Imagining 2023

League President and CEO Jesse Rosen delivered the following remarks on Tuesday, June 18 at the Opening Session of the League of American Orchestras’ 2013 National Conference in St. Louis.

Don’t you just love the Gateway Arch? What a stunning symbol of optimism and the pioneering spirit of America! It is indeed a gateway through which we create our future, and a shining upward surge toward new heights. Eero Saarinen, who designed this arch, also designed the wonderful Kleinhans Music Hall, home to the Buffalo Philharmonic. Finland has given us great architects as well as great musicians.

Saint Louis also boasts, of course, the wonderful St. Louis Symphony, itself a testament to a spirit of optimism. Long in the forefront of the performance of American music, the Symphony also pioneered our modern design for community engagement for large-budget orchestras, a full ten years before others caught on.

And following tough financial straits in 2005, the St. Louis Symphony has bounced back with all-time-high records in revenue and attendance. Most importantly, the quality of its musicians and the adventurousness of its music director, David Robertson, make the St. Louis Symphony among our most celebrated orchestras.

Across the river from the Gateway Arch lies East Saint Louis. Its failing public school system was made famous by Jonathan Kozol’s bestselling book Savage Inequalities, a searing look into the inequity of support for the education of poor, black children in America.

Last year the U.S. Department of Education released its Arts Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools report, covering 1999-2009. It reveals that arts education is largely inaccessible to poor children. The inequity is so great that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declared it both “an equity and a civil rights issue.” This problem of access to the arts illustrates systemic flaws in our nation’s education system, but also paints a desolate picture of the future of orchestra audiences, musicians, volunteers, and administrators, for it predicts an ever smaller, more isolated, and homogenous pool of those who benefit from or care about our art form.
So as we imagine the future of orchestras in 2023, there are reasons for both optimism and pessimism.

Our approach may depend on our answers to some key questions, such as “How will we address the large scale societal forces that impact us so profoundly?” Or, “How will we leverage the voices of a new generation of music creators and interpreters who are leaving old boundaries behind?” These are some of the questions you will have a chance to address in the next few days, with the help of our speakers and your colleagues.

But before we begin, I’d like to talk briefly about the last twelve months and where we are today. The image that represents our field for me is New York’s Hudson River. I know that sounds odd, but the thing about the Hudson River, unlike the great Mississippi outside our doors, is that it flows both north and south at the same time. Crazy, isn’t it? But it’s true. And to me, this pulling in opposite directions seems like what is going on across our field. We are deeply anchored in our traditions yet simultaneously swept along by the currents of our new world. We have to hang on to our core audiences, but all signs suggest the coming generations are pulling us toward something completely different.

Or as a musician in the Detroit Symphony observed to me: “I love playing in the new suburban venues, and the work we do with kids, but we also need to be in our terrific-sounding concert hall where the orchestra sounds its best. How do we balance this?” he asked me.

Indeed, navigating these cross currents is no easy task. To stay with this metaphor, we have some beacons, our bright lights, and we also have some turbulence.

For sure, we have witnessed more than our usual share of strikes, lockouts, and bankruptcies. Each situation is of course unique. I would only observe that, in these times of both rapid change and when traditional income streams are at risk, there is no margin for anything less than the highest quality leadership from boards, managements, and musicians.

By high quality I mean focused on a long-term vision while practicing open communication, transparency, and dialogue. I mean empathy—the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes on an ongoing basis, and being deeply engaged in building and sustaining trust. To encourage these qualities the League will continue to make leadership development its top priority and largest resource commitment. And we will be increasingly turning to you to play your part in identifying
emerging talent and leadership in your own organizations and creating pathways for its development.

I would also note that while public perception cannot take precedence in navigating disputes, this discord takes a heavy toll on the reputation of our entire community of hundreds of orchestras. I can tell you that the public conflict leads policy makers, funders, and the national media to make painful negative assumptions about our field, despite the fact that most of our members successfully rise to their challenges. These assumptions are very hard to dispel. But now let’s turn to some beacons. I’ll start with youth orchestras—our first point of connection to young people and instrumental performance. At this time when the variety of musical options is unbelievably vast, and the availability of passive digital engagement expands exponentially by the day, our youth orchestras have not only remained strong, but they have grown.

Right here in Saint Louis, the Youth Symphony has doubled in size in the last year. The San Diego Youth Symphony garnered the top prize in good governance from BoardSource, the national group promoting governance excellence. Across the country our youth orchestras have also been on the front lines of tackling the inequities of music education in our communities, while developing so much of the talent our adult orchestras depend on.

By now we all know hockey great Wayne Gretzky’s secret for scoring so many goals. He said, “I skate to where the puck will be.” Well, orchestras have been doing a lot of skating to where the puck will be, or in our case, to where the audience will be.

The New World Symphony is one of our beacons for taking innovation to the next level. They have not only been testing new concert formats, but they have been adjusting as they go—getting audience input, evaluating the results, and collaborating with the orchestras of San Diego, Charlotte, Memphis, Detroit, and Kansas City to extend the tests outward. This is what I call real research and development!

And how about that venerated Cleveland Orchestra, whose musicians started a series at the Happy Dog Bar that grew into a neighborhood residency, which in turn resulted in major local economic impact? I told this to a national media representative who practically fell out of her chair when she heard it.

Our smaller-budget orchestras have long held deep and authentic connections to their communities, and have ensured that people outside our major metropolitan areas have access
to symphonic music. They too are reaching new heights. In Stockton, California the orchestra stepped up to take on a civic crisis: rampant gang warfare. With a commission and composer residency through our Music Alive program, the orchestra brought young people, civic leaders, and the community together, using a new composition about conflict resolution to engage the community in tough but necessary conversations.

We still have a very long way to go in addressing the ever more pressing imperative to diversify our boards, staff, musicians, repertoire, and audiences.

One of the most important things we can all do is to tackle the threshold question of what we mean by diversity. A definition drawn too broadly risks diluting the unique circumstances of various groups and may be inadequate as a guide to meaningful action. On the other hand, define it too narrowly and some not named might feel justifiably excluded. This is another tough but terribly important conversation to be having in our increasingly multicultural environment. You could say we are still swimming upstream on this one. But again, let’s not forget to acknowledge the progress being made.

At this year’s inaugural Sphinx Conference, orchestra representatives were the single largest group from among all the performing arts in attendance. Showing up does matter! Meanwhile, a work group of fourteen people from eleven orchestras facilitated by the League has been meeting throughout the year to share best practices. And the League’s online Diversity Resource Center launched in January. Wherever you are on this path, I encourage you to go visit the Center on our website.

Finally, I am pleased to report one more very big bright spot for our community. You have reversed the deficit trend line. In 2011, more than two-thirds of orchestras reported surpluses, while only one third reported surpluses in 2009.

And, as we have been saying over the last two years, balancing the budget is only one element of being capitalized in a manner appropriate to your orchestra’s own unique circumstances: your life cycle, markets, and future plans. The 40 orchestras who worked with the League’s capitalization diagnostic, the SMART tool, have had a chance to dig deeply into this work. I encourage all of you, especially boards of directors, to stay focused on this more complete set of financial indicators.

So what lies ahead for 2023? I’ve thought for a long time about what we heard at our Conference in Chicago a few years back, from Alberto Ibarguen, former publisher of the Miami
Herald, former board chair of the Florida Philharmonic, and now president of the Knight Foundation. He explained how newspapers had failed to see or acknowledge the rapid changes going on around them, including the public’s desire for participation—to own the news and use it, to act on the news, rather than merely passively hearing it or reading it. He described the insularity of their staffs, their lack of diverse voices, and the certainty with which they proclaimed, “We professionals know better.”

Noting the failure of the newspaper industry to face forward into the future, he cautioned orchestras to avoid his industry’s mistake of conflating delivery system and core purpose. In other words: the newspaper is the delivery system that supports the purpose of engaging the public in high-quality journalism in service to a functioning democracy. It is the core purpose that must be maintained. The delivery system can change. Our organizational structure is indeed a delivery system, primarily for concerts of high quality in the most perfect acoustic environments. We have also attached ancillary structures for offering concerts and other activities to young people and others in the community.

These parallel yet often separate strands of orchestra activity create some interesting problems. Think about this: if education and community engagement describe what we do for our communities and for learning, what in the world would you call that other stuff we do—those concerts of classical music in our concert halls? Are they not for our communities, for learning, for our young people? Do we mean to suggest that our public value happens outside the concert hall and what happens inside is perhaps more private? Or, do we just have a harder time explaining the value of a traditional orchestral concert, and making it accessible to more people?

Or—maybe the concert is not what it’s ultimately about.

Using Ibargüen’s newspaper analogy, newspapers are to journalism as concerts are to…Fill in the blank. It’s an interesting exercise. And to play you don’t have to believe, and I don’t, that orchestras are as passé as newspapers. It’s simply about separating the essential from the habitual.

It’s not for me to answer this question for any one orchestra or for all orchestras together. But I can tell you what I think I’m hearing from many of you. It’s this: our institutions—that is, our delivery systems—could be organized to create and deliver a range of orchestral and related musical experiences designed for learning, for communities, for stretching artistry and the art
form. And our core purpose, instead of delivering concerts, might be to grow the humanity of the people we serve and engage, through orchestral experiences.

I like this framework because it places all we do, or may yet do, under one banner. It avoids the not very helpful bifurcation of access and excellence, or community engagement and the classical series. And it suggests that we bring the same high standards of excellence and creativity to our work outside the concert hall that we do inside—that we infuse the concert experience with the same passion for learning, for meaning, and for relevance that we bring to our work in our neighborhoods and schools. With this frame our core purpose lives firmly in a public context. This is critically important, because as long as we remain tax-supported institutions, our core purpose must be, and be understood to be, for the public good. And we can no longer simply assert this, we must demonstrate it.

Finally, if we anchor ourselves in serving people through music, we necessarily invite new voices, new questions, and new opportunities for fulfilling our creative and public imperatives. This framework may or not suit you, and that’s okay. As we anticipate 2023, a time that is certain to be very different than today, I think the main thing is to be very clear about what is core and what is transitory, what we must keep, and what we can let go of. This is important and hard work.

I’d like to close by sharing an insight into how we can do this work. It comes from Yo-Yo Ma, who offered this up in his Nancy Hanks Address at the Kennedy Center early this year. Yo-Yo talked about something called the “edge effect.” He said, “It’s a term from ecology. Where two eco-systems meet, such as the forest and the savannah, the point of intersection is the site of the ‘edge effect.’” Yo-Yo continued: “The edge is where those of varied backgrounds come together in a zone of transition, a region of less structure, more diversity and more possibility. The edge is where you find the greatest diversity of life, as well as the greatest number of new life forms.”

I submit that our orchestras’ chances for success in 2023 will depend on how fully we can engage the possibilities that exist at the edges—not just of our art form, but of our society. And the time to begin is now.

Thank you.