

# The View from the Chair

Orchestras nationwide are regaining a semblance of normality after more than two pandemic seasons of upheaval. Yet this tumultuous time presents an opportunity for the people at the top—board chairs—to rebuild and renew their orchestras. What do today's board leaders expect as they look forward, and what perspectives do they offer on key issues?

By Jasmine Liu

It has been a time of disruption and change on multiple fronts for orchestras. Despite the challenges, many orchestras took the opportunity to innovate in new ways, beefing up recording and streaming capabilities and connecting with new audiences, virtually and once again in person. Those innovations—and others—continue. Yet many orchestras still face reduced ticket sales, season subscriptions, and memberships. Though many orchestras came through the last two years fairly well, all things considered, others are just getting back on their feet. This year sees orchestras at a critical juncture on another front: how will they convince their communities of their continued relevance when classical music has been overwhelmingly White for so long? How are orchestras rethinking their mandates to better serve their communities?

The following interviews with board chairs at orchestras range from community ensembles and youth groups to large professional orchestras across the country. Although these organizations differ in their missions, funding models, and constituencies, they share similar concerns about renewing their strategies and visions amid the uncertainty of the pandemic. Many board chairs highlighted fresh initiatives to improve equity, diversity, and inclusion at the board level, among staff, and in their orchestras' artistic programming and community

engagement. The board chairs surveyed here also spoke about what they believe the proper relationship between a board of directors and the orchestra's strategy and operations should be. (Comments have been edited for space.)



**Andy Jih,  
Bay Area  
Rainbow  
Symphony**

### **What do you view as the key issues facing your board and orchestra in the coming year?**

As with so many organizations in the performing arts, one of the key issues ahead for us is how we adjust to the unpredictability of live events due to COVID. Planning ahead is quite challenging when health policy and guidance is shifting on a regular basis, so we've been focusing on how we can keep performing for the community while ensuring that all of our audience members and musicians feel safe and comfortable.

### **How might your orchestra's situation differ from or be similar to the situations of orchestras elsewhere?**

Our orchestra, the Bay Area Rainbow Symphony, has a mission to highlight LGBTQ+ composers and musicians. We're quite fortunate to be based in the

San Francisco Bay Area as this area is among the most LGBTQ+ inclusive parts of the country. We recognize that people across the country and the world who might want to hear or perform music by LGBTQ+ composers don't have as many options or opportunities to do so or, worse yet, they don't feel safe doing so. We hope that by performing for our local community, we can be a small example for others around the country and the world for how they can connect with musicians in their communities.

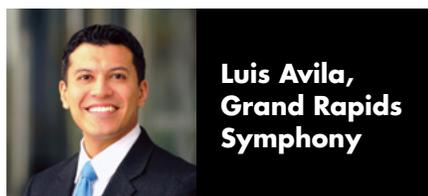
### **How do you view your board in light of the increasing calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion in orchestras?**

There are many ways our board can improve as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion [DEI]. As it relates to DEI, our orchestra is doing well in some areas, but lagging in others. We highlight at least one LGBTQ+ composer and/or soloist in every concert, and Dawn Harms, our phenomenal music director, ensures that there is always at least one female composer per concert. That said, we still have a lot of work to do to ensure our orchestra learns, grows, and evolves.

### **How involved should boards of directors be in the day-to-day running of orchestras, setting new directions, or building strategies? What inspires you about the future of orchestras?**

Where possible, boards should be focused on longer-term strategies and governance, while staff should focus on day-to-day

operations. That said, the reality for every orchestra is different. I don't think there's a one-size-fits-all answer to this question, as it varies depending on the specific orchestra and what their goals and challenges might be. Our board historically had been focused on day-to-day operations, but we're gradually shifting the board's energies and focus to longer-term strategies.



**What do you view as the key issues facing your board and orchestra in the coming year?**

One of the key issues facing our symphony is going to be audience participation. Audiences are slowly coming back but have not quite reached a pre-pandemic level. While initial numbers are promising, it is going to be a while before we see full halls at every performance. This will require orchestras to adjust their budgets to meet lower ticket sales, without compromising artistic integrity or long-term infrastructure.

**What are the critical issues facing orchestras now?**

Perhaps the biggest challenge will be attempting to achieve pre-pandemic levels of programming and operations, but without the same level of community engagement or funding as in prior years. This is not unique to symphonies, but to arts organizations in general.

**How might your orchestra's situation differ from or be similar to the situations of orchestras elsewhere?**

The Grand Rapids community has a long-standing history of strong philanthropic support of the arts, and specifically the symphony. While recovery will not be without some challenges, I believe that our community will rise to the challenge as it has numerous times before.

**How do you view your board in light of the increasing calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion in orchestras?**

Our board has been clamoring for an increased focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion [DEI] for some time now. As a result, leadership has made

DEI a central focus at all levels of the organization, whether that's on the artistic side—choosing composers, directors, and performers of historically underrepresented communities—or performing free concerts in the community or being intentional about diversity in recruiting and retention. I'm proud to say our board is increasingly representative of the community we serve.

**How involved should boards of directors be in the day-to-day running of orchestras, setting new directions, or building strategies? What inspires you about the future of orchestras?**

Some orchestras require deeper, more hands-on involvement from their boards, while others have a robust leadership structure where board members serve more in a governance capacity. At the Grand Rapids Symphony, we have an executive committee that is active in operations, while the larger board helps with the big picture and strategic planning.

I believe that the pandemic, coupled with a nationwide focus on DEI, has forced orchestras to think critically and creatively about their future. The symphony world as a whole has been stagnant for too long. I am inspired by the fact that we are seeing younger and more diverse audiences not only attending concerts but taking active leadership roles. The future of our industry is in good hands.



**What do you view as the key issues facing your board and orchestra in the coming year?**

Building back our services to pre-pandemic levels presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, we've learned how to be responsive and adaptive to the changing needs of our community—but as we move forward, we face complex considerations. With programming, partnerships, and fundraising all evolving, how will we now choose what to keep between the new and the old, the different and the familiar?

**What are the critical issues facing orchestras now?**

Opportunities for encouraging support of the arts have been disrupted as a whole, given the limitations placed on traditionally shared experiences. It will be crucial for us and other orchestras to build strategic partnerships with organizations in and beyond music. Doing so will help us to individually, and collectively, advance the roles that music plays in our communities.

**How might your orchestra's situation differ from or be similar to the situations of orchestras elsewhere?**

Although Hawai'i is unique in that we are an island archipelago, the situation of being a major arts organization that serves remote and rural populations is common to many orchestras. Because this makes "run-out" concerts difficult, we instead fly young musicians from our neighboring islands to Oahu for weekly rehearsals and lean on Zoom for other activities.

Our distinct geography also opens opportunities for us to collaborate with orchestras in Asia and the Pacific Rim.

**How do you view your board in light of the increasing calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion in orchestras?**

EDI work is important and always a work in progress. We are striving for our board to reflect the communities in which we serve. Presently, our board is made up of 17 individuals of Asian American, Pacific Islander, Caucasian, and blended backgrounds, and all our officers are women.

**How involved should boards of directors be in the day-to-day running of orchestras, setting new directions, or building strategies? What inspires you about the future of orchestras?**

Hawaii Youth Symphony has a bold vision to "Make Music A Right"—which is incredibly inspiring to me, because imagine what our world will be like if every child played an instrument! Our entire organization, from board to staff to stakeholders, is galvanized to play a part in advancing access to music education. The board is very involved when it comes to developing the strategic and community connections vital for realizing this vision, and we confidently trust our President Randy Wong and his team to manage and run the organization's day-to-day operations.



**What do you view as the key issues facing your board and orchestra in the coming year?**

The different [coronavirus] variants—that's in the background as we think about next year. We don't have our own hall. We play at various venues around Los Angeles, and during COVID, that was a good thing because it gave us more flexibility. We didn't have to worry about paying the costs of owning our own home. But as we started to reopen this year, in many cases that made it harder because we had to scramble to find space, and everybody had different rules.

We're focused on how to improve diversity on our stage and in our audience. We can do things in the short run, but it's a long-term problem that all of us in the music world need to work on. Having more musicians of color is going to take time. It's not inexpensive to become a world-class violinist. It takes a lot of training and investment. The foundations, the government, and all of us with orchestras are going to have to work together over the long term to fix the problem.

One of the things that we did very well on [during the pandemic] is donations. Our supporters were extremely generous. Will that continue? We had the same help as most orchestras did from the state and federal governments. But we have not returned to the same levels of programming that we had. Do we go back to our full slate of concerts?

**Can you expand on the challenges of not having your own concert hall?**

When you don't have your own hall and raise long-term funding from donors, it's harder for them to conceive of what they're giving endowment money to. When you have a hall, you can understand the bricks and mortar and what your money is going to.

**How involved should boards of directors be in the day-to-day running of orchestras, setting new directions, or building strategies? What inspires you about the future of orchestras?**

I see our job as directing the strategy of our organization. We have to hire the best executive director that we can and give him or her all the help that we can. When boards start to get too involved in the minutiae, it's not a good thing. We have a small board and a small staff, so we probably get involved in more day-to-day activities than a huge orchestra, and that's okay as long as the staff feels that it's helpful. Being the chair of the board of this orchestra has been a wonderful experience. I wish more people would serve on boards. Making more music available to the public is an important mission.



**What do you view as the key issues facing your board and orchestra in the coming year?**

There are three critical issues, and I am sure that they are the same ones all orchestras are facing now. First is restoring audience size, which relates directly to income, and regaining all our loyal audience members plus new ones to compensate for those we lost temporarily as a consequence of COVID. Second is getting all our musicians comfortable playing with their colleagues who cannot be masked during rehearsals and performances. Third is the urgent need for further diversification and greatly expanded community involvement and impact. One difference, which we are quite proud of, is that the LPO was able to function during the COVID pandemic without furloughing any musicians or staff.

**How might your orchestra's situation differ from or be similar to the situations of orchestras elsewhere?**

The concerns mentioned above are pretty universal, but the mechanisms for the Louisiana Philharmonic to solve them are rather different because of our unique governance structure. The LPO is musician-owned, and the musicians have a much greater voice in dealing with problems than in most American orchestras. Despite the structure, the

board, the staff, and the musicians work closely hand-in-hand to deal with concerns and make long-term plans.

**How involved should boards of directors be in the day-to-day running of orchestras, setting new directions, or building strategies?**

Boards should have little to do with the day-to-day running of orchestras, but must be intensely immersed in future planning, fundraising, community involvement, and orchestra development and prosperity.



**What do you view as the key issues facing your board and orchestra in the coming year?**

The biggest issue is uncertainty. Will the pandemic fade or resurge? When will audiences feel comfortable returning in their previous numbers? Will they return in their previous numbers? We need to grow our audience. What will we need to do differently with how we present, what we present, and to whom we present? How do we ignite innovation in a staid industry? How do we pay for innovation and testing while our budgets are strained by the pandemic? At the same time, we need to embrace the idea that crisis can fuel creativity.

**What are the critical issues facing orchestras now?**

The industry needs more hard data. We are in a data-driven world, and we continue to talk about ethereal values. Our pitch about our value to our communities has to be substantiated with data.

The continuing decline of the subscription base in a more transactional world demands that we "sell" our product more. Our marketing concepts need to adapt to this. Budget challenges could lead to cost-cutting that can affect the quality of our product. We must avoid "good enough." Finally, the industry isn't doing enough collectively to advance the art form. We should have a national campaign to re-ignite interest.

**How do you view your board in light of**

**the increasing calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion in orchestras?**

I view our board as on the early stages of a new journey—one that will enrich the organization, as well as our community. One that will build on our storied past and lead us to an enhanced future. We start with our board-adopted commitment to creating a welcoming, accessible, and inclusive environment for all, while focused on the core values the orchestra brings to the community. We are working hard to move beyond words on paper to action. We have already seen significant progress in attracting more diverse board members. We have significantly expanded our pre-professional fellowship program for young musicians identifying as Black or African American that we believe will be important in the pipeline for diversity on the stage. Our strategy is already reflected in programming. We have only just begun.

**How involved should boards of directors be in the day-to-day running of orchestras, setting new directions, or building strategies?**

Boards need to be engaged in strategic planning, community relationship building, fundraising, and preserving and protecting the mission of the organization—not day-to-day operations.

**What inspires you about the future of orchestras?**

The fundamental value we bring to our community: the higher good of our emotional well-being that music gives us; the sense of community as we bring people together to share common experiences; and the economic value and enhanced quality of life that we bring to our communities.

because of COVID, and that’s going to be a concern for the foreseeable future. Subscriptions are strong, but they’re not at pre-COVID levels: we’re down 10 to 20 percent in renewals. The challenge is, how do we get people to come back into the hall? Are they going to say, “I’m going to stream that online”? Will they rely on other avenues? That’s our biggest challenge.

We have a unique challenge in that in 2023-24, we’ll be 100 years old. We’re gearing up for a centennial in a time of COVID. That centennial is very exciting; for the board, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and it’s obviously a historic event for Rochester. People have been incredibly generous throughout COVID, and now we’re going to ask them to make special gifts for the centennial. So we have to highlight everything that the orchestra has done in the past 100 years, and amplify what we’re going to do for the next 100 years. We’re looking to fulfill our mission of being a community orchestra.

**How do you view your board in light of the increasing calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion in orchestras?**

In late 2020, we created an anti-racism working group that was populated by people from within and outside the Philharmonic. It presented recommendations to the board, all of which were adopted, starting with a commitment statement in our bylaws and employee handbook. It’s the policy of the board to ensure that the corporation serves the entire Rochester community

as a culturally astute, engaged, anti-racist civic organization that is committed to modeling and strengthening the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion. One objective was to increase board representation by members of the BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] community by up to 30 percent by 2024. When we started this, we had no BIPOC members. Today, four out of 29 board members are members of the BIPOC community. We’re working hard to reach the target.

**How involved should boards of directors be in the day-to-day running of orchestras, setting new directions, or building strategies?**

We have a very capable president and CEO who reports to the board and who’s responsible for what happens, but we don’t give day-to-day direction. Same thing with the music; we don’t make recommendations. We’ve got a wonderful music director, wonderful principal pops conductor, fantastic VP of artistic planning. Committees make recommendations to the board. If it becomes a policy or directive, it goes to the staff, but that’s strategic, not day-to-day management. **S**

JASMINE LIU is a journalist from the San Francisco Bay Area who writes about literature in translation, contemporary art, classical music, and more. She holds bachelor’s degrees from Stanford University in anthropology and mathematics.



**Ross P. Lanzafame,  
Rochester  
Philharmonic  
Orchestra**

**What do you view as the key issues facing your board and orchestra in the coming year? What critical issues are orchestras facing now?**

I don’t know that we’re any different than anyone else in terms of the pandemic issues. Attendance is still impaired

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