignment.

Focus on Emerging Leaders. For emerging leaders already in the orchestra field, the League plans a targeted and intensified mentoring program that will strengthen networks within the field and deepen peer-to-peer learning. The League will design specialized, in-depth programs to develop skills in the critical revenue roles of marketing and development.

Recruitment Center. The League will invest heavily in a major recruiting program to attract the best and the brightest, including those from outside the orchestra field. The pursuit of diversity will be central to this recruitment process.

Improving Practice. Orchestra self-assessment tools will be developed and disseminated industry-wide. These will focus on practice in orchestra-community connection, organizational and business models, artistic excellence, and stakeholder alignment.

Governance Institute. To meet the unique learning needs of trustees, the League will create a comprehensive array of training opportunities targeted to trustees.

Become a powerful engine for innovation and R & D

The League will foster settings in which essential R & D can occur—where new knowledge can be discovered, shared, and applied to orchestras' biggest challenges, helping our field to become a knowledge-based industry. The League aims to equip orchestras with the information and understanding they need as they work to strengthen community relationships, develop effective organizational models, and align internal constituencies.

A Think Tank for Orchestras. The League will undertake the functions of a think tank. It will conduct its own research for the benefit of orchestras, and it will partner with research institutes to cause such research to be conducted.

New Ventures: Adding Resources, Harvesting Knowledge. The League will identify, attract, and generate funding to encourage innovation and experimentation—both artistic and operational—in individual orchestras.

Understanding the Audience; Understanding the Community. The League will provide the information that helps orchestras develop audiences through an understanding of broader societal trends that influence participation. As communities change, the League will capture the information, practice, and knowledge that will help orchestras adapt to their environment and become vitally connected to their communities.

Understanding Technology. The League will play a central part in equipping orchestras with the knowledge to seize the opportunities of technology.

Be an indispensable source for meaningful information

In the future the League will deliver much more than raw data. It will gather, analyze, and disseminate timely, accurate information on topics of vital interest to orchestras. This means not only information about orchestras themselves, but also about environmental changes and challenges—information that will improve understanding of community dynamics and organizational models.

Collaborative Data Project. Already the League is engaged in a new partnership that is bringing orchestra managers and the elected national musician leadership together to develop a single, consistent means of gathering financial data about orchestras.

Placing the Data in Context. League annual surveys will be redesigned to include relevant context, making the data more meaningful and promoting greater understanding.

Future Models. As the environment changes, orchestras face more choices about how to organize themselves for maximum effectiveness. The League will explore, explain and evaluate alternative models for orchestras' artistic, financial, and organizational work.

Be a stronger advocate and connector for the orchestra field

Given the heightened desire to strengthen the civic stature of orchestras, the League must sharpen its messages while entering new spheres of influence critical to the growth and evolution of communities.

An expanded network. The League will foster conversations on the public role of orchestras, stimulating lively debate on why they matter; and will join forums where civic priorities are debated to articulate the field's priorities and monitor emerging trends.

Information that matters. The League will strategically seek information necessary to craft the messages that demonstrate the public value of orchestras. It will identify and tell the stories that compellingly move policy makers and the media; and will undertake the research measuring scope and impact that allows it to articulate the importance of orchestras.

Capacity Building. The League will build the capacity of orchestras to do their own public relations and advocacy through improved electronic communications, publications, and media training.

Access and distribution. The League will develop the communication tools, partnerships, and alliances to make its resources available and visible to orchestras and policy makers of all kinds.

CONCLUSION

This vision for the League is ambitious, and its aspirations for orchestras are even more so. It emerges from extensive consultation with thousands of people in orchestras and related fields, drawing on their wisdom, counsel, and passion. The goals and strategies serve to clarify the League's current purpose, role, and responsibility on behalf of America's orchestras. They will focus the League, helping it make better decisions and allocate resources more wisely. The success of the League's work must ultimately be measured by how thoroughly orchestras adapt to the challenges outlined above. While the challenges of implementation are substantial, this strategic direction for the future is truly exciting—as ambitious as the cause is important. It is rooted in the League's commitment to the vitality of orchestras and its appreciation for the artists who perform and create orchestral music.

**To receive a copy of the complete, 24-page strategic direction,
e-mail League staff member Katie Klenn at kklenn@symphony.org**