

A World More Embracing

As orchestras grapple with the financial and organizational challenges of recalibrating their business models for a post-pandemic world, compelling opportunities to rethink relationships with local communities and society itself are emerging.

by Simon Woods

After more than 30 years working with orchestras, I was honored earlier this year to accept the position of president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras. But back in March, I had little idea of what I would inherit as I stepped into my new virtual office at the end of the summer. It's not hyperbole to say that our working lives will never be the same again after 2020. As a result of COVID-19, arts organizations large and small are fighting for their lives, while individual artists and administrators are fighting for their livelihoods. The long-overdue racial reckoning of 2020 has layered on a profound re-examination of our entire field. And the Presidential election has reminded us all of the polarization that runs through American society and the acute divergence of views about how we should move forward as a nation. But what's particularly draining about this moment is the unfathomable uncertainty. Previous assumptions about our organizations seem irrelevant; even year-old strategic plans are barely worth the paper they're printed on, and no amount of self-care can fend off the deep anxiety we feel as we try to navigate the moment.

Amid crisis, it's hard to see what the future might bring. Music and extraordinary artistry across our field will always nourish

us. But with vaccines shipping and hope on the horizon, I want to suggest that we turn to new possibilities that might lie ahead. Humanity is resilient, and the arts are resilient. Orchestral music has survived for centuries, and it will thrive again. But it will thrive differently—and the opportunity in front of us now is to fashion a future that is richer and far more embracing than where we've come from.

Much has already been written on how we rethink our business models to be sus-

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tainable in a very different environment. It's a mammoth task. But alongside that vital work, there will be things we can do to root our work in a "new humanity" that gives our art fresh meaning and resonance. What follows are some thoughts on what those priorities might look like.

We can wait no longer to implement permanent structural change in response to the racial injustice that disfigures the history of orchestras. The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too



Craig T. Mathew/Mathew Imaging

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

many other Black Americans have precipitated deep questioning and accelerated our learning about how we have excluded Black people and culture from the orchestra field over many decades. The rawness of the moment has been mobilizing—and it's inspiring to see many organizations (including the League in its recent [Statement on Racial Discrimination](#)) committing themselves to the journey toward creating race-equity cultures. And as orchestras opened their 2020 fall seasons—in many different formats—a common thread was the widespread and welcome presence of Black artists and composers. But we've been here before and this time must be different. This moment requires commitments and benchmarks that we all hold ourselves accountable to and that keep this work alive each morning as we walk into our offices—virtual or actual.

We must address the pervasive privilege that continues to run through our structures and activities. Despite the urgency to maximize revenue in support of an art form that inherently requires many people for its execution, there are some

big questions to answer about financial and societal barriers to attendance, about the racial and socio-economic make-up of our boards, about galas that celebrate the exclusivity and the trappings of social privilege, and about our relationship with smaller arts organizations in our communities. COVID-19, as has been thoroughly documented, is the reverse of a “great leveler,” in the way it has laid bare the way privilege runs through society. It would be tone-deaf to attempt to turn the clock back to 2019; the new environment deserves and demands we observe a new level of intentionality around the word “inclusion” and how it plays out in our internal cultures and our external actions.

Creative artists will lead the way. They are the voices that will memorialize the human stories of this challenging period. Some of the most moving and visceral art of previous generations came out of darkness and suffering, and 2020 will be no exception. Works born of the COVID era will attempt to make cathartic sense from the suffering of this time, and they will come from a diversity of identities that would be unrecognizable to previous generations. If we put the creative voices of today center stage, future generations will turn back to them to learn about this moment we lived through, unravel its impact, and admire the way we grasped the moment to reconsider our purpose and values.

We need to rethink the role we ascribe to the canonic European repertoire of the past. Like Metropolitan Museum, Prado, and Louvre for the visual art world, orchestras interpret and curate an extraordinary body of repertoire for today’s audiences. And that repertoire continues to be of profound meaning, generation after generation, even as we increasingly understand it to be only part of the story. But the currency risks getting devalued. In this moment of re-assessment, let’s finally stop treating these great treasures of orchestral music as a recyclable asset, pulled mercilessly off the shelf for marketability and immediate emotional impact. Through scarcity and being placed in more diverse, more complete, and more

surprising contexts, they will live with new meaning and immediacy.

We must quickly advance the leadership potential of the coming generation, creating space for them to thrive, and helping us all to inhabit their world—where the many dimensions of diversity are a natural part of the landscape of hu-

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manity. Years of teaching and mentoring have shown me time and time again that young people ask the right questions and hold many of the answers. Our organizations are full of them—onstage and off. As the world shifts on its axis, the next generation of musicians and leaders brings extraordinary appetite for thinking differently and challenging norms. They are amazing multipliers for our field and its potential. Now is the moment to release their power.

Advocacy for education reform and instrumental instruction should sit much higher up in our hierarchy of organizational priorities. Even pre-COVID, access to music education was a stark civil rights issue, with schools serving low-income neighborhoods and communities of color receiving the least access to the benefits of an arts education. Music education resources are likely to be further threatened as public sector finances reel from the post-COVID economy. We know intuitively and from research that participation in music later in life as professional and amateur musicians, audience members, and volunteers is directly attributable to access to music education at the earliest age. But orchestras must prioritize education advocacy not only out of self-preservation, but because equitable access to a complete education is a human right. This slow-burning catastrophe requires a new urgency and leadership from orchestras and the field as a whole.

The rehabilitation of towns and cities must again become our work. The word “outreach” is at last thankfully getting replaced with the much more welcoming “engagement,” but that’s not going to be enough in 2021 and beyond. Think “activation.” With many downtowns currently reporting office occupancies of 10% or less and some showing disturbingly fast signs of decline, now the arts will come into their own, giving people a reason to return to urban cores, eat in restaurants, stay in hotels, and spend money in stores. Orchestras are increasingly skilled at reflecting local identity in their programming. That willingness to look for purpose beyond the stage can now come into its own, as the arts lead a revival of our post-COVID towns and cities.

Collective impact should be our daily bread. Many large arts organizations live in fragile competition with others in their communities, trying desperately to make a case for customers’ “share of wallet.” The vast range of entertainment, cultural, and philanthropic options available to our audiences forces us to hone our competitive edge. But this isn’t a zero-sum play. We

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can continue to nurture the uniqueness of our offerings while reaching communities more efficiently in partnership with smaller, less-resourced culture-makers who are more rooted in neighborhoods. Without underestimating the financial challenges orchestras are currently facing, it’s nonetheless true that in “normal” times we are usually among the largest and most privileged organizations in our communities. With that privilege comes great responsibility, and we should feel emboldened to stand side-by-side with those with less agency and access to power, working to inspire and build healthier communities together.

And finally, as we eventually exit from this tunnel, **we must prepare for the next crisis.** The violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja said recently: “COVID-19 is the general rehearsal for climate crisis.” The

still worsening pandemic has brought humanity's fragility shockingly into focus and should wake us up to the even more catastrophic threat that we—and our children—face. Like COVID-19, climate change exerts an asymmetrical force, as those who have less tend to suffer more.

For sure, we'll think twice about jumping on a plane to that business meeting a two-hour flight away, but we owe it to those performing in and managing orchestras 100 years from now to go further. However difficult the answers may be, let's finally start an honest discussion about the more

carbon-intensive aspects of our work—like touring, the global market for guest artists and attractions, and how audiences travel to our concerts and events.

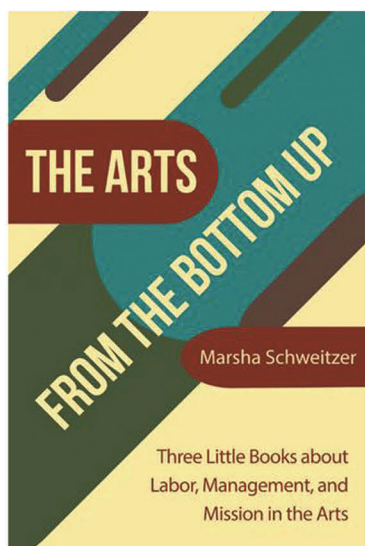
The League of American Orchestras supports and represents America's vibrant orchestral sector—and it's of deep personal meaning for me to take on the leadership of this organization at such a pivotal moment. In the past decade, our field has benefited from a huge explosion of new thinking, coming out to meet the changing world in exciting and challenging ways. Music has a unique power to cross boundaries and bring people

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together—and its inspiration will be more important than ever in the months and years to come. But we have work ahead of us, as we redefine ourselves less as “legacy art form” and more as a sector in permanent evolution, responding to and participating in powerful tides of societal change. Through advocacy, research, convening, and education, the League's work is to equip our field to answer the big questions in new ways as each generation passes the baton to the next—and help nurture our hopes into living reality.

I recently read a quote from long-time executive coach Nancy Levin that jumped off the page at me: “Honor the space between no-longer and not yet.” There is no better way to honor that space than giving airtime to the most pressing issues and challenges that are staring at us. We are currently living through the longest period of uncertainty that any of us has ever experienced in our professional lives, and it feels like an eternity. The more care we spend thinking about our missions in this not-yet moment, the more fully we'll be ready for the world more embracing that awaits us. **S**

This article first appeared on Medium.com on November 17, 2020.



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