

Creating Authentic, Community-Driven Partnerships

As the country copes with the pandemic and faces a long-overdue reckoning with racism, orchestras are seeking fresh ways to forge genuine connections with communities. How can orchestras collaborate with public education and community partners and offer social-emotional support and engagement? The League's "New Ecosystem for Community-Centered Commitments" webinar gathered experts to propose new directions.

INTRODUCTION

By Lecolion Washington

Orchestras all over the country have proven themselves to be extremely skilled at developing and promoting the beauty and grandeur of orchestral music. Because of the performance cancellations that have been brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, many orchestras are now seeking new and innovative ways to connect with audiences. What has become clear is that, at a time when creating and nurturing authentic community relationships is top of mind, many orchestras have not developed the necessary skills to lead in this arena.

When most people talk about community, they use the word "community" to describe places they would never visit. If the neighborhood in question was a place that patrons or musicians wouldn't take their children, then the institution would refer to that work as being "in the community." For many, community engagement was where institutions placed programs that were important, but not mission-critical. It was this framing that led to the lack of authenticity in "community-engagement" programs.

The legacy of this thinking is forcing

orchestras to come to terms with the competing truths of the orchestral field. Competing truths is a phrase from Thomas Henschel's podcast, "The Look and Sound of Leadership." In the idea of competing truths, there are multiple truths that are simultaneously true and contradictory. For example:

We're all the same.

We're all like many people and different from many people.

We're all individually unique.

"When most people talk about community, they use the word 'community' to describe places they would never visit."

All of those statements are true and contradictory. As a Black classical bassoonist, I understand competing truths quite well. I performed in great concert halls with some of the greatest musicians in the world. That's a truth. Simultaneously, many of the concert halls in which I performed were segregated during their history. My parents would not have been able to see me perform in those concert halls when they were young. That was a competing truth in my relationship with

this beautiful art form that I loved and that I committed my life to. Many of the times that I played concerts, I had to reconcile that competing truth in my mind while also preparing to play my best.

Competing truths is a way to create a sense of humility among orchestras as they begin to navigate this new terrain of creating authentic and community-driven partnerships. The music is wonderful and some of the relationships that the institutions created were simultaneously inauthentic.

Last fall, Eric Booth, a veteran arts-learning consultant, and I spoke with individuals from several perspectives in an honest discussion of the new approaches that will emerge from this time of closures. In *The New Ecosystem for Community-Centered Commitments*, a League of American Orchestras webinar, we also discussed the roles that orchestras can—and hopefully will—play in creating authentic relationships with the communities in which they exist.

The text that follows has been excerpted from the League of American Orchestras' September 23 webinar "New Ecosystem for Community-Centered Commitments" and edited for space. Learn more and watch the complete webinar at bit.ly/communitycenteredwebinar.

Eric Booth: This conversation is a testament to the priority that the League places on this issue of orchestras deepen-

ing their relationships with communities when it might get lost amid the demands of the triple or quadruple crises that we all find ourselves in. I've been touched that, repeatedly, they refer to this crisis time as an "opportunity time," in which we may be able to accelerate the pace of change for the relationship between orchestras and community ecosystems.

We have seven panelists with us who have seven different perspectives on this topic, experts who will look at the experience of this time and share their visions for the future.

Lecolion Washington: We're thinking about this time when 330 million people are experiencing collective trauma. We have this period of racial unrest that we must all acknowledge and appreciate. How do we take this as an opportunity to rethink what that word "community" means? What does it mean to be a community partner?

"We're meeting regularly during this period. We're asking ourselves how we're going to rebuild post-crisis, how we're going to diversify our faculty."

Victor Sawyer: In the Memphis music-education community, I've noticed a major challenge around training and reframing. The level of control has really been democratized; everyone's equal on the worldwide web. I'm noticing that a lot of people are having a hard time relinquishing control and allowing the community to speak for themselves. The people who have had the reins are rethinking what they do, because they don't have that same level of control that they once did.

Paul Murphy: I'm involved with several communities of teaching artists at cultural organizations. This is a vulnerable time for many of us—like most of my colleagues, I'm unemployed at this moment. And yet, teaching artists have been meeting regularly during this period. We're asking ourselves how we're going to rebuild post-crisis, how we're going to diversify

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Proudly hailing from Washington, D.C., trombonist **Hakeem Bilal** is assistant professor of trombone at West Virginia University, a regular extra with the Cleveland Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Symphony, serves as the bass trombonist of C Street Brass, and is a member of River City Brass and the MC of Beauty Slap.



Arts learning consultant **Eric Booth** has worked with many arts organizations, including several U.S. orchestras as well as cities, states, and businesses. He has served on the faculties of Juilliard, Tanglewood, the Kennedy Center, and Lincoln Center Education, and is the author of seven books.

Charles Dickerson is founder, executive director, and conductor of the Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles and the South Side Chicago Youth Orchestra, and professor of conducting at California State University, Dominguez Hills. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the League of American Orchestras.



Trumpeter **Paul Murphy** is a teaching artist at the New York Philharmonic and a curriculum specialist at Juilliard K-12. He has performed with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Orchestra of St. Luke's, the Knights, and International Contemporary Ensemble, and co-founded the chamber collective Decoda, an affiliate ensemble of Carnegie Hall.

Strategic and cultural planning consultant **Myran Parker-Brass** is the former executive director for the Arts for the Boston Public Schools. She served as director of education for the Boston Symphony Orchestra for twenty years, and was chair of Experiential Education at Longy School of Music at Bard College.



Suzanne M. Perrino is senior vice president of Learning and Community Engagement at Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

Victor Sawyer is a freelance trombonist in Memphis, TN. He is an instrumental instructor at Stax Music Academy for middle-school and high-school musicians, and the senior fellowship coach for the Memphis Music Initiative, working with teaching artists in underserved communities.



Dalouge Smith is CEO at the Lewis Prize for Music and prior to that, he led the San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory for thirteen years. Smith also serves as vice-chair of El Sistema USA and is on the boards of California Arts Advocates and Californians for the Arts.

Lecolion Washington is the executive director of the Community Music Center of Boston. He was co-founder and executive director of the PRIZM Ensemble in Memphis. Washington has been a featured solo and chamber bassoonist in the U.S. and abroad, and has performed as guest principal and co-principal bassoon with American orchestras.



our faculty. We wonder how we can help cultural institutions, arts leaders, board members, teaching artists, and funders reimagine more equitable labor structures for teaching artists and our community engagement work.

Right now, many teaching artists are feeling abandoned by cultural institutions. There is a risk that the trusting, collaborative, generous culture that has fueled teaching artists' work in community engagement may be damaged if we

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are unable to address the vulnerability of teaching artists as a labor force.

At the same time, I’m aware of many organizations that are using this moment to double down on community engagement. Even in organizations where funding has been cut or is uncertain, I’ve seen arts leaders find innovative ways to keep building community both internally and externally, so that we’re ready after this crisis.

Washington: Hakeem, can you give us a sense of what’s happening in the academic space?

Hakeem Bilal: There are universities that don’t have the deepest pockets that are furloughing employees; you’re seeing nationwide hiring freezes. But the biggest thing that I’ve seen with my students and with the community, especially in West Virginia, is the lack of accessibility. We’re talking about everyone having a stable internet connection, so that when you have a remote lesson, you have something you can receive that instruction from. There are students who have to go to a McDonald’s parking lot to get free WiFi just to have a lesson. There’s a major disconnect from people who have internet and say, “All right, we’re gonna go online.” We’re leaving out people who didn’t even

The screenshot shows the League of American Orchestras website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Learning & Leadership Development, Advocacy & Government, Jobs Center, Knowledge, Research & Innovation, and Conferences & Meetings. The main content area features a webinar titled "The New Ecosystem for Community-Centered Commitments" by Eric Booth and Lecolion Washington. A sidebar on the left lists "Upcoming Meetings" and "On-Demand Webinars" with various topics like "Newest Federal COVID-19 Relief Options" and "Coming Back Stronger - Using the Shutdown to Rebuild Audience Loyalty". Below the webinar title, there are two headshots of the speakers, Eric Booth and Lecolion Washington, with a "Register Here" button. A short description of the webinar is provided at the bottom of the main content area.

have internet before the pandemic who were left in the dark. That’s been a major roadblock.

Washington: Those of you within organizations, are there things that you’re recognizing—not only challenges for yourselves and your staff, but also challenges for the constituency that you’re working with and supporting and partnering with?

Dalouge Smith: The crux of this is, orchestras have an incredible specialization that, it turns out, is not adaptable to a changed environment. The question is, “What is your capacity for being responsive to change moments and to this particular circumstance?” In the creative youth development field, [they’ve retooled] programs that historically offered music, education, and meals and transportation so that now the transportation is a meal delivery service to families. Where I believe orchestras could do some important introspective work is to ask, what are the assets we have? How do we evolve those assets into a different shape or a different form to serve our communities differently than we were originally built to do?

Suzanne Perrino: Just thinking outside the concert format can be stressful to orchestras considering, “What can we do besides a concert?” For the fall, we’re

creating five digital episodes that are contextual and historical, but also offer a platform for local artists. We’re opening it up to offer different voices, different perspectives, different aspects of the region, to celebrate and involve other people and other topics—which can be very scary. We’re going down that road, but it

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fits into all of this: it is about adapting, pivoting. As a large organization that’s been around for 125 years, we’re going through that pain right now. How can we improve?

Charles Dickerson: It is incumbent on leaders in the field to be the ones who are nimble, and not to look to those within our ensembles and groups to be the ones who need to make the change. We are the

ones who need to make the change.

My orchestra also serves as the orchestra for California State University, Dominguez Hills. I've had to change the class so that we're not actually performing music, but we're listening to a lot of music. The underlying point I want to make is

“How are we as a collective going to build this new way to teach and for our students to learn? We're seeing something similar in arts and cultural organizations. How do I invite my partners into this new mode of teaching and learning?”

that it is upon us, as the leaders, to be nimble and flexible.

Booth: Panelists, are you seeing things emerging in this interim time that you sense are indicators of a longer-term change? Community connection through the internet is with us; that is going to be a long-term change. What else are you spotting?

Dickerson: We are suffering from a fear, perhaps more than a reality, that we're going to lose some of our participants because some of the young people that we have the privilege of serving don't have the technology. The bigger issue is, how do we maintain connection with the young people who are in our groups and with their parents? Some of them simply seem to have fallen off the map; they don't want to come online. How are we being creative and making sure that we can maintain connections with the very people we are there to serve?

Perrino: I'll add that social-emotional support, to make sure that we're there for others, is like a music therapy approach, like using music as a tool for health outcomes for the betterment of participants. The negative side of not having that social-emotional support is you see kids move away, disconnect, and return their instruments to drop out of band class, to drop out of youth orchestra. We're in this together. How do we support the larger

ecosystem of social, emotional, supportive music education?

Sawyer: In the examples where that connectivity hasn't been lost, I noticed something positive. Instead of people focusing on the 80- or 100-member orchestra in music education, teachers and specifically teaching artists are focusing on mentorship. They're focusing on smaller groups, on chamber groups. They're saying, “Maybe it's more important if I spend an hour with these three kids to just see how they are in general.”

Myran Parker-Brass: In Massachusetts, our music educators have been thrown into this new territory together [and] begun to understand that we're stronger as a collective. We're all losing resources and revenue. How are we as a collective going to build this new way to teach and for our students to learn?

We're seeing something similar in our arts and cultural organizations. It's that conversation about how we engage our teaching artists, and what tools we're going to give them. Also, how do I invite my partners into this new mode of teaching and learning? I think that is the positive that's coming out of this, because we're having this collective thinking and conversation.

One of the negatives, which we also need to keep in our forefront, is that schools and districts are having difficult conversations about resources and revenue. We're seeing this reduction and sometimes elimination of music positions and music programs.

Smith: In San Diego County, thousands of students at the highest income bracket are pulling out of public schools. They are basically building private academic hubs, pods, going to in-home learning, homeschooling, etc. At the same time, the lowest-income, most family-unstable students are dropping out of public school, disappearing. They're not even actively withdrawing from school, they are evaporating.

If orchestras want to really be responsive to the circumstances of their communities and meet young people where they are, finding partners who are tightly

connected to young people is important. I can't state enough that orchestras have immense resources in communities, and for those resources to not be directed to young people who are at risk of essentially losing education entirely, is basically an abdication of civic responsibility.

Booth: El Sistema and other in-depth after-school programs have almost all managed to get access for their students to sustain that relationship, to somewhat heroic degrees. They're actively using every tool they have—interpersonal, socio-emotional, and musical—to keep that thread alive, until it becomes clearer how to advance the musical learning.

Washington: In this moment in which many people in the country are galvanized around racial inequity, what role is an orchestra going to play in this trauma-

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sensitive space? What are some ways orchestras can use this as an inflection point to become part of these broader conversations?

Sawyer: One thing we did at Stax Music Academy is to look at mission and vision and ask: What are the goals for this organization? For the youth? For the community? Often those aren't aligned. It's so important to list [these goals] and then say, what is the purpose? Is this particular part of my programming needed in this environment? When you define and say, “this is important,” then ask yourself, how do we deliver it? Are we the ones to deliver it, and why? Ask yourself: What does it mean to uplift the arts of Black culture in traditionally anti-Black spaces?

Perrino: I agree. Sometimes it's difficult for an organization to think about itself, other than its main purpose of doing concerts. How can you uplift others? So



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much gets stuck in the silo of learning and community engagement, but we really need to make it institutional.

Dickerson: If we're going to be relevant, if we're going to continue to exist, it's time for us to get into the places where the young people are. This is not a usual space for orchestras. We're not used to going to the people. We're used to having the people come to us, and that's a major paradigm shift.

Murphy: Developing culturally responsive pedagogies and curriculums is an urgent part of orchestras doing anti-racist work. I'm a White teaching artist who has often been tasked by orchestras to teach predominantly Eurocentric curriculum in urban schools that are made up of primarily Black, Brown, and Asian students. We have the opportunity as a field to improve. It's important that orchestras include teaching artists, musicians, staff, and board members in professional development around this issue. Orchestras should move away from the deficit-based lens of "giving access" to musical culture, and towards a paradigm of engaging with the cultural wealth that's already present in the communities we interact with.

For example, most of my students in East Harlem have family connections to Jamaica. There is a wealth of musical knowledge and culture already alive in the classroom—if I and the NY Philharmonic are willing to get to know the students. We talk about the music of Beethoven and Julia Wolfe in my New York Philharmonic school residencies, but as we build an authentic relationship, my students and I have also found time to talk about Bob Marley and "Buffalo Soldier." We're able to have a much more authentic conversation. The learning is more discovery-based and less hierarchical. It's not about me and the Philharmonic giving access to Beethoven and Julia Wolfe, it's about imagining the kind of conversation that Bob Marley, Julia Wolfe, and Beethoven might have had together. And empowering my students to feel like they have every right to add their own voices, ideas, and music to that conversation.

Washington: Myran, what role can

orchestras play in being an advocate to mayors, city council people, state senators? You have been within an orchestra, but you've also been in city government, in the school system.

Parker-Brass: Orchestras are in their city governments all the time advocating for funding, but that funding can sometimes be narrow, focused. When they're advocating, let's change that narrative so that it includes the entire musical community, the entire music education landscape, so it's not just about them as an orchestra and what they bring to the city.

This is also a time for orchestras to help schools understand how and what the curriculum needs to look like. Students and millennials access music and arts differently. You're entering their space as orchestras, because you're now offering many more

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online opportunities for them to engage with you than ever before. Well, this is their territory. How do you bring them into the conversation about this new space of concert performance, engagement?

Dickerson: I would bet that every single person who's involved in their orchestra knows the city council person who represents the area where the orchestra is housed. It's time for us to know the city council persons who represent that part of the community that, frankly, is 90% of the time left out of orchestral music. Call your local head of your NAACP. Have lunch with them, find out what's going on. Ask, "How can we as an orchestra be helpful in your community?" Call your school board representative. How can we be helpful? Opening the dialogue is the first step.

Sawyer: When it comes to connecting with a community, we have city names attached to orchestras. The question I began asking myself, even before the pandemic, is how does the Memphis Symphony differentiate itself from the Nashville Symphony? Oftentimes,

organizations and symphonies have the name of a city in their title, but you could literally take that orchestra and drop it in any other city, and nothing would be different. Orchestras are claiming our cities, claiming our communities, and the only way that they're connected, oftentimes, is by ZIP code.

Booth: From other arts-community conversation, two things always come up. Number one is a challenge to the quality of listening by institutions: there are such habituated ways of listening that learning afresh how to listen is crucial. The second one connects to new partnerships. What is your sense of the opportunity of new partnerships?

Dickerson: I work in the inner city. Orchestras shouldn't come in as missionaries, as colonizers. Come in with a sense of humility and a recognition of what's already happening—what young people and their parents already know.

Bilal: There's a lot more room for the ego to be put aside. I think that we can stay relevant as organizations, by empowering those who are younger to just create, whether that's through digital audio workstations or finding a way to teach them how to put their thoughts down on paper.

Smith: City council members know what's going on in their neighborhoods. You can turn to your local leaders and say, here's what we have, we want to learn if this can be of use. Who should we talk to? Or, here's something that we're interested in learning more about, who can we learn from? You have to be conscious that you're not coming in to put your brand on their work, that's the colonizing side of things.

Smith: It is an act of immense privilege to not show up.

Sawyer: Go to a church service, go to your city council, ask the young people in your orchestra what they want. The problems are obvious; how to go about rectifying these things is obvious. Is the process a little bit painful, building relationships across time? Absolutely. But it's on us to stop acting like systemic racism is complicated. We know the problem. We know the solutions. **S**