



Top 30²⁰²³ Professionals of the Year

The Movers. The Shakers. The Creators.

musical
america
SPECIAL REPORTS

december 2023

ON THE COVER

1. **PATRICK SLEVIN**
Executive Director
Austin Soundwaves
2. **JAN HUNDLEY**
Chair of the Board
Arkansas Symphony Orchestra
3. **SHARON YAZOWSKI**
CEO
Levitt Foundation
4. **SHAWN OKPEBHOLO**
Jonathan Blanchard Chair of Music
(Composition & Music Theory)
Wheaton College
5. **VALENTINA PELEGGI**
Music Director
Richmond Symphony
6. **MAGEE CAPSOUTO**
Associate Director
Equity Arc
7. **ACHIA FLOYD**
Director of Foundation Relations
and Community
Sphinx Organization
8. **TIGRAN ARAKELYAN**
Conductor, Executive Director
Music Works Northwest
9. **SARAH EDGAR**
Choreographer, Stage Director
Haymarket Opera Company
New York Baroque Dance Company
10. **TIFFANY ORTIZ**
Director, Early Childhood Programs
Carnegie Hall
11. **JOSH SHAW**
Founding Artistic Director and CEO
Pacific Opera Project
12. **STEFANIE GARDNER**
Clarinet, Residential Faculty
Glendale Community College
13. **CONNOR BOGENREIF**
Career Advisor
College of Performing Arts
Chapman University
14. **YOLANDA KONDONASSIS**
Head, Harp Department
Cleveland Institute of Music
15. **ALEXA SMITH**
Senior Director of Anti-Racism,
Equity, and Belonging
The Public Theater
16. **CARLOS CASTILLA**
Director and Guitar Instructor
Fayetteville (NC) School of Music



17. **MICHAEL BORISKIN**
Artistic and Executive Director
Copland House
18. **LEE KOONCE**
President and Artistic Director
Gateways Music Festival
19. **KEITH C. ELDER**
President and CEO
Grand Rapids Symphony
20. **THERESA ERICHSEN**
Co-Founder and Executive Director
VCU Health Orchestra
21. **TONI-MARIE MONTGOMERY**
Dean Emeritus and Professor
Bienen School of Music,
Northwestern University
22. **MICHAEL SOLOMON**
Director of Media Relations
Lyric Opera of Chicago
23. **MELISSA NGAN**
President and CEO
American Composers Orchestra
24. **JOHN-MORGAN BUSH**
Dean, Extension Division
The Juilliard School
25. **THOR STEINGRABER**
Executive and Artistic Director
The Younes and Soraya Nazarian
Center for the Performing Arts
26. **JACKSON COOPER**
Major Gifts Manager
Pacific Northwest Ballet
27. **DAVID H. STULL**
President
San Francisco Conservatory of Music
28. **MARNA SELTZER**
Artistic and Executive Director
Princeton University Concerts
29. **LAURA COCKS**
Executive Director and Flutist
TAK
30. **ANGÉLICA DURRELL**
Founder and CEO
Intempo

Introduction



Most of the names in the following pages will not be familiar—but they are decidedly praiseworthy. This year's Musical America Top 30 Professionals are the entrepreneurs, the worker bees, the creative minds that ensure the health of the artform and its essential value in our lives, now and for generations to come. They launch and run community music schools specializing

in working with minority youth; they raise money for off-the-wall opera projects in off-the-wall spaces bringing in new audiences; they compose music for regional symphony orchestras; and they commission and record solo pieces and donate the proceeds to environmental groups, from the Sierra Club and the Rainforest Alliance to the World Wildlife Fund.

What is especially exciting about the Class of 2023 is its variety, both geographical and professional. A French horn player who founded and plays in a semi-professional orchestra of doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers in Virginia; a percussionist trained in El Sistema who runs an after-school program in Austin, TX, boasting an enrollment that is over 80 percent Hispanic; a classical guitarist who emigrated from Colombia and landed in Fayetteville, NC, where he founded a music school whose youngest students are studying Suzuki guitar and whose oldest is learning Fleetwood Mac songs on guitar at the age of 70-plus. There's a university presenter in New Jersey, an orchestra board chair in Little Rock, AK, who recently completed an \$11M campaign to build a new music center for her band; a self-described "recovering soprano" who now oversees anti-racism, equity, and belonging at New York's Public Theater; and a female conductor who takes her very traditional orchestra in a very conservative community into local breweries.

Who says classical music isn't for everyone? Clearly, these professionals are focused on making it so. Kudos to every one.

Regards,

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Top 30 ²⁰²³ Professionals ^{of the Year}

The Movers. The Shakers. The Creators.

The names of the Musical America 2023 Top 30 may not be familiar, but they are decidedly praiseworthy. They are the entrepreneurs, the worker bees, the creative minds that ensure the health of the artform and its essential value in our lives, now and for generations to come. They launch and run community music schools specializing in working with minority youth; they raise money for off-the-wall opera projects in off-the-wall spaces bringing in new audiences; and they compose music for regional symphony orchestras. They are the unsung MA All Stars of 2023.



TIGRAN ARAKELYAN

Conductor, Executive Director

[Music Works Northwest](#)   

Tigran Arakelyan finds it hard to recount everything he's accomplished in his 36 years without being overwhelmed with gratitude. He's "been fortunate," he insists. Or he'd sooner credit his many mentors—like his first music teacher in Armenia, or Ludovic Morlot, former music director of the Seattle Symphony—and his parents, who encouraged his "crazy ideas."

Crazy to some, maybe. But many can't imagine classical music in the Seattle area without Arakelyan. Recently named one of *425 Business* magazine's 40 under 40, Arakelyan has conducted numerous regional orchestras in Washington and California; he took the Federal Way Youth Symphony on three tours to South Korea in 2014, 2017, and 2019, and is known for finding unusual venues for all of his projects, from bars to cafes to homeless shelters. On his podcast, [Let's Talk Off the Podium](#), he has interviewed a huge variety of notables including George Walker, Vijay Iyer, Evelyn Glennie, JoAnn Falletta, Sharon Isbin, and Christopher Theofanidis.

Today, Arakelyan devotes virtually all of his energies to Music Works Northwest, a community music school in Bellevue, WA, that provides lessons, music therapy, and summer programs to individuals and schools, offering tuition assistance to the former and free instruction to the latter, as well as gratis public concerts by its professional faculty.

This may be his most personal project yet—a way of giving back. Arakelyan moved to the U.S. when he was 11, his family becoming part of the bustling Armenian-American community in Glendale, CA. He was born with a respiratory condition; his parents, also musicians, believed playing a wind instrument would help, and suggested he pick up the flute. Money was tight, but Arakelyan was able to keep studying music thanks to a scholarship from the Lark Musical Society, a music school in Glendale not unlike Music Works Northwest. "My parents think that music technically saved my life," he says. And Arakelyan is making his own mark on many, many lives today. —Hannah Edgar



CONNOR BOGENREIF

Career Advisor

[College of Performing Arts, Chapman University](#)

A perennial question for Connor Bogenreif to answer is: “What can you do with that degree?” Bogenreif is career advisor for the 400 undergraduates majoring in music, dance, and theater in the College of Performing Arts (CoPA) of Chapman University, located in Orange County, CA, with a total enrollment of 10,000. “We do get that from parents,” he says. “The earning potential is higher in other industries than in the arts, and jobs may be more obtainable. Many of our students do have kind of a one-track mindset about only being on stage. For me, it’s mainly a matter of lowering their blinders. I encourage them to explore how many career options are actually available to them.”

Bogenreif’s own profile is a good model for students. A cellist, he graduated from the school’s conservatory in 2015, and then went on to earn a master’s in cello performance at California State University, Long Beach. Now he balances his time between his CoPA work and his cello, freelancing as a sub with orchestras. He is also on the board of the Association of California Symphony Orchestras.

“After finishing my studies, I still wanted to perform, but I also realized that I liked the

administrative part,” says Bogenreif, who worked at the Long Beach Symphony in operations and education before returning to Chapman. “I tell students that having a performance background is really valued on the administrative side of music, dance, and theater institutions.”

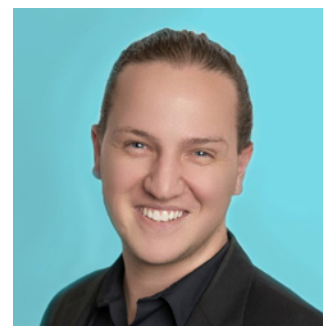
Students hone their artistry from faculty practitioners. “Where I can help is with how to manage the business side of a career. I can also be a help in navigating the audition process.”

He sees performance training as a transferrable skill in the job market. “Performing arts students are effective communicators, and being in a music ensemble, a dance company, or theatrical production, they learn how to work as part of a team. Those are skills employers prioritize.” —John Fleming

COMMITTED TO LEADERSHIP INSPIRED BY CHAPMAN

CONNOR BOGENREIF '15

With tremendous “Panther Pride” we congratulate you on your recognition as a top music professional! Your leadership shines in both your role as Career Advisor at Chapman University’s College of Performing Arts and your recent election to the board of the Association of California Symphony Orchestras!



Empowering Our Music Community



MICHAEL BORISKIN

Artistic and Executive Director

[Copland House](#)   

Pianist Michael Boriskin has enjoyed an international career playing concerts and making recordings, as well as related work that ranges from music commentary for National Public Radio to being music director of Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project for three years. He is also the longtime artistic and executive director of Copland House, the nonprofit organization that tends the flame of Aaron Copland by supporting American music.

A variety of musical, educational, and philanthropic activities flow from the composer's modernist house and studio on three acres in a woodsy part of Westchester County outside New York City. Built around 1940 and purchased in 1960 by Copland, who lived there until his death in 1990, the house, known as Rock Hill, is a National Historic Landmark, the only classical composer's home so designated in the U.S.

"Copland was a peerless advocate for his fellow composers, and that's what has always motivated Copland House," Boriskin says. Every year, eight to 10 American composers are invited to reside, one at a

time, as guests for up to eight weeks at Rock Hill for contemplation and creation, with all their needs provided for. The Copland House website is full of plaudits from them.

Boriskin performs with the Music from Copland House ensemble, whose debut release on the Copland House Blend label, is a two-CD set of all of its namesake's chamber music. "Now I'm in the process of recording the complete Copland piano music," he says. "It's a fascinating repertory, including a lot of pieces that don't get played very much at all."

In 2024, Copland House will announce a "transformative expansion" of the Rock Hill property, with a capital campaign to fund it. "It doesn't involve the house itself, which is meant to be preserved as it is, but we've been looking to increase our physical capacity for a long time. I think it will have a significant impact, certainly on Copland House, but also on the whole concert music field." —John Fleming

JOHN-MORGAN BUSH

Dean, Extension Division

    [The Juilliard School](#)



John-Morgan Bush became dean of the Juilliard School's continuing education division at the beginning of 2020, and it has grown impressively since then, with enrollment almost doubling to 1,100 students who take classes every year. Extension students are mostly adults ranging from their 20s and 30s all the way up to their 90s. They are drawn to the program by a menu of 111 courses in the performing arts, taught by Juilliard faculty.

Bush, a French horn player, educator, and entrepreneur, has embraced ideas of the creative aging movement in his job. "Creative

aging, for me, involves the way the arts bring value and an increased quality of life as people grow older," he said. "What we're seeing is that nurturing creativity doesn't have an age boundary. People are looking for ways to engage with the arts in a very robust, deep way."

Popular Juilliard extension courses for adults are those on voice, ballet, guitar, and scene study for actors. "These are what I call group participation classes," Bush said. "People want to learn how to do these things, to participate in art as well as appreciate it." Music theory, composition, and music production are staples of the curriculum.

continued on p. 7

continued from p. 6

Inaugurated during Bush's tenure was an online workshop called Advancing an Anti-Racist Orchestra Model. In four sessions over two years, it was taken by more than 100 members of symphony orchestras around the U.S. and Canada to learn about issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

In June, Juilliard Extension launched a pilot program to offer on-site classes in music, dance, and theater, as well as performances, both live and streamed, to residents of the [Sunrise Senior Living](#) community on Manhattan's Upper East Side. "Sunrise is one of the largest senior living providers in the country," Bush said. "Our goal is to deliver the program digitally live to a network of senior living communities, bringing it to thousands of people at once."
—John Fleming



MAGEE CAPSOUTO

Associate Director

[Equity Arc](#)  

Growing up in New York City, Magee Capsouto started playing the violin at age four, and over the next 20-plus years she progressed toward becoming a professional violinist and teacher. Capsouto earned degrees in violin performance from Furman University, the Cleveland Institute of Music, and the University of Colorado, Boulder. During her time in school and afterward, she also worked in arts administration at various organizations, such as the Boulder Bach Festival, and that changed her perspective.

"After I graduated with my doctorate from Colorado, I had been in school for the better part of my adult life, and I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do in the classical music world," she says. "What struck me was how much larger an impact you could make in administration. When you're performing, you can collaborate with fellow musicians and create something special to share with an audience, but in administration you get to create opportunity for countless others. I realized just how powerful it could be to give back to the field and be part of imagining what the future looks like."

Today, Capsouto is realizing that vision as associate director of Equity Arc, a nonprofit organization formerly known as the National Instrumentalist Mentoring and Advancement Network (NIMAN). Its mission is to provide support to musicians of color through five pivotal stages of development: entry and early years; high school and pre-college; college and conservatory; pre-professional; and young professional.

In March, Capsouto played a key role in the inaugural National Pathways Festival and Annual Convening, held in partnership with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. The two-day event brought together 120 arts administrators, music educators, and professional musicians to engage in dialogue on racial equity. Forty pre-college musicians of color performed a side-by-side concert with the CSO.

"The convening was incredible," she says. "In the wake of George Floyd's police murder, there were a lot of pledges and promises to address systemic racism. Now we're able to work with partners across the country who want to turn these promises into action that will lead to tangible change in the field." —John Fleming



CARLOS CASTILLA

Director and Guitar Instructor

  [Fayetteville \(NC\) School of Music](#)

As a classical guitarist and teacher at a conservatory in Barranquilla, Colombia, Carlos Castilla had a dream. “Running a music school, having my own business, that is something I always wanted to do,” Castilla says. “I tried to do it in Colombia, but the terrible economy made it an impossible situation.”

In 2004, Castilla and his wife, Cuban pianist Amanda Virelles, and their two children emigrated from Colombia to the U.S. Since then, it has been a long and winding journey from graduate school at the University of Southern Mississippi, where he received a doctorate in musical arts (his dissertation was on Cuban composer and guitar master Leo Brouwer), to putting in time as a Nashville studio musician, to being an adjunct guitar instructor at universities in Mississippi, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

Now, 20 years later, Castilla’s dream has come true in Fayetteville, NC. “The road has not been easy, and sometimes I

feel exhausted, but I’ve been able to build a community around music through working with students and their families.”

Castilla founded the Fayetteville School of Music in 2018, and after surviving the pandemic by doing classwork on Zoom, it has thrived. With a teaching staff of nine, enrollment averages about 180 students per semester. Along with his ownership duties, Castilla teaches guitar to a range of students from classical Suzuki Guitar Method youngsters to a 72-year-old learning arrangements of Fleetwood Mac songs.

The school’s website has a video of Castilla playing a Telemann fantasia, as well as one with his wife, in the keyboard-guitar duo Duo Guitiano. There’s also a funky guitar-percussion production of *Spirits in the Material World* by The Police. “If I depended solely on interest in 19th-century classical guitar, I would be out of business,” he says. “My being able to play pop and rock makes a difference with students.” —John Fleming



LAURA COCKS

Executive Director and Flutist

[TAK](#)  

PHOTO: Kaveh Kowsari

It’s *en vogue* for groups to call themselves “collectives,” but TAK, an ensemble founded in 2013, is as democratic as they come: Artistic decisions are run through consensus in the group and the five members divide administrative duties equally. In fact, when Executive Director Laura Cocks—a leading commissioner and interpreter of new flute repertoire in her own right—learned she’d been nominated for this recognition, her very acceptance was the subject of group discussion, not to mention disbelief.

In addition to Cocks on flute, TAK is clarinetist Madison Greenstone, vocalist Charlotte Mundy, violinist Marina Kifferstein, and percussionist Ellery Trafford.

“There’s never been anything we’ve done that’s been solely my project,” Cocks says. “I want to stress just how collective the nature of the ensemble is, from really every angle.”

That team spirit extends to partner composers, as well. The group founded a record label, [TAK Editions](#), to support composers

continued on p. 9

continued from p. 8

in making first-time recordings of their works; TAK also produces a [podcast that hosts insightful conversations on new music](#). Its investment in new talent includes composer-workshop residencies at several U.S. universities—up next are Princeton, Huddersfield, and the University of Chicago. The most extensive of these was a yearlong stint at the University of Pennsylvania, which also included an open rehearsal of a new piece by Tyshawn Sorey and a course on non-traditional performance.

TAK's explorations are as deep as they are broad. The ensemble cultivates sustained collaborations with composers,

like Bethany Younge and Eric Wubbels, working with the latter on *interbeing*, a multimedia music theater project, since 2016. When money is tight, Cocks says TAK members often forego their own compensation so composers and other collaborators can be paid fairly.

"When we're collaborating with someone, whether they're writing for us, we're presenting them, or something else, we really want to give them full artistic reign," Cocks says. "It's a richer experience for everyone involved." —Hannah Edgar

JACKSON COOPER

Major Gifts Manager

    [Pacific Northwest Ballet](#)



For Jackson Cooper, fundraising means "talking to people who love what you love." That love has carried him to positions as major gifts manager at Pacific Northwest Ballet and as the precocious 23-year-old executive/artistic director at Chamber Music Raleigh. He reports increased revenue streams and board membership at both organizations.

Cooper traces his interest in arts administration to a production of *Grease* he saw at age 14 at The North Carolina Theater in Raleigh. He remembers thinking, "How do I do that? How do I get 1,200 people to be excited about the same thing I'm excited about? I learned that it was producing."

Bitten by the theater bug, he asked his mom to help him fire off an email to the company, which agreed to take him on as an intern, first in its music department then in fundraising. Other roles at Raleigh performing arts organizations followed, including helping to organize a 24-hour theater festival in the city—and that was even before

Cooper headed off to college at UNC Greensboro. There, he freelanced as a critic for a handful of North Carolina papers and pursued his interest in orchestral conducting, graduating with a double major in theater and business.

UNC Greensboro didn't have an arts management program when he attended. Now, in a full-circle homecoming, he teaches it at his alma mater over Zoom and at Seattle University. He has also authored a children's book about the importance of philanthropy (*A Kid's Book About Kindness*) and is co-authoring one about sustainable fundraising, which he reports is scheduled to be issued in 2027 by Columbia Business School Publishing. He sees these recent projects as his way to give back to the field. "I equate my journey now to Taylor Swift: This is my *Eras Tour*, and I'm in a service era," Cooper quips. —Hannah Edgar



ANGÉLICA DURRELL

Founder and CEO

[Intempo](#)   

As an eight-year-old violinist, Angélica Durrell emigrated with her mother from Ecuador to the United States, and they settled in Connecticut's Fairfield County. Now, 26 years later, Durrell is CEO of Intempo, a music education organization she founded to serve the local immigrant community.

"Intempo is a reflection of my life," said Durrell, who comes from a family of musicians in the Chimborazo region of the Andes. "I created Intempo for immigrant children and families who did not have an institution to support them in pursuing a high quality classical and intercultural music education." Some of the largest immigrant populations in Fairfield County are from Guatemala, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

Durrell started Intempo with \$1,500 in graduation gifts she received from family and friends upon getting her music degree from the University of Connecticut in 2011. Today the nonprofit organization boasts operating revenues of more than \$1.2 million in 2022, when it was awarded the \$500,000 Lewis Prize for Music, which promotes access to music education for youth.

"We started with 30 students in one site," she said. "Now we serve over 700 students across 10 different sites. I was a solo entrepreneur the first two years, then we added three teachers, and now we have 18 teaching artists and five administrators."

Durrell is an advocate for complementing classical music with the folk and pop music of her students' homelands. "Our kids love Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, but they also love their hip-hop. And they love to learn to play traditional instruments like the charango, a 10-string guitar from the Andes." In its annual Cultural Crossover Concert, Intempo partners with the Norwalk Youth Symphony to focus on a specific national musical genre, such as this year's performance of bachata music from the Dominican Republic.

In 2024, Intempo, which has been sharing space with a church, will move into its own arts and culture center in Stamford. It also plans to launch the online Intempo Music Catalog, making available diverse, intercultural scores from Latin America. —John Fleming

SARAH EDGAR

Choreographer, Stage Director

    [Haymarket Opera Company](#) (Chicago)

  [New York Baroque Dance Company](#)



Chicago's Haymarket Opera presents Baroque opera as it would have been at the time of its creation. One of the key contributors to its period-performance alchemy is Choreographer/Director Sarah Edgar, who rounds a decade with the company this season.

Edgar was raised in northeastern Ohio, where she studied the Cecchetti ballet method. She discovered Baroque dance when Catherine Turocy, artistic director of the New York Baroque Dance Company, came to Ohio State University as a visiting scholar. Edgar,

then a freshman, would go on to become the company's associate director, with stints in Europe for graduate studies and freelance dance work.

When her husband's job brought the couple back to the U.S., this time to the Chicago area, Edgar reached out to Craig Trompeter, Haymarket's director, to ask if he needed a choreographer. Her first show with Haymarket, a 2013 *Dido and Aeneas*, was just six months later.

continued on p. 11

continued from p. 10

Now, Edgar’s expertise guides not just dance sequences—at this point quintessential to Haymarket’s productions—but the company’s stage direction and blocking, as well. Of course, she leans on contemporaneous dramaturgical materials as primary sources. For example, her stagings of Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* in 2022 and [La liberazione di Ruggiero dall’isola d’Alcina](#), Francesca Caccini’s only surviving opera, in 2023, were both informed by a 1699 treatise by actor and playwright Andrea Perucci. She’s

also leaned on Franz Lang’s *Abhandlung über die Schauspielkunst (Treatise on Scenic Acting)* from 1727.

Edgar usually schedules a half-day movement workshop to walk singers through historical acting techniques. By now, though, she’s worked with Haymarket regulars so often that she finds she can take a step back. After all, as she is quick to remind, stage directors didn’t even exist in the eighteenth century.

“The core group of singers feels like a real eighteenth-century company. They’re all so used to the style that they can improvise on it . . . It becomes this organic organism,” Edgar says. — Hannah Edgar



KEITH C. ELDER

President and CEO

[Grand Rapids Symphony](#)

After becoming president and CEO of the [Grand Rapids Symphony in July](#), Keith C. Elder’s priority was “really getting into the community,” he says. “That has meant telling the story of the orchestra, about the vitalness of live classical music to a city where people want to live and raise a family. And the second piece has been meeting with musicians and board members to hear about the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.”

Established in 1930, the Symphony has an annual budget of about \$10 million, and in Elder’s view, its challenges mirror those of every orchestra. “Become more relevant to the community. Expand our brand presence. Collaborate with other organizations and get them excited about what we do on stage.” Plus, in Elder’s case, negotiate a new labor contract with musicians to succeed the one expiring in 2024.

As for opportunities, he wants to develop concerts with visual effects that enhance the music. “The key is that the visuals need

to be tied to the excellence of the music,” says Elder, who has a bachelor’s degree in music and arts administration from Indiana University with concentrations in tuba and technical theater. He has held various positions with the [Aspen Music Festival](#), [Eastman School of Music](#), Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Tanglewood Music Center. He is also a lawyer.

Elder was [executive director and CEO of the Tulsa Symphony](#) for four years before decamping to Grand Rapids. One of his proudest achievements in Oklahoma was the orchestra’s role in the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, with a 2021 performance of Wynton Marsalis’ oratorio *All Rise*. “We brought in Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, 11 soloists, a community chorus, our orchestra, and Conductor David Robertson,” he says. “In that concert, the power of music was used to unite and heal our community.” —John Fleming



THERESA ERICHSEN

Co-Founder and Executive Director

[VCU Health Orchestra](#)

A registered nurse and healthcare administrator, Theresa Erichsen has been a freelance French horn player with orchestras in the

Richmond, VA, area for more than 25 years. “I was a nurse by day, a musician by night, never thinking my worlds would collide,”

continued on p. 12

continued from p. 11

Erichsen says. But collide they did, and happily so, in the form of the VCU Health Orchestra, which she co-founded in 2017 and has managed and played in ever since.

The orchestra, part of the Virginia Commonwealth University Health System, for which Erichsen has worked since 2011, has more than 80 musicians on its roster. They include nurses, physicians, administrative and support staff, students, alumni, and community musicians. Everyone is a volunteer, except for its two conductors. Weekly rehearsal is on Wednesday night, and the concerts, typically three or four a year, are free and draw attendance of up to 800. In August, Erichsen started a second group, the VCU Health Wind Ensemble.

“There is a strong connection between medicine and music,” says Erichsen, a board member of the [National Association of](#)

[Medical Orchestras](#), which has about 40 member orchestras in the U.S. “Many of us who have gone into the medical field either majored in music or played an instrument throughout school.” The level is high in the VCU Health Orchestra, whose concertmaster, for example, is an employee of the university’s School of Medicine with a graduate degree in violin performance.

The orchestra’s repertoire is a mix of classical and pops. Last season it performed Haydn’s *Lord Nelson* Mass, with chorus and soloists. The 2023-24 season opened with a side-by-side concert with Randolph-Macon College music students; a pre-recorded holiday concert is to be streamed in December. A shining hour for the orchestra came as the pandemic abated in 2022, when it collaborated with the Richmond Symphony and Chorus in an outdoor concert that saluted healthcare workers.

“The concert closed with a joint performance of ‘Ode to Joy’ from Beethoven Nine,” Erichsen says. “It was such an honor. I have the concert poster framed in my kitchen.” —John Fleming



ACHIA FLOYD

Director of Foundation Relations and Community

[Sphinx Organization](#)    

Achia Floyd’s fundraising philosophy is reflected in her title, with the focus on “relations,” for the Sphinx Organization. “Relationships are everything in life, and definitely in fundraising,” says Floyd. “My job is more person-to-person than just writing proposals. It’s through building relationships with foundation officers that I get funding.”

A flutist with a master’s degree in arts administration from Florida State University, Floyd joined the Sphinx executive staff in 2022. She has been successful in raising nearly \$4 million thus far. In 2021 both Sphinx and Floyd’s then-employer, the Atlanta Music Project, were recipients of transformative gifts from the foundation of MacKenzie Scott, ex-wife of Amazon mogul Jeff Bezos. Since 2020, she has donated at least \$14 billion of her fortune to more than 1,600 nonprofits. [Scott has given \\$1 million-plus to Sphinx.](#)

“It is unheard of for someone to call and say they’re going to give you a lot of money, and then actually give you the money within a month with no stipulations, no reports required, nothing,” Floyd says. “It put the spotlight on Sphinx and AMP, and that has led to funding from other organizations.”

According to Floyd, foundations are moving toward artist-centered philanthropy, spurred by the loss of income many artists experienced in the pandemic. As part of that trend, Sphinx’s regrating program has become central to helping the Black and Latinx musicians enrolled in its programs, especially when it comes to covering travel costs for orchestra auditions. “Foundations want to give money directly to artists, but artists may not know how to get the money, so having an intermediary like Sphinx do the regrating meets everyone’s needs,” she says. —John Fleming



STEFANIE GARDNER

Clarinet, Residential Faculty

[Glendale Community College](#), Arizona

Stefanie Gardner is an activist for the clarinet and especially her instrument, the bass clarinet. “All my degrees are in soprano B-flat clarinet, but I am primarily a bass clarinetist,” says Gardner, who has a doctorate in clarinet performance from Arizona State University. She teaches clarinet, music theory, and chamber music at Glendale Community College, a two-year school in the Phoenix metro area.

Gardner is bass clarinetist for the [Paradise Winds](#) quintet and the [Égide Duo](#) (with her husband and fellow clarinetist, Joshua

Gardner), which tour widely and have commissioned many works that feature the instrument; she frequently gives solo performances and master classes on bass clarinet; and she is a consultant for instrument-maker Henri Selmer Paris, traveling to France yearly to test prototypes and provide feedback.

“The bass clarinet used to be kind of an afterthought in the clarinet family, but now it’s coming into its own,” Gardner says. “The instrument is so versatile,” she says, pointing out its merits as a solo, chamber-music, orchestral, or jazz instrument. “You

continued on p. 14

Stefanie Gardner

Congratulations on being selected as one of Musical America’s Top 30 Professionals of the Year

Thank you for being an inspiration to the students at Glendale Community College. The entire campus community is grateful for your dedication, artistry, and talent.



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continued from p. 13

even hear it in rock bands. At school I have a low-clarinet choir—it's called Team Lo-Blow—and it has such a unique, big sound, like an organ."

In January, Gardner was artistic director and host of the first-ever [Low Clarinet Festival](#) for the International Clarinet Association, drawing about 275 enthusiasts from around the world to the four-day event on the GCC campus. She is an influential member of ICA,

chairing several committees, including the New Music Committee, working to broaden the repertoire. Now she is chair of the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access Committee.

"Unfortunately, the clarinet community has been very late to diversity, especially in Europe," Gardner says, citing numerous clarinet events lacking in representation of women and marginalized populations. She has been outspoken in asking organizers, "Where are the women?" via the social media hashtag #womenplayclarinettoo. "It has been a passion of mine to call out when I see something is wrong." —John Fleming



JAN HUNDLEY

Chair of the Board

[Arkansas Symphony Orchestra](#)

Jan Hundley looks back on 2023 as a very good year. "We've been on a roll," says the five-year chairman of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra board. "We have survived the pandemic, we hired a music director, and we're building a new headquarters building."

In June, the ASO announced that its new music director was Geoffrey Robson, who had been serving as interim artistic director. He signed a five-year contract to lead the Little Rock-based orchestra, which is in its 58th season, and succeeds Phillip Mann, who stepped down in 2018. Board, management, and musicians were open to bringing in a music director from outside the orchestra and community, and a national search yielded four other finalists. In the end, they went with a familiar figure on the podium.

"Geoff has been our associate music director for many years, he conducted our youth orchestra, and is a Little Rock resident," Hundley says. "He's part of the community and knows the other arts organizations. He was involved in planning our new building."

continued on p. 15



ARKANSAS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

ONE OF MUSICAL AMERICA'S TOP 30 PROFESSIONALS OF THE YEAR 2023

Jan Hundley

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Opening September 2024...

ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center

A Radically Welcoming Hub of Musical Activity for all Arkansans

continued from p. 14

In August, the ASO broke ground on the Stella Boyle Smith Music Center, a 20,000-square-foot facility in Little Rock's East Village, adjacent to the Clinton Presidential Library and Museum. The orchestra will continue to give concerts at the 2,222-seat Robinson Center, but the new building promises to be a significant community asset. Projected to open in September 2024, it will include offices, rehearsal and practice spaces, a broadcast and recording studio, and music classrooms.

Hundley led the recent five-year capital campaign that raised \$11.7 million to cover the cost of the center. She also steered the ASO, which has a \$4 million budget, through the pandemic. "We didn't lay anyone off, not full-time musicians, not staff," she says. "Our donors really stepped up, and then we ultimately received government funding, but we didn't know we were going to get that at the time we were making those decisions." —John Fleming

YOLANDA KONDONASSIS

Head, Harp Department



[Cleveland Institute of Music](#)



Harp soloist Yolanda Kondonassis has been featured on more than 20 albums, but her latest release, *Five Minutes for Earth*, is something special. The album, on the Azica label, has short works for solo harp that Kondonassis commissioned from 15 composers, including Michael Daugherty, Reena Esmail, Stephen Hartke, and Aaron J. Kernis. Not only is the new music a significant contribution to the harp repertoire, but it also serves as a source of monetary contributions to environmental causes via Kondonassis' [Earth at Heart](#) nonprofit organization, whose mission is to inspire "earth conservation awareness and action through the portal of the arts."

"Each piece is roughly five minutes long and expresses some condition or atmosphere of Earth," Kondonassis said. "The brief length is a metaphor for how little time collective humanity has to recognize that we have nothing unless we have a place to live."

Kondonassis developed a "pay it forward" process for musicians who play works from the album along with others she is adding to the collection. The Earth at Heart website contains links to sheet

music for the works and directions on how to verify a performance and generate an automatic donation from the organization to the Nature Conservancy, the Ocean Conservancy, the Rainforest Alliance, the Sierra Club Foundation, the Environmental Defense Fund, or the World Wildlife Fund.

"So far we have been able to do a minimum donation of \$100 per performance," said Kondonassis, who is on the lookout for smaller environmental groups to add to the list of beneficiaries. "We hope that with time and momentum the donations can be more. All the composers waived their commission fees. That is a substantial in-kind contribution to the cause. I was so gratified."

Kondonassis gave premieres of works from *Five Minutes for Earth* in a 2022 concert at the Cleveland Museum of Art. In March 2024, her solo performance with the [BlueWater Chamber Orchestra](#) in Cleveland will include the premiere of the harp and orchestra version of the first track on the album, Takuma Itoh's *Kohola Sings*, which celebrates the sounds of the humpback whale. —John Fleming



LEE KOONCE
 President and Artistic Director
 Gateways Music Festival

As president and artistic director of the Gateways Music Festival, Lee Koonce has steered the organization through an impressive transformation. Before he assumed the post in 2016, the festival was largely volunteer-run and had an annual budget of about \$200,000. Today, with a \$2.2 million budget and a professional staff, it is in the midst of an ambitious 2023-24 season comprised of two festivals.

“Never have we had a season as big as this, and it is what we plan to continue in the future,” says Koonce of the 30-year-old festival,

which is affiliated with the Eastman School of Music in Rochester. Its mission is to connect and support professional classical musicians of African descent with programming that highlights Black composers.

The first festival offered concerts over six days in October, divided between Rochester, NY, and New York City, with a rich helping of music by 18th-century French-Caribbean composer Joseph Boulogne. The second festival is April 15-19 in Chicago’s Orchestra Hall and features the all-Black Gateways Festival Orchestra in Margaret Bonds’s symphonic tribute to Martin Luther King Jr, *Montgomery Variations*.

continued on p. 17

Congratulations, Yolanda Kondonassis
 one of Musical America's 2023 Top Professionals of the Year!

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continued from p. 16

There is also a February 13 concert by the Gateways Chamber Players at Washington's Kennedy Center.

Koonce has achieved important advances, changing the festival from biennial to annual and improving the level of the orchestra. In January, he will turn over Gateways leadership to Alex Laing, longtime principal clarinet of the Phoenix Symphony. Laing, who first participated in the festival as a player in the orchestra in 2001,

has been executive director since July. (Laing was named a [Musical America Top 30 Professional](#).) "The most important thing for me is that Alex have the runway he deserves so that he and Gateways can soar," says Koonce, who will stay on as senior adviser for a while. "I will support him in every way I can." —John Fleming

TONI-MARIE MONTGOMERY

Dean Emeritus and Professor

[Bienen School of Music, Northwestern University](#)



With a long record of achievement behind her at Northwestern University, Toni-Marie Montgomery stepped down as dean of the Bienen School of Music in August. Appointed in 2003, she was Northwestern's first African American dean and the music school's first female dean. "Being first has kind of been my life, simply because there have been so few African American women as university administrators," says Montgomery, who considers her most enduring legacy to be the Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Center for the Musical Arts. The \$111 million building overlooking Lake Michigan and serving the Bienen School was completed in 2015. "I say that it was my 12-year-old baby, because the gestation process to get it built took that long."

Other landmarks of Montgomery's tenure were the establishment of a pair of biennial prizes: the [Michael Ludwig Nemmers Prize in Music Composition](#), a \$100,000 award that went to Tania León this year; and the [Jean Gimbel Lane Prize in Piano Performance](#), a \$50,000 award whose 2023 recipient was Maria João Pires. She is proud that the [Institute for New Music](#) was founded on her watch. She made a future bequest from her own estate to initiate the Toni-Marie Montgomery/Mattie Drayton Undergraduate Piano Scholarship to honor her mother "and all she did in furthering my musical career."

Montgomery studied piano performance at the University of Michigan, receiving her doctorate in chamber music and accompanying in 1984. She looks back on that expertise as key to her career as an administrator, which encompassed posts at five universities over nearly 40 years.

"In accompanying and in chamber music, if my collaborator skipped a beat or a measure, then I had to follow. I think this kind of close listening helped me in administration, working with faculty and students, but also in fundraising, where really listening to what donors might be interested in supporting is so important." —John Fleming

Congratulations
Toni-Marie Montgomery



The Bienen School of Music celebrates Former Dean Toni-Marie Montgomery's selection as one of Musical America's Top 30 Professionals of the Year.

Northwestern
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MELISSA NGAN

President and CEO

[American Composers Orchestra](#)   

Since its founding in 1977, the American Composers Orchestra has been a leading performer of new work by American composers, as its Carnegie Hall concerts have long attested. In addition to those, the current season will offer the New York premiere of *An American Soldier*, an opera by composer Huang Ruo, with a libretto by David Henry Hwang, at the Perelman Arts Center.

The profile of the organization is evolving under Melissa Ngan, who became president and CEO in 2021. “ACO has made a lot of strides in refreshing its purpose as a national gateway for composers to enter the field,” says Ngan, former executive director of Fifth House, an innovative chamber music ensemble she founded in Chicago. “Now we’re kind of a hybrid between a performing organization and a service organization in the sense that while we do perform at Carnegie Hall and have our own activities in New York, we also develop relationships between composers and other symphony orchestras. And we partner with orchestras nationally on composer readings, residencies, and commissions.”

For example, ACO collaborated with the League of American Orchestras and the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation to establish a 30-orchestra consortium that has commissioned works by six women and nonbinary composers: Anna Clyne, Sarah Gibson, Angel Lam, Gity Razaz, Arlene Sierra, and Wang Lu. The results are being performed across the U.S. A longstanding ACO program is [EarShot](#), which gives composers reading sessions of their works and has helped boost the early careers of many now-prominent composers, such as Jennifer Higdon, Jessie Montgomery, and Carlos Simon.

“The opportunity to have your music performed by live humans on live instruments is still very rare at the scale of a symphony orchestra,” Ngan says. “For me, one of the most joyful things is to sit with a composer when that happens for the first time. It’s a beautiful moment.” —John Fleming

SHAWN OKPEBHOLO

Jonathan Blanchard Chair of Music (Composition & Music Theory)

    [Wheaton College](#)



In May, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra will premiere a newly commissioned work by composer Shawn Okpebholo, inspired by his experience working with students in Chicago Public Schools.

When it comes to cost-free music education, Okpebholo is simply paying it forward. Raised by his mother in government housing in Lexington, KY, Okpebholo started taking free music lessons at a Salvation Army church, joining its English-style brass band and youth choir. He also took intermittent composition lessons from composer James Curnow, a fellow congregant.

“With my narrative, it’s so easy to say, ‘Well, you’ve worked hard.’ Yes, but there’s still systems in place where, no matter how hard you work, it’s still hard to get to the next level. I care more about changing how those systems work,” he says.

After entering graduate school, Okpebholo explored the music of his heritage: African American spirituals on his mother’s side, West African music on his father’s side. That interest in spirituals has evolved: He is now among the foremost art song composers working today. His music is featured on two Grammy-

continued on p. 19

continued from p. 18

nominated albums, with vocal eminences Will Liverman and J'nai Bridges. *Songs in Flight*, his recent song cycle setting fugitive slave ads, premiered earlier this year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Now, he's broken into the opera world, collaborating with librettist Mark Campbell on *The Cook-Off*, slated for productions in Nashville and Portland, OR, in future seasons. Okpebholo is

also a member of the Blacknificent Seven, a composer collective whose ranks include Jessie Montgomery and Joel Thompson.

"People ask me all the time, 'What's some advice you would give younger composers? It's an easy question for me: develop meaningful friendships,'" Okpebholo says. "I attribute my career taking off the way it has in large part because I just like people: I've developed these friendships, and it makes art more fun." —Hannah Edgar



TIFFANY ORTIZ
Director, Early Childhood Programs
[Carnegie Hall Kids](#)

On October 7, hundreds gathered on West 57th Street in Manhattan, one of New York's many celebrations during this, the 50th-anniversary year of hip hop. Two things about this particular occasion stood out, however. First, most of the attendees, including the DJs and the rappers, were between the ages of three and ten. Second, it took place at Carnegie Hall—not exactly known internationally as a cradle of rap.

To Tiffany Ortiz, though, that was nothing out of the ordinary. Carnegie Hall has been hosting themed Family Days like this one since 2014. In addition to its vast, in-school music education program, it also offers interactive concerts for babies and group music classes to small children and their caretakers. *And* it produces an online singalong series for children. Did we mention that all of these are free?

"What we heard from people was, 'We really would love to have more music activities in our community, but either they're nonexistent or they're not affordable,'" Ortiz says. "We really made it a mission to provide free programs so that families can learn about music in a range of ways."

Ortiz began working for Carnegie Hall right out of college, in 2011. When she first started, as an administrative assistant for its

community programs, she was returning to home turf; Ortiz grew up in Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with specializations in communications and music—Ortiz is a singer-songwriter, though she admits that work keeps her too busy these days—and found her happy place in Carnegie Hall's family programs department.

[The Lullaby Project](#), which gives parents and parents-to-be the opportunity to compose original lullabies with the help of a professional musician, was just getting off the ground when Ortiz arrived. It started as a collaboration with the Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx. By 2016, Ortiz was managing the entire initiative. Under her leadership, the Lullaby Project grew to encompass 50 partnerships globally—mostly with social service organizations, shelters, and hospitals—and serve about 800 families per year.

Now, as director of all early childhood programs, she remains motivated by her commitment to make music education available to all, regardless of class, neighborhood, and even age. Ortiz's projects don't just give families and children activities to bond over. As she notes, they empower parents to become "the first music teachers for their children." That's music to our ears. —Hannah Edgar



VALENTINA PELEGGI

Music Director




[Richmond Symphony](#)

The Richmond Symphony made headlines earlier this year when it announced that its musicians would do away with its traditional ties and tails in favor of sleek, sweat-wicking blue and black uniforms. In a statement, Music Director Valentina Peleggi said the point of the wardrobe change was not to break with tradition but to “include innovation” as one of the orchestra’s trademarks.

Innovation has been a throughline of her tenure so far, even though, unluckily enough, the 2020–21 season was her first in the job. But streaming, for many merely a temporary salve during the pandemic, is now a core part of the Richmond Symphony’s operations, even offering video links to live ticket-buyers. She’s also diversified the orchestra’s concert formats, offering a Symphony (mainstage), Metro (offsite), Pops, Choral, and Chamber series, the last of which includes performances at local breweries, a nod to Richmond’s craft

beer industry. The orchestra has just named its first composer-in-residence: the fast-rising Damien Geter, a Richmond-area native. Geter’s residency culminates in his operatic retelling of the landmark civil rights case *Loving v. Virginia*, a co-commission with Virginia Opera.

In a sense, being forced to think existentially right away was an asset to Peleggi’s directorship. To go national, she realized, the orchestra had to dig in locally. Even the blue on those uniforms is a nod to the James River, which runs through the city.

“We started thinking about all the questions that came up with COVID. Like, for whom are we playing? And in what way is the Richmond Symphony the Richmond Symphony? What makes us different from anybody else?” Peleggi says.

It’s paid off in a big way. Ticket sales are booming—so much so that Peleggi is almost sheepish to report to peers in industry meetings that Richmond’s COVID era has been its most successful. She’ll be around to watch her efforts bear fruit: just a few months ago, the orchestra extended her contract through 2028. —Hannah Edgar



MARNA SELTZER

Artistic and Executive Director

[Princeton University Concerts](#)





Since arriving in 2010, Artistic and Executive Director Marna Seltzer has pushed the venerable Princeton University Concerts, founded in 1894, to be more audience friendly. “I think this season looks completely different,” Seltzer says. “The music is still great, but now we are trying to extend a hand to people who feel

like the world of classical music is maybe a party to which they were not invited before.”

PUC’s 2023–24 lineup has the usual complement of stellar artists—pianist H el ene Grimaud, the Hagen String Quartet, violinist Isabelle Faust—but their concerts are sprinkled amid less

continued on p. 21

continued from p. 20

conventional fare. They range from Do-Re-Meet: Pre-Concert Speed Dating to Live Music Meditation. This last is free and combines guided meditation with music by top-level artists, such as Chanticleer and harpsichordist Jean Rondeau. “It’s really about focused listening,” Seltzer says. “You don’t need to be a serious meditator. You don’t need to be a serious concertgoer. Just come with an open mind. Honestly, every time we do it, I think, why aren’t all concerts like this?”

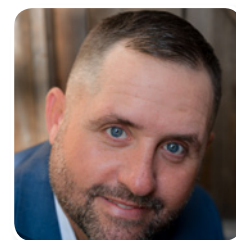
The pandemic led to the creation of a series called Healing with Music. It features concert-conversation programs based on health and wellness issues: Living with cancer (with Grammy winner Jon Batiste and his wife, writer Suleika Jaouad); anxiety and depression (pianist Jonathan Biss and writer Adam Haslett); and Parkinson’s Disease (Mark Morris Dance Group).

In January, PUC will present the U.S. premiere of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra’s “Future Presence: An Immersive Installation in Virtual Reality,” with music of Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Ives as experienced through a VR headset. “With the headset on, you listen to a top-notch recording and have freedom to move,” Seltzer says. “You can walk around, you feel like you can touch the musicians, you can dance, you can conduct. It’s a way to have the Mahler Chamber Orchestra on a season when they’re not really here.” —John Fleming

JOSH SHAW

Founding Artistic Director and CEO

[Pacific Opera Project](#)



How many opera companies would dare set *The Magic Flute* in the Nintendo universe? Or rechristen the *Merry Widow* as *The Merry Widder*, transplanting the action to the Wild West? Or reimagine the inciting event of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* as an alien abduction, with Belmonte and Pedrillo as sendups of Captains Kirk and Spock?

Josh Shaw is the *Regie* behind Pacific Opera Project’s (POP) bold, cheeky brand of *Regietheater*. Trained as an opera singer, Shaw got his start working in dinner theater and the musical theater world. He returned to opera after moving to Los Angeles in 2004, but it wasn’t until 2011, when he founded POP, that he turned his attention to directing. An early hit—and recurring favorite—was *La bohème aka the Hipsters*, which not-so-secretly satirized Highland Park, the hipster-y northeastern L.A. neighborhood where the company is based. But Pacific Opera Company productions “POP” up everywhere, from a Pasadena church (for an immersive *Tosca* in

2014) to Title I schools (through its Opera Explorers program, teaching students how to create their own operas).

To date, Shaw has directed over 50 POP productions in addition to his own freelance directing schedule; many of these stagings feature his original, singable English libretti—now something of a POP calling card. The company also mounted a nearly unheard-of 26 live performances in 2020 and 2021, on outdoor stages and drive-throughs; the *Los Angeles Times* credited POP with “the first major musical or theatrical event in Los Angeles County presented for a live audience in nearly 14 months.” Through it all, POP has maintained its commitment to having \$15 tickets available, in part by raising prices across its premium ticket class. *Opera News* recently gushed that “the chances of [opera’s] survival in the years ahead will, in part at least, be dependent on the energy of companies such as Pacific Opera Project.” Surviving—and thriving, too. —Hannah Edgar



PATRICK SLEVIN

Executive Director

[Austin Soundwaves](#)   

Talk about being in the right place at the right time: In 2011, Patrick Slevin—a percussionist with degrees in performance and urban studies from Northwestern University, plus a year in the El Sistema Fellows Program at New England Conservatory—was hired by a fledgling music-education organization focused on reaching out to Hispanic students in Austin, TX. Today Slevin is executive director of Austin Soundwaves.

From its start with 42 students at a single middle school, Soundwaves has grown dramatically during Slevin's tenure. In 2022–23, it worked with 1,100 students—80 percent Hispanic—at 23 schools, supporting orchestra, band, mariachi, and general music instruction in grades K–12; it also has after-school and summer programs. “For me it’s been a lot of learning by trial and error,” Slevin says. “At Soundwaves, I have been able to combine my love of music with my interest in making communities stronger and more equitable.”

One Soundwaves program was launched out of tragedy. In 2018, Draylen Mason, an African American double bass player and longtime

student in the organization, died from the explosion of a package on his home doorstep, one in a series of random murders known as the Austin Package Bombings. “He was the most gifted musician I’ve ever worked with,” Slevin says. “When Draylen died, he had been accepted into Oberlin Conservatory, the University of North Texas School of Music, and the Butler School of Music of the University of Texas at Austin. Along with being an extraordinary talent, he was a champion for social justice. It was important for us to honor his legacy.”

The [Draylen Mason Fellows Program](#) is in its sixth year of supporting a small group of Austin area high school musicians—there are eight fellows this year—who meet monthly to collaborate on an original performance highlighting an issue of their choosing. Previous fellows have examined themes such as Black Lives Matter and gun violence in schools. “I still lead the program and work with it closely,” Slevin says. “It’s a special part of my life personally, and definitely for our organization.” —John Fleming

ALEXA SMITH

Senior Director of Anti-Racism, Equity, and Belonging

   [The Public Theater](#)



For most of her career, Alexa Smith has been part of the classical music world. She studied voice at Roosevelt University and the Manhattan School of Music, sang in operas (her website is [Recovering Soprano](#)), was marketing director of New York City Opera, and served as MSM's associate vice president for strategic innovation and special initiatives. It was quite a change in March when Smith moved into the theater world, becoming the inaugural senior director of anti-racism, equity, and belonging at New York's Public Theater.

“Obviously, for me the departure from classical music was a big decision, but I’ve found that the theater world provides a good road map for EDI (equity, diversity, inclusion) and cultural transformation work,” she says. “What I really have loved is that my role is equal parts on the administration side and on the artistic side. I’m in the rehearsal room quite a bit, and spend a lot of time with directors, designers, actors, crew members. I find you can move the needle best when the administrative and artistic are in balance.”

continued on p. 23

continued from p. 22

The Public is a touchstone of the performing arts in America, with a legacy of legendary productions since its 1954 founding by Joseph Papp, including the premieres of *Hair*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Hamilton*. Key to Smith's new job is the company's Anti-Racism and Cultural Transformation Plan, created in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. "The plan is in its third year, and we are making a lot of adjustments in how we think about it," she said. "At the Public, we understand that what we do ripples out throughout the industry, and we take that responsibility very seriously."

In addition to getting her new post at the Public this year, Smith also saw the launch of the [Duncan Williams Voice Competition](#) for Black and Latinx singers, for which she is founding artistic director. Named for pioneering African American opera stars Todd Duncan and Camilla Williams, the initial competition drew almost 300 applicants and was held at MSM in February, with 10 singers awarded cash prizes. —John Fleming



MICHAEL SOLOMON

Director of Media Relations

[Lyric Opera of Chicago](#)

Earlier this year, Lyric Opera of Chicago made headlines when it became the first opera company in the world to provide wearable haptic technology as a regular offering for d/Deaf patrons.

As the company's media relations director, Michael Solomon generated much of the press for that [SoundShirt initiative](#). A passionate advocate for accessibility at the company since joining Lyric in 2021, he was one of the few opera professionals to attend the Kennedy Center's [Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability](#) (LEAD) conference in Boston earlier this year.

Creating accessibility was high on the agenda—the conference was held in what he describes as "the most deliberately accessible space I had ever been in. And they made it seem like the easiest thing in the world." He returned to Chicago bursting with ideas.

A self-described "opera snob," Solomon says his first exposure to the disability issue came when he worked for Austin Opera on an Opera America grant as its audience experience director. There,

he learned more about patron needs, and how they were—or weren't—being met. Later, accessibility work became personal: Solomon had a lower limb amputation in early 2020, while working as a press manager at the Metropolitan Opera. He jokes that the experience made him an early adopter of remote work: There wasn't an ADA-accessible bathroom on his floor, so he worked from home during recovery.

Solomon says losing his leg "changed the trajectory of my life in ways that are really fantastic." He remembers the ecstasy he felt when he ran his first 10K last year. He recognized the same emotion on the faces of patrons donning SoundShirts at a recent Lyric production.

"Accessibility isn't just about following the law. It's about customer service. And—drumroll please—it can be joyful," he says. —Hannah Edgar



THOR STEINGRABER

Executive and Artistic Director

[Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Instagram](#) [The Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts](#)

Executive and Artistic director Thor Steingraber is celebrating his 10th season with the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts, which is part of California State University, Northridge. Known as the Soraya—the first name of the matriarch of the Nazarian family, who made a \$17 million donation in 2017—the center has carved out a distinctive niche in the complex performing arts market of Southern California.

“We are very much a multidisciplinary venue,” says Steingraber, an opera and theater director before turning to management. “Our identity is wrapped up in a couple things that don’t always sit side by side. To reflect our community, we try to present the best Spanish-language content we can, and we put that right alongside our classical music and dance.” Most performances are in the 1,690-seat Great Hall.

Among highlights of his tenure, Steingraber cites the 2018 Los Angeles premiere of *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*, the first-ever

mariachi opera, by José “Pepe” Martínez. For *Treelogy*, composers Gabriella Smith, Steve Mackey, and Billy Childs were each commissioned to write a work inspired by an iconic California tree—the Redwood, Sequoia, and Joshua. The trilogy’s world premiere was performed last season by Delirium Musica, a 15-piece string ensemble. With underwriting from the Soraya, the Martha Graham Dance Company revived its classic *Canticle for Innocent Comedians* with a new score composed and played by jazz pianist Jason Moran.

Asked about challenges for presenters like the Soraya, Steingraber points to “the total decimation of the touring orchestra ecosystem. We had a robust international and American orchestra series that has diminished radically. Our audience is not back to pre-pandemic levels, but the real problem is on the supply side. Touring costs are something like three times what they were. The fee you pay a touring orchestra is already challenging, and if they increase fees to cover additional costs, there’s no way we’d be able to do it.” —John Fleming



DAVID H. STULL

President

[Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [YouTube](#) [Instagram](#) [San Francisco Conservatory of Music](#)

American conservatories—indeed, the entire concept of a conservatory—faced an existential crisis during the pandemic. Not the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM). Between 2020 and 2022, it audaciously redefined what a school of music could be by acquiring the renowned record label Pentatone and two major arts management firms, Askonas Holt and Opus 3.

Why? It’s all about connections, says SFCM President David Stull. SFCM’s recent mergers bring those companies’ affiliated artists straight to students’ doorsteps—literally. Since coming to SFCM in 2013, Stull has also overseen the construction of the award-winning [Bowes Center](#), a \$200 million, 170,000-square-foot “vertical campus” that houses not just student residences but three performance venues,

continued on p. 26

Congratulations, Thor!

“CSUN is honored to recognize and celebrate Thor Steingraber on being recognized as one of Musical America’s Top 30 Professionals of 2023. CSUN, the greater Los Angeles region, and the performing arts world have benefitted from his leadership and service.”

Erika D. Beck

PH.D., PRESIDENT
CAL STATE NORTHRIDGE



STATEMENTS FROM FELLOW CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY & UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PERFORMING ARTS LEADERSHIP

“Thor is a visionary leader in the arts community and an inspiring colleague. I look forward to his continued stewardship of The Soraya and to witnessing his deep and steadfast dedication to honor and reflect the rich cultural heritage and diversity of Southern California. Congratulations, Thor!”

— **Megan Kline Crockett**

Executive Director, Carpenter Performing Arts Center, Cal State Long Beach

“Congratulations, Thor! Your outstanding leadership has made The Soraya into a beacon of innovative and diverse programming, while also providing substantial support to artists.”

— **Jacob Yarrow**

Executive Director, Green Center, Cal State Sonoma

“This recognition is a testament to Thor’s exceptional contributions to the arts presenting world and to the cultural landscape of Southern California — on which his impact is palpable. Thor’s visionary and innovative leadership has resulted in countless transformative experiences for those in The Soraya’s community and beyond. On behalf of the entire team at The Luckman, I offer a standing ovation to an arts leader whose name is synonymous with excellence.”

— **Nicholas A. Mestas**

Executive Director, The Luckman Fine Arts Complex at Cal State LA

“Congratulations, Thor! We deeply value our relationship and applaud The Soraya’s vibrant contributions to the performing arts in Southern California.”

— **Celesta Billeci**

UCSB Arts & Lectures

Congratulations, Thor, for this richly-deserved distinction! Under your leadership, the Soraya has provided Southern Californians with groundbreaking artistic experiences, from which the entire West Coast arts ecosystem - including the Bay Area - has also greatly benefited. Here’s to many, many more years!

— **Jeremy Geffen**

Executive and Artistic Director, Cal Performances

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a state-of-the-art recording studio, San Francisco's classical radio station, and apartments for visiting artists. He's also inaugurated or redeveloped the conservatory's partnerships with Bay Area cultural juggernauts like the San Francisco Symphony, Opera, and Ballet, the SFJAZZ Center, Skywalker Studios, and Sony.

"This is a way to advance our agenda of creating a playground on our campus for artists when they come here, and for our students while they are here," he told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "It becomes a phenomenal network."

Stull's previous tenure at the helm of Oberlin College and Conservatory was similarly visionary. In his nine years as dean and

brass studies professor, he launched a record label, hosted the [Rubin Institute for Music Criticism](#)—which has since followed Stull to SFCM, and which funds classical music coverage at 17 publications across the country—and raised \$40 million. Those accomplishments led then-President Barack Obama to award Oberlin the National Medal of the Arts in 2010.

A graduate of Oberlin himself, Stull is also, in his words, a "recovering tuba player" and an amateur pilot. If the first ten years of Stull's tenure are any indication, SFCM's own dizzying ascent is only just beginning. —Hannah Edgar

SHARON YAZOWSKI

CEO

  [Levitt Foundation](#)



The Levitt Foundation has a down-to-earth mission: To support free concerts in public spaces for social and economic impact. There are Levitt Pavilions in seven U.S. metro areas, including Los Angeles, Denver, and Dallas, and they carry out the foundation's mission through summer-long programming of about 50 free concerts at each venue.

"They're all outdoors, all open lawn settings, and we don't fund anything that has fixed seating, because the open space is more conducive to social connectivity and community," says CEO Sharon Yazowski, who was hired as the Los Angeles-based foundation's first employee in 2009 to professionalize the operation. Today, it has a national staff of 16.

Established in 1966 by Mortimer Levitt and his wife Mimi, the foundation endowment (projected to be valued at \$170 million after an infusion from the family estate in the next year) stems from Mortimer's custom shirt-making business, The Custom Shop. The Levitts were avid arts patrons—he was board chair of Young Concert Artists, she was on the Bard Music Festival board—

and their first pavilion opened in 1974 in Westport, CT, where it remains a fixture in the community.

The construction and operation of a Levitt Pavilion entails a multi-year, multi-million-dollar commitment by the foundation. "We provide seed money of \$500,000, with the rest coming from community sources, either public or private or both," says Yazowski, adding that the cost of a pavilion runs up to \$9 million. "We do long-term operating grants of approximately \$200,000 a year over 15 to 20 years, which leaves the local group covering about 80 percent of annual operating costs." New pavilion venues are under development in Houston and San Jose, CA. In addition to its support of pavilions, the foundation has given three-year matching grants totaling \$90,000 each to concert series in 33 small to mid-sized cities for 2023-25.

"The Levitt Pavilions collectively select one artist a year who will play each venue," Yazowski says. This year it was La Santa Cecilia, a Pan American band that won a 2014 Latin Grammy Award. "It's a way to celebrate how free music in public spaces can elevate our communities." —John Fleming



Hannah Edgar is a Chicago-based freelance writer who contributes to *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Reader*, the Cincinnati Symphony's *Fanfare*, and *Musical America*. Bylines also appear in the *New York Times*, *VAN Magazine*, *Bandcamp*, and *ARTnews*.



John Fleming writes for *Opera*, *Musical America*, *Classical Voice North America*, and other publications. For 22 years, he covered the Florida music scene as performing arts critic of the *Tampa Bay Times*.

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Advertiser Index

Arkansas Symphony Orchestra.....	14
Chapman University.....	5
Cleveland Institute of Music.....	16
Glendale Community College, Maricopa Community Colleges	13
Northwestern University Bienen School of Music	17
Younes & Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts CSUN.....	25

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