MORE AND MORE, the definition of what it means to be a musician in a symphony orchestra is expanding. As orchestras’ missions evolve, their musicians are contributing in ways that go far beyond the traditional role of performing concerts for a ticket-buying public. Under the orchestra’s auspices, some musicians teach in area schools, or bring live music to hospital patients or eldercare facilities. Others work with low-income or at-risk youth. Still others connect with communities that are steeped in very different musical traditions.

A new program launched this year by the League of American Orchestras—the Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service—recognizes orchestral musicians for outstanding efforts in these areas. Made possible by Ford Motor Company, the League’s new Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service recognize five orchestral players for exemplary work in education, cross-cultural diplomacy, and bringing music’s therapeutic power to hospitals and other special-needs facilities. Here are their stories.

The Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service were presented at the League of American Orchestras Conference on June 10. From left: Baltimore Symphony Orchestra percussionist Brian Prechtl; South Dakota Symphony Orchestra Principal Oboe Jeffrey Paul; Oakland Symphony cellist Beth Vanderven; League Chairman Patricia A. Richards; Ford Motor Company Fund Community Relations Manager Elizabeth McAdam; League President and CEO Jesse Rosen; Detroit Symphony Orchestra bass clarinetist Shannon Orme; Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra violist Penny Anderson Brill.
Company Fund, the program honors individual musicians’ essential contributions to the community through work supported by their orchestras.

Of the many orchestral musicians who engage in community service, the inaugural Ford program has singled out five awardees, selected by a panel of industry professionals following a competitive nomination process. They are Penny Anderson Brill, a violist in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra; Detroit Symphony Orchestra bass clarinetist Shannon Orme; Jeffrey Paul, principal oboist in the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra; Beth Vandervenet, a cellist in California’s Oakland Symphony; and Baltimore Symphony Orchestra percussionist Brian Prechtl. Each award includes a $2,500 grant to the musician and an additional $2,500 to his or her home orchestra to support professional development focused on community service and engagement for its musicians. The five musicians demonstrated their community-service work—some with instruments, some through video—during a “Ford Musician Awardees in Action” session at the League’s Conference in June, and were formally presented with their awards during the League Luncheon and Annual Meeting.

“These five musicians serve as models and mentors to the entire orchestra field,” says League President and CEO Jesse Rosen. “Their commitment and dedicated work, whether by inspiring under-served students, bringing comfort in healthcare settings, or bridging cultures through their artistry, is on the leading edge of orchestras’ service to their communities. We’re grateful to Ford Motor Company Fund for helping support this vital program, and for enabling us to publicly acknowledge and share the important work of these musicians.”

Jim Vella, president of Ford Motor Company Fund, notes that when music is combined with community service, “it results in a powerful experience that has lasting impact on everyone involved. These dedicated musicians, and many more like them who take the time to share their talents with those less fortunate or in need, deserve special recognition. They really do go further
Music and Wellness
Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra violist Penny Anderson Brill first experienced the power of music to help heal the body and soothe the soul nearly two decades ago. Faced with a number of procedures following a diagnosis of breast cancer, she turned to music therapy. To prepare for reconstructive surgery, Brill had a therapist do a session using a technique called guided imagery. “It was enormously helpful to me in imagining the surgery and the recovery,” she says. Particularly beneficial during the postoperative phase was the therapeutic use of music therapists. She has led numerous workshops on health and wellness and written extensively on the subject, most recently in “Addressing Community Concerns Through Music,” a scholarly article published in the July issue of *Music and Medicine*, journal of the International Association for Music and Medicine. And thanks in large part to Brill’s work, the Pittsburgh Symphony has, through its newly launched Musicians as a Community Resource website (musacor.com), become a resource for orchestras and orchestral musicians seeking to establish or manage wellness programs.

For Brill, “wellness” is not simply the absence of sickness. It’s a matter of mental and emotional focus, relief from stress and worry, a feeling of connectedness. Music and sound have a powerful role to play in all of that, as she demonstrated in the Ford Musicians session at the League Conference. Brill owns many percussion instruments—things. And the sound of everybody doing the drone together is incredibly powerful. You gather a sense of strength from helping each other create the sound.”

In hospital settings, it’s not just the patients who benefit from what Brill and her colleagues have to offer. Twice a year she visits UPMC Children’s Hospital with a violinist, cellist, and flutist from the PSO to perform at a memorial service for the children who have died—about 75 of them will have passed during a typical six-month period. Aside from the children’s families and UPMC medical staff, the people attending these services come from “all parts of the hospital: the spiritual department, the administrators, the music therapists. There’s a sense of the whole community helping the families get through an unimaginable event. The memorial service takes place after the families have had some private time to deal with their loss. A sibling, or someone whose child died, might talk about how they are coping. The people who play for these services often tell me it’s one of the most powerful and important things they do all year.”

Brill also brings her musical talents to The Woodlands, an organization that runs weeklong retreats for special-needs kids in Wexford, Pa., just north of Pittsburgh. This summer she visited a Woodlands retreat for children with autism, Down syndrome, and other disabilities. Together with a music therapist and two PSO colleagues, violinist Louis Lev and cellist Adam Liu, she worked with the kids in interactive settings. The goal, she says, is to give them the “most positive experience of music. At the end of the week there’s a performance where each child—by being allowed to conduct or do other things—is given a chance to shine.”

Indian-inspired Shakti Yoga music, which Brill says “helped me in getting my circulation back, and in reducing the amount of pain medication I needed. It made a big difference in how quickly I recovered.”

At that time, Brill says, there were no music therapists on staff at the hospital where she was treated, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC). With help from the Pittsburgh Symphony, she set out to change that. Music therapists are now a key component of the PSO’s Music and Wellness program, which allows Brill and many other musicians from the orchestra to bring music to hospitals in the UPMC system, as well as nearby nursing homes and special-needs facilities. They do this through a service-exchange arrangement that earns the musician vacation days for time spent in a vital community service.

Brill has become an international authority on the effective use of live music in healthcare settings, and in the complementary relationship between musicians and "a rolling suitcase of stuff," she says—and for this gathering of orchestra professionals she brought out one of her standard tools, the ocean drum; it evokes the sound of waves washing over a beach as it’s tilted and metal balls under the drumhead roll from side to side. Brill asked the audience to inhale and exhale slowly and deeply, mimicking the ebb and flow of the ocean. She then played two pitches on a violin, a perfect fifth, directing half the audience to drone on one note, half on the other.

“Practicing with the wave and creating the drone are ways of extending the time that you’re breathing with your diaphragm,” Brill explains. “There’s a test that hospitals do before letting you go home. You’re more likely to pass it if you’ve been practicing deep diaphragm breathing. Four minutes have gone by, and what has changed? Everything, because for four minutes you’ve been paying attention to the present. Suddenly you feel more optimistic, you’re more alert, you can handle
The idea of the Lakota Music Project, says South Dakota Symphony Principal Oboe Jeffrey Paul, is to “get into the reservations and play with Natives for Natives—to see if there is a possibility of using music to culturally heal.”

The first Lakota Music Project concerts, says SDSO Executive Director Jennifer Boomgaard, took place in May 2009—in
A Lakota song of mourning was paired with Barber’s *Adagio for Strings.* "The second half included the world premieres of two South Dakota Symphony commissions: *Black Hills Olowan* by Native American composer Brent Michael Davids (a Wisconsin-born member of the Mohican Nation) and Paul’s own *Desert Wind.* The concert was a “very moving experience for the orchestra, and seemed to be so for the drum group as well,” says Paul. Another new work generated by the Lakota Music Project was *Wakcígli Olowan* (“Victory Songs”), a song cycle for baritone and orchestra by Jerod Impich-Chaachaaha’Tate, an Oklahoma-born member of the Chickasaw Nation. (His middle name means “high corncrib.”) It was commissioned by the Sisseton Arts Council, based in a town near the reservation’s southern border. "They had heard my *Desert Wind,*” Paul recalls, "and they said, 'This is great, but we have a cultural treasure here in Bryan Akipa. He's Dakota, and so far that's been lacking in the Lakota Music Project. We want to have Dakota music represented." The orchestra premiered Paul's *Pentatonic Fantasy* in Sisseton in April 2013.

The Lakota Music Project’s most recent iteration was a March 2016 partnership with Joseph Horowitz’s "Music Unwound" project exploring Native American and African American influences on Dvořák’s “New World” Symphony. Presented in Sisseton and Sioux Falls, the program paired the Dvořák with Brent Michael Davids’s *Black Hills Olowan,* performed with the Creekside Singers, a Lakota drum group. Boomgarden expects the Lakota Music Project’s next phase to include programs involving the full orchestra as well as residencies by its Dakota String Quartet and Dakota Wind Quintet in multiple South Dakota communities and reservations.

**Baltimore Symphony percussionist Brian Prechtl learned about educating at-risk youth during his time with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic 25 years ago: “We needed to fill a lot of roles that a normal teacher or musician wouldn’t be expected to fill.”**

As Paul sees it, the whole idea of the project is to “get into the reservations and play with Natives for Natives—to see if there is a possibility of using music to culturally heal, even in the tiniest way. It’s so important not to trample into their territory, to cheapen or exploit their music. We want this to be authentic. And that has meant treating each of our traditions with equal reverence.”

**Ford Webinar: Watch, Listen, Learn**

All five recipients of the 2016 Ford Musician Awards will discuss their work in a League of American Orchestras webinar this fall moderated by the noted educator and author Eric Booth. Individuals affiliated with League-member orchestras may participate in the webinar free of charge, and the full content will be posted to [americanorchestras.org](http://americanorchestras.org) following the event.
about “the four things you need to make a symphony concert happen: a musician, a composer, a conductor, and an audience. I’ll have a kid come up and play ‘Pop Goes the Weasel,’ where they pluck the E-string on ‘pop.’ I’ll have kids conduct me while I play the cello: when they conduct big I play loud, if they conduct fast I go fast. They’re learning how music is shaped. It’s one of the most rewarding things I do.

“I like to call the musicians in this program ‘mentoring/teaching artists.’ We really are different from that teacher the kids see every day. In the five years I’ve been coordinating the program I’ve encouraged our mentors to develop relationships with the kids so they’re learning about our careers. When they come to a concert they get really excited: ‘Oh my gosh, there’s my mentor up there!’ It’s hard to get kids and families out to concerts, but one small piece of that is having them see us as mentors and not just teachers.” Having participated in the mentoring program for seventeen years, Vandervennet is “seeing kids I’ve worked with go off to college. They haven’t gone to Juilliard or anything like that, but that’s not my focus. It’s to enrich their lives through music, and to show them that when you really stick with something you can get good at it, and it will add a whole other dimension to your life.”

Buckets in Baltimore

“So many life skills are tied up in ensemble playing,” says Baltimore Symphony Orchestra percussionist Brian Prechtl. “Teamwork. Understanding your place in the greater scheme of things. Putting yourself second and the group first. Everybody wants to see himself as part of a group. And this is like, ‘boom, you’re in a group.’ Pride, identification, knowing who you are, who your peeps are. So often we see groups form around less desirable commonalities. It’s really nice to give kids something that’s so productive.”

Prechtl is talking about his bucket band, an ensemble that he directs as part of OrchKids, a program of the Baltimore Symphony that provides free instruction, both after school and year-round, to students in some of the city’s toughest neighborhoods. “Except for the ones who are exclusively percussionists,” he says, “almost all of the bucket-band kids play other instruments. They’re coached by OrchKids specialists in those instruments and participate in an orchestra, then come to me for the bucket band.”

As a member of the Fort Wayne Philharmonic some 25 years ago, Prechtl says

Swapping her regular instrument for a violin, Oakland Symphony cellist and education coordinator Beth Vandervennet leads kids from the Oakland Unified School District at the annual String Festival last May.
he “got a call from a woman at the YMCA in one of the worst parts of town. She said, ‘I have an after-school program, and I want it to have music.’ I said, ‘How much money do you have?’ Her response was, ‘$850.’ So I said, ‘OK, we’ll buy some buckets at Home Depot and get drumsticks.’ I learned pretty quickly just how much you are able to do with such an economical approach.”

Prechtl also learned a few things in Fort Wayne about educating at-risk youth. “I would go to this person who ran the after-school program and say, ‘We have a problem with this kid. He doesn’t really understand what I want from him and how he’s going to handle himself. We need to get him a psychologist, get his parents here.’ She said, ‘Brian, that isn’t going to happen. I know his mother. She has five kids, works two jobs, and there is no father. And no psychologist. We are all of those things rolled into one, and we’ll have to solve these problems ourselves.’ That was a wakeup moment for me. I realized that we needed to fill a lot of roles in this kind of work that a normal teacher or musician wouldn’t be expected to fill.”

A member of the OrchKids team of teacher-mentors since 2009, Prechtl works with more than 200 students weekly in three schools. What is the kids’ level of commitment to the program? “There are always some hurdles,” Prechtl says. “Their idea of what’s acceptable in terms of participation is constantly being updated by us. I have to let them know, ‘You can’t just come or go as you please. If you want to work in this world, there are expectations you have to meet.’ That’s really difficult for some of them. But they do get self-motivated.” Prechtl has watched kids in his bucket band go on to Baltimore School for the Arts, to summer camps such as Interlochen, and to the El Sistema-inspired National Take a Stand Festival, a partnership of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Aspen Music Festival and School, and the Longy School of Music of Bard College.

“The relationships I’ve developed with these kids are going to last forever,” Prechtl says. “When I spend time with them outside of rehearsals or class, we’re talking about life—how to handle disappointment, how they deal with their parents, or some of the hurdles they have at school, especially when they’re trying to balance it with the kinds of demands OrchKids puts on them. They may not go on to become percussionists or cellists or tuba players, but you know you’re helping these kids in a host of different ways. And they will take that with them.”

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