

# Why Don't We Talk About Music?

Artistic excellence and innovative programming have never been higher at American orchestras. But as we go through a period of great cultural and social change, the time is ripe for big conversations about the artistic work of orchestras—with musicians leading the way.

by Jesse Rosen



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It's never happened before: each of the five keynote speakers at this year's National Conference are musicians. They are Vijay Gupta, violin, Los Angeles Philharmonic; Jennifer Koh, violin; Demarre McGill, Principal Flute, Seattle Symphony; Anthony McGill, Principal Clarinet, New York Philharmonic; and Yo-Yo Ma, cello. We have had some pretty terrific speakers at our Conferences, but musicians have been the exception, and I wonder what that says about us. When our community gathers we seem to talk about just about everything but the music.

There are some who argue we have that figured out. After all, the quantity and quality of musical talent seem to continue on an endless upward trajectory. Orchestral playing is uniformly high across all sizes and shapes of orchestra. American orchestras remain in demand in world capitals. Excellence is the defining musical principle and orchestras seem to just get more and more excellent every day. The important work, so the argument goes, is to figure out how to pay for it, i.e., raise more money, sell more tickets.

Well, it's hard to argue about the importance of raising money and selling tickets. It is the never-ending work of any



Street Symphony

In 2011, Los Angeles Philharmonic violinist Vijay Gupta co-founded Street Symphony, which presents live music for communities experiencing homelessness and incarceration. In December 2017, Gupta performed with Reena Esmail (above), Street Symphony's composer in residence and vocalist, at the Midnight Mission in Skid Row during the annual Project Messiah, a performance of Handel's *Messiah* that features stories and performances from people affected by and recovering from homelessness in Los Angeles County.

enterprise to tend to its income streams. And that's hard, because things change: competition arises and the very nature of demand changes, often getting in the way of income generation.

Successful adaptation usually involves

not only changes in income-generating strategies but also changes in products. Keeping the product the same, or even investing in making the product more and more excellent, has rarely worked in a dynamic market. Orchestras are figur-



Los Angeles Philharmonic violinist and Street Symphony co-founder Vijay Gupta will give the keynote address at the League Conference in June.

ing this out. We have more “product” experiments and innovations going on than ever before. It’s refreshing. Alternate venues, multimedia, video, collaborations and partnerships, apps for real-time program notes, and on and on. There is simply more variety today in the orchestra experience.

I wonder, as orchestras go through this period of change, what are the principles that guide visions of the art form and artistry? Do our existing values, frameworks, practices, and organizational designs

support the continuing growth of the orchestra experience?

My answer is no. For the most part, orchestras adhere to static notions of artistry and how to achieve it. For example, there was a time when what we asked of music directors was to lead great concerts, make coherent programs, and combine them in a season that had some discernible profile. And if they did that really well, all was fine. The board stayed out of the way (what could they possibly add to this highly specialized

changing audience and donor preferences and priorities) the old and narrow definition of artistic leadership as embodied in the expectations of music directors, seems very limited. The changing demands of new audiences for both what they hear and how they experience it, the explosion of orchestral compositional styles and genres, and the increasing imperatives for the nonprofit performing arts to play a civic role all seem to point to a need for an expanded definition of artistic leadership.

Similarly, these changes are also prompting questions about the roles of musicians. Indeed, as orchestras work to create civic value, seize the amazing creative potential of contemporary composition, and respond to audience desires



Khalid Al Bataineh

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma (left) will speak at the closing plenary of the League’s Conference in June. He is the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s creative consultant and founder of the Silk Road Ensemble, a musical collective that promotes multicultural artistic exchange through performances and collaborations. Above, Ma in performance with fellow musicians of the Silk Road Ensemble at the Royal Opera House in Muscat, Oman.

creative endeavor?) and the chief executive supported the music director vision by running the “business.”

As orchestras increasingly move from a transactional or even manufacturing model (producing concerts of essentially known repertoire and selling them to a known audience and donor base) toward a more relational and fluid model (evolving repertoire and concert experience and

for intimate performance experiences, musicians have lots to offer. And yet our means of training musicians and auditioning them is still based on narrow definitions from the past of what constitutes competence: namely, mastery of audition repertoire and selection of those who execute excerpts at the highest level and are the best fit for the ensemble. Undeniably, some remarkable musician leaders have



Jason Bell





New York Philharmonic Principal Clarinet Anthony McGill (above left) and Seattle Symphony Principal Flute Demarre McGill (center) will perform the world premiere of a double concerto by Michael Abels with the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras at the League's Conference in June. Above right, Anthony and Demarre McGill in performance with the CYSO at Orchestra Hall, led by CYSO Music Director Allen Tinkham.

come through the current system, but imagine the potential if orchestra practice was intentional about recruiting for the wider skill sets that are called for today.

Orchestras are pushing hard against the old roles, definitions, and values. But the practices, the job descriptions, the skills, and the language are all lagging. The old definitions of excellence and artistic leadership and roles of music directors and musicians are an unnecessary constraint, a drag on what feels like enormous creative potential in our time. I don't have an alter-

native to propose and don't believe there is a single alternative, anyway. But I do think we are overdue in asking some key questions and having some big conversations about the artistic work of orchestras. For example:

- What are the artistic opportunities and challenges for orchestras today?
- How do we define artistic leadership, and who owns it?
- What skills are needed, among musicians, conductors, composers, staff,

and boards to advance the artistry of orchestras in the 21st century?

- How would artists, repertoire, and programming change if principles of diversity were elevated to the highest priority?
- How could orchestras increase their capacity to become full-fledged citizens of their communities, deploying their music and musicians in service to civic agendas?
- How might orchestras nourish the musical potential of everyone associated with them?

Violinist Jennifer Koh will speak and perform at the Conference. She will discuss how musicians and musical institutions can work to achieve inclusive representations of America.



Asking these questions and pursuing their answers is not an attack on excellence, or great concerts of great music performed at the highest level of orchestral execution. It simply an invitation to ask anew what any of these words mean in today's context, and in service to whom? And to put all my cards on the table, I will admit that while I value excellence as much as anybody, I just don't find it to be a sufficient ideal for optimizing the abundance of creative opportunity in our midst today.

I hope readers will either get to our National Conference or watch the subsequent videos of the keynotes on our website. The five artists we are hearing from this year are each pioneers, and in their own distinctive ways are finding answers to these big questions, advancing our art form, and redefining excellence and artistry. And note to self: keep the artists at the center. It's their voices that lead. **S**