

A Champion for Orchestras

Meet Simon Woods, the new president and chief executive officer of the League of American Orchestras.

by Robert Sandla

Simon Woods believes in orchestras. Growing up, he was spellbound by orchestras: the power of the sounds they make, their infinite variety in bringing music to life, the way an ensemble can go from 0 to 60 in a few heart-stopping measures. And in a journey that has taken him from musician to conductor to record producer to artistic administrator to chief executive positions at orchestras in the U.S. and the U.K., he has been engrossed by all the extra-musical things orchestras do: how they can provide solace and inspiration, play vital roles in their hometowns, and forge enduring bonds with multiple communities.

This September, Woods became president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras, the national nonprofit that serves the orchestral field, advocates for their essential roles, and promotes the value of live orchestral music for all. Woods succeeds Jesse Rosen, whose distinguished twelve-year tenure as president and CEO concluded this summer.

Woods brings a unique perspective and wide experience to the job. You might say he knows orchestras from inside out. Growing up in London, England, Woods studied piano and clarinet, played in youth orchestras, and explored conducting. He earned a degree in music from Cambridge

University and a diploma in conducting from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. For nearly a decade, he was a record producer at EMI Classics in London, where he initiated and produced recordings at Abbey Road Studios and on location, with a who's who of classical artists and ensembles. From 1997 to 2004, he was artistic administrator and later vice president of artistic planning and operations at the Philadelphia Orchestra. From 2004 to 2005, he was president and CEO of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, before returning to the U.K. in 2005 to become chief executive of the

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Royal Scottish National Orchestra. In 2011, Woods was named president and CEO of the Seattle Symphony, a post he held for seven years. In November 2017, Woods was appointed CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and from February to August 2020, Woods was interim executive director of the Grand Teton Music Festival, in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. He’s accomplished all that with quiet humor, keen insight, and an open, affable demeanor.



Craig T. Mathew/Mathew Imaging

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

Throughout, Woods has championed the creation of the music of our time, new roles for orchestras in their communities, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. He has led programs at orchestras focusing on access for young people, homelessness, prisons, and native tribe partnerships. In addition, Woods is committed to the professional development of emerging orchestra leaders: he has been closely involved with the League’s professional development programs for two decades, and served as director of the League’s Essentials of Orchestra Management seminar through 2019.

Woods arrives at the League at a time of significant change and challenge for orchestras. He brings energy, rich experience, and deep-seated optimism to the work ahead. He’s spellbound by orchestras—still.

ROBERT SANDLA: Did you grow up in a musical family? Was classical music a part of your life?

SIMON WOODS: My parents were not musicians, but they took me to the famous Robert Mayer Concerts at London’s Royal Festival Hall, which would be equivalent to the family concerts presented by most American orchestras. My parents have eclectic musical tastes, so I

grew up hearing everything from the *Rite of Spring* to The Beatles and everything in between. As a child I listened to everything I could get my hands on. I studied piano and played the clarinet in youth orchestras—and I conducted orchestras in front of the mirror!

SANDLA: You were serious about music; it wasn't simply a matter of a kid who loved orchestras.

WOODS: It was an all-consuming passion—but at a certain point I realized that what I wanted more than anything was to be a conductor. After graduating from Cambridge University, I went to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London to do postgraduate work in conducting. But when I left a year later, I had a crisis of confidence. I simply didn't have enough faith in my ability as a conductor,

took over, there was massive expansion within the record business, as all the major labels re-recorded the entire traditional classical repertoire in digital technology. I happened to be in the right place at the right time and landed at EMI in 1988, working at Abbey Road Studios in London. I suddenly found myself working

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with great orchestras and world-famous conductors and soloists, learning daily about interpretation and the craft of recording. It ended up being an inspiring nine-year period in my career.

from sight-reading to transcendence in a matter of minutes. In all the time I have worked in this field, I've never lost that deep reverence for the way musicians create great performances together.

SANDLA: How did you move into orchestra management?

WOODS: In the mid-1990s I began to feel that this part of my career was nearing its conclusion. One day after a recording session, the conductor Sir Roger Norrington said to me, “You should be an artistic administrator. American orchestras are always looking for people who love and understand orchestras.” In those EMI years I had been producing recordings with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and it so happened that they were looking for an artistic administrator. To cut a long story short, Joe Kluger, who was president and CEO at the time, hired me, and I moved to Philadelphia in 1997, just a month after getting married. So Karin and I started our married life in a new phase of my career, in a country which was destined to become home in every possible way. And now we're proud citizens!

SANDLA: What struck you about the difference between orchestras in the United States and the United Kingdom?

WOODS: You can't go to an organization like the Philadelphia Orchestra without being in awe of its decades of tradition about sound and interpretation. I reveled in that every single day. The other thing that struck me was the way the orchestra was so embedded in the civic psyche, going back decades. And at that time in the late 1990s, orchestras were beginning to think in new ways about breaking down barriers with audiences and the community, and it has been inspiring to watch the way this idea has flourished over the past twenty years. I've arrived at the firm conviction that reflecting their communities in unique ways is one of the most beautiful things that American orchestras can do.

SANDLA: After a period of six years back in the U.K. at the helm of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, what led you to the Seattle Symphony in 2011?

WOODS: I was offered an amazing



Abigail R. Collins

Simon Woods (third from right) with faculty and participants in the League of American Orchestras' 2019 Essentials of Orchestra Management seminar, in Los Angeles. Woods has been closely involved with the League's professional development programs for two decades, and served as director of Essentials of Orchestra Management through 2019.

and I eventually decided to leave that to people who were more naturally equipped than me. But I was clear that I was going to work in music, and if I wasn't going to do it persuasively as a conductor, then I would just have to do it a different way.

SANDLA: Is that what led you to become a record producer at EMI?

WOODS: In the early 1980s, as CDs

When you look back, everything seems to have a purpose—and for me, orchestras have been the common thread. I played in them as a teenager, then I conducted them, then I recorded them, and then I had over twenty years working in orchestra management. It has been an amazing journey into understanding the magical ecology of an orchestra, and how it can go



James Hoff/Seattle Symphony

Simon Woods backstage at Benaroya Hall with Seattle Symphony musicians, during Woods' seven-year tenure as the orchestra's president and CEO. The words in the background are the Seattle Symphony's mission statement.

opportunity in Seattle. The orchestra had just appointed Ludovic Morlot as music director, and he had a very clear vision of what it would mean to build an orchestra in the image and values of the city. Seattle is a community that loves culture and has a highly appreciative audience. It also is community-focused, and has an amazing musical history: Quincy Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, to name just a few. So we took all that into our thinking. We explored the city's musical heritage, we launched new programs for people experiencing homelessness, we collaborated with the Native American community, and we looked for every opportunity to play an active role in civic life. It was an extrapolation, if you like, of the notion of civic value that had intrigued me twenty years previously in Philadelphia. I give enormous credit to Ludovic, who drove it all forward with great gusto and curiosity.

And it's worth saying that what we were doing was happening concurrently

in different ways in orchestras right across the country, from Portland, Oregon and Sioux Falls, South Dakota to Charlotte, North Carolina and Baltimore, Maryland. The 2010s really were an important period of evolution for our field, in ways that perhaps only now become clear as we look back.

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SANDLA: When the opportunity to run the Los Angeles Philharmonic arrived, you took it. Your time there lasted less than two years.

WOODS: The Los Angeles Philhar-

monic is an extraordinary, awe-inspiring organization in every sense—it has burst through every conventional boundary of what an orchestra can be. It is full of talented and passionate people, and the work they do is at the very highest level of creativity and achievement. And of course, one of the great joys of my time there was witnessing Gustavo Dudamel at work. I loved every minute working with him. In the end, however, my own hopes and beliefs just somehow didn't seem to land in that organization. It was a disconnect that everyone felt—it wasn't right for me and it wasn't right for them. It happens. And when it happens, the best thing you can do is recognize it and get out of the way.

SANDLA: Now you're at the League. In a way, it is a homecoming, as you've been involved with the League for a long time. What drew you to the leadership position at the League?

WOODS: I am committed at a very deep level to the idea that the rising tide



James Hoff/Seattle Symphony

Under Woods' leadership as president and CEO, the Seattle Symphony launched programs for the city's homeless communities. At a fundraiser at Benaroya Hall for Mary's Place, which works to provide shelter for people experiencing homelessness, Woods stands with, from left: Deputy Mayor Hyeok Kim; Randy Engstrom, director of Seattle's Office of Arts and Culture; Marty Hartman, executive director of Mary's Place; and Seattle Symphony Music Director Ludovic Morlot.

lifts all boats—that what orchestras can achieve together is greater than what any individual organization can achieve. The League has important programs in so many areas: professional development, national advocacy and communications, data and research, convening, and the vital work of championing and leading equity. Being able to support this field I love—especially in a time of great need and challenge—is a moment that holds deep vocational meaning for me.

SANDLA: In Essentials of Orchestra Management and other programs, you encounter a lot of young people seeking careers in orchestras.

WOODS: I am so very grateful to the people who took the time to mentor me. They know who they are! And I've always tried to do the same in return. I have a very strong faith in the next wave of thinking that is almost upon us, with a whole generation of fantastic emerg-

ing leaders who are thinking in new ways about equity and anti-racism, about media and digital engagement, about the role of orchestras in community, and about the challenges of our role as a “legacy” art

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form. Harnessing the creativity of the next generation is one of the things I'm most committed to.

SANDLA: This is an art form with a lot of history, and it is under more and more scrutiny for the way it's rooted in hierarchical and Eurocentric ideas. Do you see change happening?

WOODS: It has to change. We must bring equity into the center of our identi-

ties as orchestras. We have to empower and open ourselves to the voices of those who have been systematically excluded. This is about the way we program, it's about working constantly to rid internal processes such as auditions and tenure votes from biases, it's about how we invest in education programs, and it's also about how we work together. There is tremendous wisdom in our organizations, and the idea that those of us who are, let's call us “titular leaders,” that we uniquely have the answers, is ridiculous. Today, leadership is about turning to a broad array of voices to answer questions in the richest and most humane way.

SANDLA: Someone from a more traditional background might wonder if a focus on social issues distracts from artistry or excellence in orchestras.

WOODS: Every time I hear that, a small part of me dies inside! It really couldn't be further from the truth. One of



As CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Woods meets with young musicians in the LA Phil's YOLA program (Youth Orchestra LA) at the Hollywood Bowl in July 2019. YOLA serves more than 1,300 young musicians across four sites, providing free instruments, music instruction, academic support, and leadership training.

the people in our field whom I most look up to is Alex Laing [principal clarinet at the Phoenix Symphony]. One of the powerful things I have heard him talk about is the way diversity actively enhances music-making and artistry. He is very eloquent on this subject and I won't dare to summarize his ideas here as I won't do them justice. But it saddens me that discussions about community, equity, and anti-racism too often revert to this inexplicable fear about what might be lost, whereas the real story is about what we might all gain. The richer the texture of human experience that we bring into our art form, the more we correct the injustices of the past, the more powerfully our art will speak. This seems to me central.

And even despite the profound setbacks and challenges of COVID-19, American orchestras are still extraordinary. They have never had such deep virtuosity, talent, and quality at every level of budget size. So yes, we are committed to the very highest standards of artistry. And yes, we are committed to a journey where our orchestras reflect our communities and the broadest range of human experience. Always “yes and.” One without the other is inconceivable to me.

SANDLA: Concerning equity, diversity, and inclusion, it's worth asking how you see your role, given that you're another white man leading a classical-music organization.

WOODS: I approach the work of anti-racism with much humility, knowing I have a lot to learn. But I am deeply committed to creating change. I have tried in both my last two positions to root equity thinking in organizational culture.

“Belief in the future and in something better drives everything I do.”

It's about creating a space for honest conversation, empowering people to lead, and about insisting on the concrete actions and behaviors that come from that dialogue.

This moment we're in right now is tremendously painful, but also a moment of great opportunity. Orchestras have been talking about the need to change for decades, but frustratingly little has happened. I really feel like this time, yes, it must and it finally will change, and I'm excited to be part of that. The work the League has done in recent months with the Statement on Racial Discrimination is of seismic importance. Advancing this work will be a defining aspect of my tenure as president of the League.

SANDLA: Simultaneously, we're in the midst of a global pandemic. What are the critical issues for the League and the field in this crisis? How can the League help? How do you see orchestras getting through this?

WOODS: Our field is hurting, and our people are hurting. Our work at the League is to support the field at both institutional and individual levels. This year's Conference was an enormous success, with nearly 4,000 registrants, which is four times the normal number for one of our in-person Conferences, and an average per session of more than 400 people. The level of participation was an index of just how much people yearn to come together for mutual support and for concrete advice that they can take back to their organizations. In moments of crisis, organizations like the League come into their own. And the way the League's own terrific team members have been burning the candle at both ends to support orchestras is a sign of the living vitality of the League's mission.

But critically, we must also not lose sight of the need to support individuals. Musicians are hurting financially, but also spiritually because they can't play music together for audiences. For a lot of people in management, the stress is almost incalculable; they've suddenly been forced to completely rethink everything they thought was normal. We have a responsibility to hold people close—musicians, managements, volunteers, our professional partners, and everybody within the ecosystem of orchestras—so that we can all come out the other side of this crisis as whole as possible.

SANDLA: How would you characterize yourself—as an optimist, a realist, a visionary?

WOODS: I'm absolutely, irredeemably an optimist. Belief in the future and in something better drives everything I do. I have a vision of an orchestra field a few years hence that will be very different from the field we knew in 2019—in a very inspiring way. I don't say that getting there is going to be easy. But there are incredible hearts and minds across the country applying themselves to creating that future. For now, it may be just over the horizon, but it's there waiting for us. **S**

ROBERT SANDLA is *Symphony's* editor in chief.

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