

# Musician to Financier to Board Chair

**Alan Mason, the chair of the League of American Orchestras' Board of Directors, may just be uniquely suited to lead the national service organization.**

It's not everyone who forges the kind of path that Alan Mason has taken. He started as a young oboe player in love with classical music while in a youth orchestra; earned several impressive music degrees at several universities; morphed into a professional oboe and English horn player at the Waco Symphony Orchestra and the Louisville Symphony, and then swerved into a "temporary" summer job at BlackRock, the multinational investment management firm, where he stayed for 33 years. All along, he's been devoted to supporting the work of American orchestras, serving on the boards of California's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, Santa Rosa Symphony, and Oakland Symphony, and as board president of the Association of California Symphony Orchestras.

In June of 2024, Mason was elected chair of the League of American Orchestras' Board of Directors, having been a member of the League's board for several years. That's not his only current service to orchestras: he's also on the board of the Monterey Symphony. Mason brings energy, enthusiasm, and curiosity to his activities; it's hard to believe that he retired (as a managing

director) from BlackRock a couple of years ago. But Mason has always been busy. He earned a BM degree from Baylor University, summa cum laude, an MA degree in musicology from the University of Louisville with honors, and an MA degree in ethnomusicology from University of California Berkeley. He also taught undergraduate music courses in Louisville and Berkeley. At BlackRock, Mason served on the Global Diversity Steering Committee and was a founding member and global sponsor for the company's LGBT+ employee network. Mason makes it all look easy; he's an understated overachiever.

**ROBERT SANDLA:** What do you view as the roles and responsibilities of an orchestra's board of directors? What makes a great board great?

**ALAN MASON:** An orchestra board is like a lot of other non-profit boards: it has to be deeply committed and engaged with the mission of the organization. Of course, there's fiduciary oversight, which most boards do well, and I think the League board is particularly good and efficient at that. The other thing that's really important, and what makes a great board, is a sense of being an



Photo by Melissa Taylor.

Alan Mason speaks at the League of American Orchestras' 2024 National Conference in Houston.



Alan Mason with his treasured Lorée oboe.

## What makes a great board is a sense of being an advocate and ambassador for the communities we serve.

have to do some things differently. We've been talking about that for a long time, but the action has to be there, and it's around innovation and inclusion and a real future orientation to make what we do on the stage more relevant to the communities we serve and to a broader set of communities. Having leaders on the board who believe in that vision and are willing to be aligned around it in good times and in challenging times is very important.

I've been reflecting on this a lot because, as somebody who led a financial services team during the financial crisis, I was part of a company that was inventing the future of what needed to happen in financial services—things like target date funds for retirement and making it simpler for people to invest for their retirement and have better outcomes; things like exchange-traded funds that made it sort of a more democratic way of people getting exposure to markets. I was part of a company that was doing all kinds of innovative things, and then the financial crisis came. Not only were the financial markets upended, and revenue and expenses were in chaos, but our company had a new owner. The reason I tell that story is because leaders who can stick to the vision of innovation and what's needed for the future, are the leaders we need right now in our orchestras. We need people who are not going to be overly concerned with market instability, political change, and are going stick to the vision we have for the future of the orchestra field. We need that kind of alignment and commitment. We have it with our League board and League staff and with our members. It's not always easy. There are times when the culture of alignment and support is challenged because there are things in the macro environment we can't control—and we are either committed to our vision despite the things we can't control, or we aren't.

The League serves the field, and the field needs to be vibrant. I don't think that there's one answer for what resilience and vibrancy look like at the local level. What I think we do together is collaborate, support one another, and ask the

right questions. We advocate for policies that enable everyone to do that at the local level. The League is not telling the field what to do, the League is serving the field. Hopefully, it's also a catalyst for a broad variety of strategies that make the field more vibrant in local areas.

In the Strategic Framework, we talked about the importance of youth. If we want younger people in this country to engage with what we do, then we're going to have to do some things differently. We know that, but there's no single right answer to what that looks like.

**SANDLA:** Related to that is the topic of board diversity and inclusion. The statistics concerning board diversity and inclusion have remained pretty stubborn in much of the nonprofit world. What steps can boards take to become more welcoming to a variety of people of different backgrounds, no matter how you define background?

**MASON:** I think board diversity is critical. Again, it's not the same answer for every community, because the composition of a community vis-a-vis what it means to be engaged in that community is different from place to place. There has to be a commitment to the function of nomination or governance, because there has to be a real focus on what voices and perspectives we need to represent. Not just who's involved with us today, but who might be involved with us in the future.

I'm proud of what the League Board has done in that area, because the League Board represents a variety of functions. We have composers, musicians, board members, have orchestra administrators. We have that geographically; we have that demographically. As a result, the dialogue about how we support our members, and how we convene our members to think about important things in the future, is richer.

It's very important. It's the same argument that goes to what happens on stage. If people don't see themselves represented in governing bodies, in senior leadership roles on the administration side, and on stage, it's not the same kind of welcome invitation to people to engage with what we do.

advocate and ambassador for the communities we serve. When you think about the League, it has a broad constituency across the country of large and small communities that are served by our orchestras—as well as communities that could be served by orchestras. Another great element of a board is that it really represents the full constituency of those you hope to serve. With the League board, that means large and small orchestras, geographical diversity, demographic diversity, age diversity, all sorts of things that create a greater sense of inclusive advocacy for all the constituencies that we should be serving, not just today, but in the future.

There's not a nonprofit in the arts that is without some kind of financial challenges, so the philanthropic advocacy and ambassadorship are very important for the board. It's important for the Board to help build engagement with those who care about what the organization is doing and hopes to do in the future. When we do that very well, financial support follows, and financial stability for the change we hope to create in the world is supported.

**SANDLA:** Your phrase “the change we hope to create in the world” stood out. Could you delve into that?

**MASON:** One of the things that we did in the League's Strategic Framework that we're implementing is that we went back to our mission. We hope to serve our member orchestras without question, and that's a tall order, because they have different needs depending on their size, where they are located, and their financial situation. But we also recommitted to leading change boldly, because if we want orchestras to be vibrant in the future and to have relevance for the total communities that they serve, then we are all going to



Alan Mason with Doris DeLoach, his former oboe teacher, at the League of American Orchestras' 2024 National Conference in Houston.



Alan Mason at a Los Angeles Philharmonic concert at the Hollywood Bowl, during an Association of California Symphony Orchestras conference. He was president of ACSO's board, in addition to serving on the boards of orchestras and the League of American Orchestras.

**SANDLA:** We're in a time of a great deal of upheaval and change on the policy front. You mentioned sticking to the mission, no matter what may be beyond one's control.

**MASON:** That's the kind of leadership that we need right now. We can't control the challenges or uncertainties that we face; we can't control the pace of change. But we can underscore our collective beliefs and our vision. We can support each other—musicians, staff, board members, donors—and really stick together. I have no crystal ball on how the uncertainties that we are seeing in markets and in policy will play out. I know that there are easier times and more challenging times to create collective action. And this is one of those moments where our belief in support of each other is very important, as is our conviction to stay with our strategy, even if it's not as popular as it might have been at another moment.

## The action has to be there around innovation, inclusion, and a real future orientation to make what we do on the stage more relevant to the communities we serve.

**SANDLA:** What first drew you to classical music and orchestras and your instrument? Was there some inciting incident that lit a spark?

**MASON:** One of the reasons I love to support the work of the League is that when I was growing up as a young, closeted, gay man in North Georgia, there were inspiring music teachers—church choir, school, band, youth orchestra. They gave me a sense of belonging, of challenge and vision, and helped me see a bigger world than my local community. That continued for me when I was an undergrad music major studying the oboe and it continued, even as a graduate student in music.

Music gave me a foundation for understanding who I was, how I fit into the world, how to collaborate, how to listen, how to set goals. It was very fundamental to me, emotionally and professionally. Yes, I ended up doing something completely different—asset management. That started as a two-day temporary job at a company called Wells Fargo Nikko that ultimately became BlackRock. When I started there, I didn't know what I was doing or how I fit in, and I needed a summer job. I was a music major, an out gay man—and this was 1991 in finance. I was far from the conventional new employee. Yet I ended up with a 33-year career, and I led the largest investment team at BlackRock. We were responsible for \$5 trillion dollars under management. It is a longer story how that unfolded, but it involved key diverse corporate leaders—gay people, women, people of color who sponsored people with unconventional backgrounds.

Given my start in music, for the last 15 to 20 years I've been serving on orchestra boards, trying to make sure that orchestral music is still available for other young kids who need it desperately, like I did. That really does tie to the League specifically, because I think that the League strategically is enabling that at a bigger scale and a bigger level than any single orchestra can. I love the fact that the League is empowering that kind of resilience for something that gave me so

much as a kid. It's a way of paying that forward.

**SANDLA:** People often cite participating in youth orchestras or being a musician growing up as teaching not only about music, but about discipline or working together or rehearsal and preparation. Was that part of the appeal for you?

**MASON:** Playing the oboe—or any instrument—teaches you a lot. First, you have to be good at your individual instrument. You've got to spend a lot of time, discipline focusing on: how can I improve in this particular area? How do I prepare to be present? But when you're performing in an orchestra, it's very much about collaboration and listening. You're not the only one that's sort of dictating the way things unfold. You need to be very clear about what your part is in supporting the greater unfolding of this piece for the audience. Playing in an orchestra did give a lot of skills in the area of discipline, but also collaboration, listening, preparedness, and even dealing with the unexpected.

**SANDLA:** The old joke: are you a recovering oboe player?

**MASON:** Making the reeds did me in. It was never my number one expertise. Even orchestra nerds don't necessarily know all the time it takes. You spend almost as much time making reeds as practicing. I deeply admire people who do it beautifully. But I did not choose that as my ultimate goal.

**SANDLA:** The way you described playing in an orchestra sounds almost like how you described being a member or leader of an orchestra board. Any comparisons?

**MASON:** The leader of a board is probably more like the music director or conductor, because you do have to bring out the best in everyone, and you're all doing something that creates an emotional experience for the audience. There's a mission-driven thing going on between conductor and orchestra around creating great art that moves and challenges the audience. Hopefully, boards are trying to move and challenge their constituencies around the mission of their organization. Everyone comes prepared like orchestra musicians, and hopefully, the leader of the organization can bring out

the best skills and talent in service of what you're doing for the audience, or the members, in the League's case.

There are times when you have to balance things differently, when you need a new soloist in a certain area, or there are decisions that must be made because the status quo doesn't always work. But you yourself are not making the music happen. It's the collective that creates the music, and you've got to get out of the way and enhance the inherent talent of the organization.

**SANDLA:** You talked about your identity as an out gay man working in finance. In recent years, the League launched an LGBTQIA+ constituency group. What does that say about the League, or about society or the orchestra field these days?

**MASON:** I was one of the founders of the LGBT+ group at BlackRock, and in financial services, we didn't have enough senior role models in the LGBT+ space. We were not necessarily dealing with all of the issues that come up for that community around belonging, identity, career progression, and all kinds of things.

There are a lot of out gay people in music and music administration. But I don't think we can take for granted the progress that's been made in LGBTQIA+ rights, especially at the national level.

There's a level of vulnerability that we need to achieve around talking about our whole lives. If you choose to be out and tell revelatory stories about yourself, and be vulnerable in that way, it has positive momentum and can encourage others to do the same. People can bring their full selves to the workplace as a result.

**SANDLA:** What do you see as the most pressing opportunities and most pressing challenges for orchestras right now?

**MASON:** I want to make sure that I say that the staff under Simon [Woods's] leadership is doing a remarkable job in collaborating with the field. I think that the Strategic Framework, which will be refreshed in about another year, is spot on concerning inclusion, greater community dialogue, focus on youth, focus on financial resilience. Those things are vital. When I think about the 2025 National Conference, I'm excited about Renée Fleming doing the keynote talk on the role of music in healing. She's also been deeply in partnership with Francis Collins, who used to be at the National Institutes of Health. Collins talks about the

exhausted middle—the Americans who are not at some great extreme of one view or the other, but want to commit to things that they believe in and not be exhausted by constant divisiveness. Having role models like Renée Fleming speaking at our Conference sends a great signal; she has partnered with people in science to think about the true power of music in our communities, to engage in ways that we haven't even fully imagined. To me, that is what the League's all about—to envision the way that orchestral

music could enliven and enrich our communities in good times and in challenging times. I don't think the direction has changed. I think we have to be committed to our vision collectively and support each other even when things are uncertain or challenging. **S**



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## Arts and Letters

### 2025 New Members and Award Winners in Music

#### New Members

Derek Bermel  
Gabriela Lena Frank  
Lin-Manuel Miranda

#### Arts and Letters Awards

Mark Applebaum  
Raven Chacon  
Sylvie Courvoisier  
Tamar Muskal

#### Andrew Imbrie Award

Elizabeth Ogonek

#### Charles Ives Fellowships

Arseniy Gusev  
Gabriella Smith

#### Charles Ives Scholarships

Corey Chang  
Ryan William Garvey  
Baldwin Giang  
Emily Liushen  
Gabriel Novak  
Max Vinetz

#### Goddard Lieberson Fellowships

Shawn E. Okpebholo  
Aruán Ortiz

#### Otto and Catherine Brunson Luening Award

Mikael Karlsson

#### Wise-Hinrichsen Award

Jerod Impichchachaaha'  
Tate

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