

A Career in Service to Orchestras

Jesse Rosen steps down as the League's president and CEO this September after a distinguished twelve-year tenure. But his links to the League—and to the orchestra field—go back much further. Rosen shares his unique perspectives as musician, administrator, and leader in a wide-ranging discussion of the past, present, and future of orchestras.

by Robert Sandla

Soon after Jesse Rosen became president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras in 2008, he began writing *Critical Questions*, a column in *Symphony* magazine. In *Critical Questions*, he examined the new roles of orchestras in a changing society, explored the topic of innovation in depth, reviewed field-wide research, analyzed emerging practices, and highlighted the vitality of the music of our time. He interviewed orchestra executives, board members, and musicians; presented the perspectives of thought leaders from inside and outside the orchestra field; spoke with experts on topics including contract negotiations, nonprofit governance, and finance; and led frank discussions of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Now it's Rosen's turn in the *Critical Questions* hot seat.

As Rosen prepared to step down from the League this September, he relinquished his usual role as *Critical Questions* interlocutor to talk about his dozen years leading the League. During his tenure, the League advocated for orchestras' deeper engagement with communities, expanded efforts to address diversity,

encouraged greater discipline in relation to fiscal health, and fostered support of contemporary composers. Rosen's links to the League go way back, even before he joined the League as vice president in 1998. His father, Seymour Rosen, had a career in orchestra management: he was chief executive at the Buffalo Philharmonic, chief executive of the League from 1966 to 1967, and occupied the top positions at the Pittsburgh Symphony

“The League tries to bring forward information and perspective that our member orchestras may not otherwise see, so that they understand their work in a broader context.”

Orchestra and the Philadelphia Orchestra. So Jesse Rosen had an early start: he began attending League Conferences as a child.

Jesse Rosen is a conservatory-trained trombone player who moved into orchestra management early in his career at the New York Philharmonic, American Composers Orchestra, and Seattle Symphony.



Chris Lee

Jesse Rosen, President and CEO, League of American Orchestras

You might say that he's enjoyed a lifetime of service to orchestras.

ROBERT SANDLA: Classical music was a part of your life from early on.

JESSE ROSEN: Always. My mother was a modern dancer and my dad was a bass player. Between the two of them I was always around orchestral music. My dad's first orchestra job as a manager was when I was a kid, but before that he was a musician. There was always classical music in the house and I enjoyed it immensely.

SANDLA: You trained as a trombone player and went to Manhattan School of Music.

ROSEN: First I went to New York University, then to Manhattan School of Music. My parents didn't twist my arm, but they didn't think a career as a performing artist was a great idea. There were the economic realities of how challenging a career as a musician would be—assuming you made it. This was before there were 52-week seasons and orchestra musicians had a shot at making good salaries.

SANDLA: What prompted you to explore orchestra management?

ROSEN: My assessment was that the prospects of a career as trombone player

were slim. Competition was extremely steep, as it continues to be. I was a good trombone player, but I wasn't at the top of the heap; being somewhere in the middle wasn't enough to be competitive. Once I decided that, it was easy to think about a career in arts administration, because my parents modeled that. My mother went from being a modern dancer to being a dance administrator and a dance teacher. My father went from being a performer to being an orchestra administrator. My first toe in the water was as an intern in the Music Program at the National Endowment for the Arts.

My first job was with Affiliate Artists, an artist-management organization that doesn't exist anymore, but it blended my love of classical music and my passion about making it more accessible to more people. It was immensely rewarding. Af-

Bill T. Jones was one of our dancers, Chris O'Riley was one of the pianists. Initially, my job was organizing residencies for artists. With the John Deere sponsorship in Iowa, we put artists on farms and in factories. With other sponsors, we put artists in plants and loading docks. We trained the artists in how to give authentic

“Our traditions were developed to solve different sets of problems. New situations and opportunities call for new ways to work.”

presentations—Affiliate Artists coined the term “informance” to describe these—to audiences that didn't know much about the arts. For the artists, if you can succeed performing on a truck loading dock with

country, meeting with 4-H Clubs, Future Farmers of America, church groups, community centers—all kinds of people. The response was always extraordinary. There was a huge hunger for the arts, and this was a way to reach regions where artists weren't previously showing up.

Later, I ran the Exxon/National Endowment for the Arts Conducting Program, a residency program at major American orchestras, and then the Affiliate Artists Seaver/NEA Conducting Award. These programs put me in frequent contact with orchestras around the country and with the League.

SANDLA: You then moved into orchestra management. What did you enjoy about that, and what were the frustrations?

ROSEN: Running the conducting programs, I was basically everybody's friend, because I represented subsidized conducting positions and big cash prizes. I was a benevolent presence. Now, every orchestra is different, but generally, when you work as an orchestra manager, benevolent is not usually how people think of you. Working at a big orchestra, like the New York Philharmonic where I started, I realized that the heavy intensity of production was not the best fit for me.

I took a job at the American Composers Orchestra as executive director, and I stayed for almost ten years. It was a tiny operation when I arrived, but it was a wonderful experience. It gave me a big education about music by American composers. We did a five-concert subscription series at Carnegie Hall, we had record deals, we had National Public Radio series. We did big festivals of Latin American music. The scale at ACO suited me and was a good match of my musical interest in wanting to play a role in shaping artistic work.

I then went to the Seattle Symphony as general manager, working for Deborah Rutter. It was a very exciting time: we were building Benaroya Hall and there was a lot going on. However, I did not enjoy living in Seattle and was anxious to get back to New York. After I was at the Seattle Symphony for two years, Chuck



Jesse Rosen (center) as a budding trombone player, with members of the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony Orchestra on tour in Monte Carlo, circa 1972.

affiliate Artists was dedicated to supporting early-career professional artists. It put together sponsorships with Fortune 100 companies to place artists in communities that otherwise had no access to the performing arts. We had an incredible roster:

no lights, no acoustics, and an audience that knows nothing about you, then you can succeed anywhere.

It was thrilling to see the transformation in the communities. Working on programs like this took me all over the

Olton, who was running the League, offered me a job as vice president, and I started in 1998.

SANDLA: What drew you to the League?

ROSEN: Organizations like the League work to address challenges across our whole system. It wasn't consumed with producing concerts, but had the space to listen, to reflect, to test, to figure

“The public is revealing a desire to experience and curate the music in different ways, see it online or in concert formats that are attuned to their tastes and preferences. Let's be open to possibilities.”

out how to provide help and have meaningful impact throughout our sector.

Chuck Olton's big imperative at the League was learning and leadership development. The League launched the Orchestra Leadership Academy, at the time our most comprehensive attempt to provide a wide range of learning opportunities across the spectrum of all types of people working in orchestras. It eventually gave rise to what became the Institutional Vision Program and the Essentials of Orchestra Management program. Chuck elevated the importance of learning and professional development in our field.

SANDLA: What was the League's situation when you arrived?

ROSEN: When I got here in 1998, the League was still recovering from the reactions to the *Americanizing the American Orchestra* report, which had come out in 1993. My sense was the League was in a defensive position, timid with respect to how it understood the field and what role it could play. In essence, *Americanizing*, which was based on extensive research, recognized that the world was changing, and orchestras had to change with it. But a very strong reaction to the report said, “No. We don't need to change.” *Americanizing* was an enormously courageous act on the part of Cathy French, who was

then the League's president and CEO. The report introduced important issues and concerns to the field, some of which were tough and people didn't want to talk about. I continue to admire Cathy's courage; doing that then was a lot harder than it is now.

Americanizing was the first wave of several signals of change. The Knight Foundation's “Magic of Music” program and the Mellon Foundation's Orchestra Forum, which came out around the same time, challenged the status quo of orchestras. The Knight Foundation work concerned the nature of the concert experience and explored ways of doing concerts that would bring vitality and relevance. The Mellon Forum work was, to put it very simply, an attempt to bring musicians, managers, and boards together to identify their shared goals and visions and to address the inability of those three disparate parts to function successfully together. The Mellon Forum also introduced the idea that there are values beyond excellence for orchestras. Those investments helped shift what people thought was possible in the concert experience and established the idea that to the extent that management, board, and staff can work together, everyone's lives and the institution will be stronger. That was in opposition to the old idea that musicians, board, and staff never need to talk to each other.

SANDLA: As a member association, the League does not prescribe specific actions or solutions. How does the League bring forward ideas that might challenge some members but that others might be willing to consider?

ROSEN: I suppose my approach has been to point out bright spots and models

of progressive, forward-thinking work—and help that work have a platform across the field so others can look at it. That's a way of presenting ideas and practice without saying “this is the right practice.” Instead, we say that something merits attention. We try to bring forward information and perspective that our members may not otherwise see, so that they understand their work in a broader context.

Ten or fifteen years ago, as concerns about community engagement emerged, the League realized that orchestras should examine their relationships with communities. We did extensive public-perception research—with policymakers, funders, national media—asking what they thought



At the League's 2019 National Conference, in Nashville, Rosen presented composer Joan Tower with the Gold Baton, the League's highest honor, in recognition of distinguished service to America's orchestras.

about orchestras. The data told us that orchestras don't score very high on the question of serving a broad cross-section of communities. We took that seriously, and every chance we got we showed the data to our members. We then developed a rubric for community engagement and how to do it by assembling a working group of 50 people in the field who came together over a year to build a community-engagement tool. Polly Kahn, our VP



Rosen attends a session with musicians participating in the National Alliance for Audition Support, which was started in 2018 by the League, Sphinx, and New World Symphony. NAAS addresses the underrepresentation of Black and Latinx musicians in orchestras by providing financial and mentorship support to those musicians as they audition for orchestras.

for Learning and Leadership Development at the time, led this work brilliantly. It wasn't dictated by the League; it came out of the membership. This was the field teaching itself and helping itself.

Another approach is to bring important voices into our conversations. One occasion was when Alberto Ibarguen [President of the Knight Foundation and former publisher of the *Miami Herald* and *El*

“Commitment to artistry and excellence goes hand in hand with commitment to engagement and access and service. These are not opposing ideas; they reinforce each other.”

Nuevo Herald] spoke at the League's 2009 Conference. He said, in effect: “Don't make the mistake the newspapers made. We thought we were in the newspaper business. We weren't. We're in the journalism business. Journalism and newspapers are not the same thing. And if you think they're the same thing, you're conflating mission and strategy. Orchestras need to think about their missions.”

In terms of mission today, what better example is there that orchestras can't give

concerts? Does that mean orchestras have to go away? No, we can still deliver on mission. Orchestras are doing that by going online. Obviously, that's not something that we want to do permanently, but it raises the question: will society support live performances at the volume and frequency that it has until the COVID-19 pandemic? It's helpful to be clear about what your mission is and separate that from the many options available for how to execute it.

SANDLA: Apart from the pandemic, what do you think the biggest issues facing American orchestras today are?

ROSEN: Continuing to address the questions of what business are we in, why are we here, our role in the world. Orchestras need to keep asking and answering those questions and moving toward answers that are grounded in today's realities. There's such a preservationist outlook in how we approach our work. Some of that is to be expected; we play a lot of old music, and it's worth preserving. It's great culture, and it matters. But because we are so attached to that preservation mentality, we miss opportunities on the creative side and pertaining to organizational models. Our traditions were developed to solve different sets of problems. New situations and opportunities call for new ways

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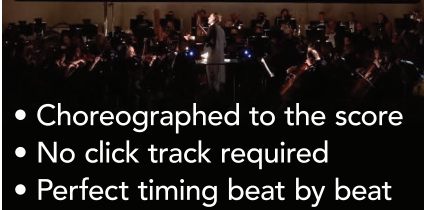
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Rosen and cellist Yo-Yo Ma head into a session at the League's 2018 National Conference in Chicago. Rosen presented Ma with the Gold Baton, which the League gives to those whose service to America's orchestras has been distinguished, at the Conference.

to work. The idea in a big orchestra that musician services can only be utilized for rehearsing and performing full-orchestra concerts does not feel really connected to the creative potential of the people in the orchestras, and to opportunities to serve our public, live and virtually. There's a lot about our basic structure that would benefit from a complete refresh and reimagination.

The pandemic has underscored that orchestras and their musicians are full of all kinds of creativity. But the field has hard boundaries about what musicians do that feel like barriers to orchestras' potential, and like barriers to meeting a huge desire from the public. The public is revealing a desire to experience and curate the music in different ways, see it online or come to performances at prices they can afford or in concert formats that are attuned to their tastes and preferences. Let's be open to possibilities.

SANDLA: Where does that leave artistry, musicians playing together as an ensemble? Does this shift detract from that?

eye contact and physical signals to sustain good ensemble. When they couldn't see each other because the sightlines were poor, they listened harder than they ever did before. But they added that what really elevated their playing was that in these smaller venues they could see the faces of the audience and see how they were being moved by their performance—and that inspired their finest playing. The lesson here isn't that we should have poor acoustical environments and concert halls, but rather it's an invitation to revisit what we think excellence means and how we achieve it.

SANDLA: As orchestras' missions evolve, values like equality, diversity, and inclusion, which were formerly sidelined, have moved to the foreground.

ROSEN: I feel some pride in League work in this area. In 2016, the League published two studies: *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field* and *Forty Years of Fellowships: A Study of Orchestras' Efforts to Include African American and Latino Musicians*. They were groundbreaking wake-up calls for the field.

ROSEN: I've told this story many times, but it remains the best answer to that question. A group of musicians in the Louisiana Philharmonic told me that after four years of playing in high school gyms, churches, and community centers while waiting for their concert hall, the Mahalia Jackson Theater, to be renovated after Hurricane Katrina, their ensemble playing actually improved. They said that when they couldn't hear so well because the acoustics were poor, they relied more on

The quantitative data in the diversity study did not contain many surprises—but seeing the facts laid out right before you, and the rigorous body of research behind it, illuminated the seriousness of this issue. The longitudinal data demonstrated that, with the exception of gender, there was little change in the makeup of orchestras over long periods of time. The fellowship study, which was primarily qualitative, addressed the question of why, if orchestras have been trying to increase diversity for years through musician fellowship programs, things had not changed. The study showed that, even when the fellowship musicians went on to career success, the internal cultures of orchestras were not changing. You could not expect to see major change across the field without confronting the values and culture of orchestras and the extent to which they embraced equity, diversity, and inclusion.

That research, combined with our 2016 Conference in Baltimore, which was devoted to equity, diversity, and inclusion, was a signal to the field that this subject had to be elevated to the highest priority. And it was being reinforced in many orchestras' communities. The League was not a voice in the wilderness. We were underscoring, framing, consolidating ideas and issues that people were experiencing at home.

We didn't merely commission studies and put them out there. They helped to inform us about opportunities to make change, and we launched The Catalyst Fund and the National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS); we are a founding partner with Sphinx and the New World Symphony for NAAS. The Catalyst Fund is a regranting program to support orchestras in advancing their understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion. NAAS addresses the underrepresentation of Black and Latinx musicians in orchestras by providing financial and mentorship support to those musicians as they audition for orchestra positions. While we were putting NAAS together, virtually every musician of color said something like this: "We're glad you're doing this, but it is not

sufficient. The problem is not primarily on the talent-pool side, it is inside the organizations themselves.” NAAS will make a difference—as long as the people who are doing the hiring, namely the orchestras, are ready to change.

SANDLA: Looking ahead, what qualities does Simon Woods, your successor, have that makes him a fit for the League?

ROSEN: I’ve known Simon for a long time, going back to when he was the artistic administrator at the Philadelphia Or-

“Orchestras must continue to address the questions of what business are we in, why are we here, our role in the world.”

chestra. He has been a part of the League for many years. He loves the League Conferences, he’s hosted Conferences in Philadelphia and Seattle, and he had started work on our Conference in Los Angeles. He’s the director of the League’s Essentials of Orchestra Management program and is deeply devoted to professional development. He’s a gregarious guy, very caring and thoughtful. He has a highly cultivated artistic sensibility, which will serve him well as he works with our membership around the evolving creative work of our field. He will be terrific.

SANDLA: At the Seattle Symphony, he led an orchestra with a high artistic profile that also did a lot of social-impact work with the homeless community and other groups.

ROSEN: Simon in some ways embodies the idea that commitment to artistry and excellence goes hand in hand with commitment to engagement and access and service. These are not opposing ideas; they are ideas that reinforce each other. During Simon’s time at the Seattle Symphony, the orchestra commissioned John Luther Adams to write *Become Ocean*, and it won the Pulitzer Prize. At the same time, the Seattle Symphony was producing the extraordinary Simple Gifts program with the homeless community and agencies throughout Seattle. The orchestra was doing great work on both fronts.

SANDLA: Once you step down, how

involved will you be with orchestras? What might you miss?

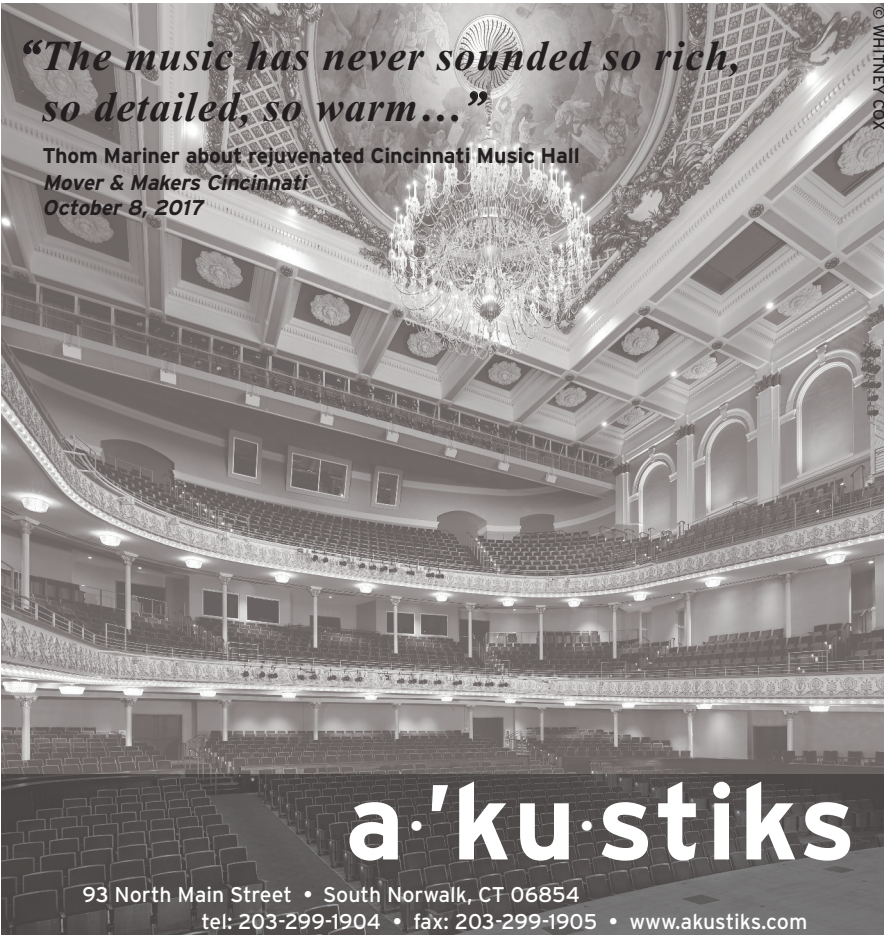
ROSEN: I love going around the country and attending concerts, seeing musicians I know, talking to board members and staff and others. After being in this field so long, I have a lot of friendships. I’ll miss that. I’ll miss the League’s staff and board, too. The staff, always hardworking and gifted, had their finest hour this spring with the online Conference, an extraordinary success and service to members. And while I was CEO, the partnership with three incredible board chairs—Lowell Noteboom, Pat Richards, and Doug Hagerman—has been a gift, and the whole board has been a brain trust, a source of tough love, and a cheerleader. All these relationships have meant so much to me, and I will miss them.

At this point, I don’t know exactly what my connection to the field will be. After

working full-time, going non-stop, I am looking forward to not working for a while, or working with less responsibility and less activity. Of course, I want to be as helpful as possible to Simon as he transitions into the job.

One lesson I learned from how Henry Fogel did this job was the value of being closely connected with our professional community. He demonstrated the importance of showing up. People love it when the person running the League gets on a plane, comes to hear their orchestra, and listens to what’s on their mind. They get a firsthand connection to the League, far away in New York City, that is very real and palpable. That part of the work was of great value to our members—and deeply rewarding to me. **S**

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



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