

# FORWARD TOGETHER



**The pandemic has been a time of unprecedented collaborative learning among orchestras, as they have worked together across the country to find solutions to daunting challenges. But the post-pandemic environment will require orchestras to go even further, asking deep questions about internal alignment and finding ways to integrate departmental goals and organizational aspirations with new clarity.**

## **By Simon Woods**

**W**hen we were considering a title for the League's 2022 National Conference in Los Angeles, we were drawn to the words "forward together" to express the intense need we were sensing in the field for people to gather and consider the future together after a tumultuous two years. But as Conference approached and I sat down to write this column, I started to sense even more weight in those two words than I had initially imagined.

We all know that we are stronger when we learn together. We benefit from learning about others' achievements as well as their failures, from testing ideas together, exploring new angles, and reflecting on impacts missed as well as those achieved. But however much can be learned from other organizations, orchestras still need to ask themselves if their own internal alignment is robust enough to face down the uncertainty ahead.

For a keynote address at the Association of California Symphony Orchestras' online conference last year, I delved into this issue by looking at job descriptions posted by orchestras on the League's Job Center. In particular, I was curious to see if I could discern organization-wide commitments to broadening the reach of the art

form and diversifying audiences. Of course, in smaller organizations, more responsibilities are covered by single individuals, providing a greater possibility for integration among job functions. But in larger organizations, where the pressure to deliver individual departmental financial results is at its most acute, I found surprisingly little evidence of crossover.

In general, marketing job descriptions barely hinted that ticket selling could also be a community-relational activity as well as a technical and financial function. Every marketer knows that the highest return on investment (and the best chance of meeting stringent goals with limited resources) is to focus on those closest to the center of the target. "If we could persuade every audience member to come one additional time during the season, our audience decline would be arrested in its tracks" is how I have often heard it articulated. And with the knowledge

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Simon Woods, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras

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that selling a ticket to a new audience member can cost many times more than selling to an existing attendee, what incentive is there to spend money on long-term audience development? Put another way, a unique marketing focus on existing demographics is a "feature, not a bug," but brings with it the risk that in the future we will simply be trying to harvest more and more revenue from a dwindling percentage of the population. The Conference elective session led by David Snead entitled *Diversifying Audiences with Research and Relevance* will be fascinating in this regard.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the coin, community engagement job descriptions seemed to imply little connectivity with strategies in other

# It's time for artistic planners, marketing directors, and community engagement directors to sit around a table before committing a single program to paper and ask: "What does our community want and need from us? How do we build a future audience following a pandemic that has disrupted attendance habits? How might our individual goals better align in service of longer-term institutional growth?"

departments to build a long-term sustainable base of support for their organizations. Education and community teams work with tremendous heart and authenticity to listen more than they talk and find ways to engage people in personally fulfilling ways. But can the arrow of community engagement really not lead into audience development? There is a spectrum of wealth capacity within the communities we engage with, and there are many from those communities who would like to come to our halls both as ticket buyers and donors. But the participation we hope for will never occur unless we work harder than ever on creating a welcoming environment for all, not just for the seasoned traditional audience. Relationships matter. In a recent study, researcher and writer Colleen Dilenschneider reported that orchestras have "an overall perception of being much less welcoming than other organization types [and] *the percentage of the US population that does not feel welcome has grown.*" (Italics are mine.)

I am reminded of a quote I heard from a community member not so long ago, which is simple and powerful: "if

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you want us to come to your stuff, you need to come to our stuff." Creating increased points of connection between community engagement and audience development represents a tremendous opportunity for our field.

And let's consider artistic planning positions. My sense is that success in those roles is still often measured on quality of press reviews, organizational prestige, and affirmation of the board and music director. But in years of teaching artistic planning, I often stole the line from nutritionists who say "we are what we eat" by reminding people that "we are what we play!" No decisions are more fertile for our long-term goals of inclusion and audience growth than what we play on stage and who plays it, but the power is only unleashed when it is tightly aligned with broader goals, rather than being driven exclusively by abstract artistic values.

The good news is that orchestras have probably never spent as much time or energy thinking about the broader meaning of their artistic planning decisions as they are today, and the League's evolving *Catalyst* initiatives have been important drivers of this work (see "Welcoming Innovation and Inclusion in Orchestras" elsewhere in this issue). It's genuinely exciting to watch the changes occur, and at the League, we are shortly launching a major project to report these changes from the perspective of hard data.

My anecdotal conclusion is that orchestras' future strategic success will probably require more long-horizon, joined-up goals to be reflected in every job description across organizations. The siloed management functions many of us grew up with are unlikely to be fit for

purpose in the world we're now entering.

In his inspiring keynote at the League's online 2021 Conference, Marc Bamuthi Joseph from the Kennedy Center implored us: "Tie your organizational growth to your region's social growth. Your program is in service of your social vision."

Bamuthi's job title tells us a lot: Vice President and Artistic Director of Social Impact. The revelation here is that the Kennedy Center views artistic vision as inextricable from social impact. As we emerge from the pandemic, there is urgency for artistic planners, marketing directors, and community engagement directors to sit around a table before committing a single program to paper and ask themselves questions like: "What does our community want and need from us next season? How do we build a future audience following a pandemic that has disrupted decades of attendance habits? And how might our individual business goals better align in service of longer-term institutional growth?"

"Forward together" is a state of mind. It asserts that the breakthrough results that our field craves are most likely to reveal themselves through our collaborative learning. But it also reminds us of the need to create intense internal alignment around our goals. As the pandemic recedes in the rear-view mirror, the challenge of building new audiences will increasingly take over the entire field of vision in our windshields. This is an existential issue for our field that can only be tackled by organizations together—and by leaders together within those organizations.

We look forward to exploring these themes with you at our Conference in Los Angeles and in the years to come! 