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RECOVERY & RENEWAL

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Louisiana Philharmonic
Overcame Katrina
to Help Its Hometown

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by Ian McNulty

Recovery and Renewal

Four years ago, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. For the musician-owned Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, it was an opportunity to forge stronger connections with its community.



Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra Music Director Carlos Miguel Prieto



The Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra faced the void after Hurricane Katrina devastated its home city of New Orleans, ruined its primary performance hall, and scattered its musicians, staff, audience, and supporters all over the country. A lot went into the orchestra's survival, its resurgence and its current success, from a new approach to outreach and partnerships to the orchestra's unusual musician-led ownership structure itself. But if you ask LPO cellist Annie Cohen, another indispensable resource was the strong backs of willing souls.

"We have the world's greatest roadies. They pack the whole orchestra up and move us wherever we need to go, night after night," says Cohen, who is also past president of the LPO and has been a member of the orchestra since its formation in 1991.

Before it could get back home after Katrina—to return to the business of bringing classical music to its communities—the LPO had to travel a great deal. Rental

trucks and heavy lifting were in order as the orchestra hit the road to find dispersed audiences in towns and cities around the Gulf South. This meant complex logistics, and sometimes compromised acoustics in unfamiliar venues. It meant cramming musicians into church choir lofts and staging back-to-back concerts on the same evenings to compensate for tiny concert halls. But most of all, all the hard work meant



Orchestra musicians helped to build the Musicians' Village in November 2006, part of a post-Katrina building effort through New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity. Conceived by New Orleans natives Harry Connick, Jr. and Branford Marsalis, the Musicians' Village has provided 72 single-family homes in the Upper Ninth Ward for musicians, artists, and other families who have defined the city's culture.

Judi Bottori

Jim Atwood



In performance at the Mahalia Jackson Theater

Judi Bottori

that the LPO was back in business, and it serves as one example of the resourcefulness, unity of purpose, and commitment that would very quickly allow the orchestra to perform once again in New Orleans.

"If musicians have the opportunity to play great music in a great way, they will find a way to do it under extraordinary circumstances," says LPO Music Director Carlos Miguel Prieto, who had signed on to lead the LPO just days before Katrina struck on August 29, 2005. Prieto was recruited that year to replace Klauspeter Siebel, who was retiring after nine years with the LPO. The Mexican-born conductor and violinist was already quite busy on the eve of the disaster: Prieto holds music directorships at the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico, the Orquesta Mineria (also in Mexico), and the Huntsville Symphony in Alabama. But he

says that he never considered bowing out of his new responsibility to lead the LPO, despite the monumental challenges the deeply wounded community suddenly presented. "We needed to play music," he recalls. "The message we had to communicate was an essential one, and it was that the LPO is a vital part of this community and would be there for this community."

By October, just a few weeks after Katrina, members of the LPO were reunited onstage for the first time, performing in Nashville for an audience that included many displaced New Orleans people. That show closed with an emotional arrangement of "When the Saints Go Marching In," the traditional spiritual heard so often in New Orleans, and an impromptu parade of audience members through the concert hall. Before the year was out, the orchestra returned

home to put on a holiday concert in the battered Crescent City itself. It embarked on a truncated season for 2006 and committed to its full, 36-week season for the next year and for the years that followed. While some musicians never returned after Katrina, the LPO brought in new talent and, restored to its pre-storm complement of 67 members, quickly began bringing world-premiere performances, the work of many living composers, distinguished soloists, and new educational programs to its stricken but recovering region.

"It would have been easy for them to roll over and play dead because they had just gone through so much, but instead they went out and found new ways to show people how much they could do for the community, how much classical music means in this community," says Dr. Alfred Lemmon,

research director at the Historic New Orleans Collection, a research center and museum in the French Quarter. Since Katrina, he has been working closely with the LPO on community- and classroom-based education programs.

Tried and True

LPO members and supporters say that necessity moved the orchestra to embrace its long-stated mandate to be a regional orchestra. The group now performs in communities across ten parishes, the Louisiana equivalent of counties. As of January 2009, the LPO shares the newly restored, city-owned and city-financed Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts with the New Orleans opera and ballet as well as with touring shows. Elsewhere in the state, they perform in convention halls, business centers, former movie theaters, university auditoriums, and so many churches that some LPO members

working as a schoolteacher. She later became the orchestra's general manager and in 2003 was promoted to her current position, which is comparable to that of executive director at other orchestras. "We have the most amazing musical history here in New Orleans and in Louisiana," she says. "What I've seen in this orchestra over the years are such highly talented people who enjoy quality music across the board—and they want to interact with different musical traditions and share them through their own art."

Notwithstanding the technical limitations of some of their current venues, the LPO's concerts have received rave reviews from the *Times Picayune*, New Orleans's daily newspaper, which in 2007 hailed the orchestra as "a potent symbol of recovery" for the city. But despite the LPO's having been through a crucible and coming through stronger for it, that resilience is be-

"We were willing to try an enormous variety of things and venues because we had to," says Babs Mollere, the LPO's managing director. "What we discovered is that people were ready to embrace the orchestra when we came to them."



Babs Mollere, managing director of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra

Carlton Mickle



Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra

A young violinist at one of the Louisiana Philharmonic's Family Concerts. Family concerts are geared toward children ages three to twelve, and admission is free for children twelve and under.



Jim Atwood

Before-and-after images of one of the Louisiana Philharmonic's timpani drums illustrate the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina.

joke that they belong to the "Baptist Church Orchestra of Louisiana."

Through it all they have maintained an artistic profile that mixes classical warhorses with contemporary works as well as a Spotlight series—what other ensembles would call pops—that brings in talent from Louisiana's other robust music traditions, says Babs Mollere, managing director of the LPO.

Mollere got involved with the LPO as a volunteer some fifteen years ago while

ing tapped once again as the LPO weathers the national economic crisis that has endangered so much arts funding. "We're in a second hurricane now, like most other orchestras, but you just can't see this one," says Mollere. The hope is that lessons learned and bonds forged during the Katrina experience will see them through once again—and perhaps provide an example for other arts organizations grappling with this financial storm.

It would be understating the case to say that the LPO faced an "economic crisis" after Katrina. Its \$4 million operating budget for the 2005-06 season was roughly halved. The historic and acoustically pristine 1918 Orpheum Theater, where it had performed in downtown New Orleans, was a flood-ruined wreck, as it remains today. Everything from instruments to music stands was damaged. At a stroke, some musicians lost their homes, practically all their possessions, and

their jobs outside the orchestra. And they were hardly alone: Needs across the region were dire, widespread and immediate, and classical music was not necessarily at the top of the agenda for assistance.

Fortunately for the LPO, the orchestra had already collected its subscription revenue for the 2005-06 season before the storm struck, and few subscribers asked for refunds after Katrina. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation issued a special \$200,000 grant to the LPO in the weeks after the storm. In October 2005 the New York Philharmonic hosted a benefit performance at Lincoln Center, which was broadcast live to a national radio audience. Listeners were encouraged to phone in their own donations, and Mollere remembers that some of the first people to respond were fellow Louisiana residents.

“That was the first indication that we

destroyed department store. There was no accurate read on how many people were living in the city again, and no one could say when major improvements would happen.

Banding Together

To understand just how the LPO pulled itself through and managed to not only survive but thrive in the seasons that followed, it is useful to know about the LPO’s history and unusual operational structure.

The LPO was born from the ashes of the New Orleans Symphony, which had performed in New Orleans since 1936. The orchestra responded to budget problems in the late 1980s by laying off staff and drastically cutting down its seasons, even shutting down altogether for the first three months of 1989. The organization finally went bankrupt and dissolved in 1991.

“The real tragedy that is remembered

LPO’s board as trustees. Some musicians took college courses to brush up on business management skills, but eventually the LPO hired professional staff to manage operations and allow musicians to spend more time on their music. Yet the original ownership structure has remained the same as the LPO approaches its 20th anniversary. Musician-run committees still oversee the fundamental operations of the orchestra, including hiring decisions.

“When you go to music school, you don’t learn how to run an orchestra—that’s supposed to be someone else’s problem,” says Bill Schettler, the LPO’s assistant principal double bass, who joined the orchestra

The Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, participating in the national food drive Orchestras Feeding America, collected 1,129 pounds of food at Ochsner Swing in the Oaks free concert at City Park on April 22, 2009. Food donated by audience members benefited the Second Harvest Food Bank of New Orleans and Acadiana, providing meals for more than 880 people.



Louisiana Philharmonic bassist Bill Morris offers a high five to children at an Early Explorers program for pre-K through first-grade students.



could do this, that people would be there for us if we came back,” says Mollere.

But funding wasn’t the only problem the LPO faced in Katrina’s aftermath. Its home city lay in ruins. Even as the orchestra took the stage for that first holiday concert in New Orleans, vast portions of the city remained blacked out and all but deserted, with wrecked homes and debris-choked streets stretching for miles in all directions. All public schools were closed, and for months most of the city’s emergency medical care was delivered from tents inside a

around here today is that the musicians only found out about it all on the TV news,” says Mollere. “That was part of the impetus for what came next—for wanting an orchestra where musicians were more involved.”

The same year the symphony folded, its former musicians banded together to create their own musician-owned and collaboratively managed orchestra, an arrangement that is virtually unique in the U.S. Musicians began to pay themselves salaries—or “shares,” as they call them—and voted to elect other community members to the

in 2004. “But you learn really fast here, and it’s amazing to see the different ways musicians put in time offstage. We have our contracts for playing our instruments, and then there’s all the other time that is basically volunteered to make the orchestra run.” Musicians participate in committees alongside community trustees to make key decisions for the LPO, from hiring moves to determining each season’s programs, and they elect both the trustees and their own musician leadership.

The approach demands a lot from musicians, and it can be time-consuming for some decisions to make the rounds of the committee process. There are still disagreements. But the structure has provided a remedy for what are typically the most contentious issues in the life of a professional orchestra. For instance, after the LPO's budget process each year, musicians are usually able to write their collective bargaining agreement in just one day. "After the hurricane we examined this to see if it would still work given our situation, but what happened is we actually re-committed to this model," says Mollere. "It worked extraordinarily well for us after Katrina because we were able to quickly achieve buy-in across the organization. We don't have the normal hierarchical structure, and while there's no doubt it all takes more time, it creates a level of trust that is invaluable.

"This orchestra would not have made it after Katrina but for the huge investments of time and energy the musicians have put back into this organization and the enormous trust that comes from everyone working together," she adds. "It led to an attitude in those days after the storm that it didn't really matter what your title was as long as you could get things done."

Musicians and staff agree that this structure allowed the LPO to concentrate on the complex financial and logistical challenges after Katrina without "us versus them" hang-ups or second-guessing of motives. For instance, when the situation for New Orleans was at its darkest—when people were just learning the extent of devastation from the levee failures—the LPO's board decided to deposit \$1,000 into each employee's checking account.

"When I tell people that story, they usually say it's hard to imagine other orchestras doing that, that maybe instead they would have just battened down the hatches," says Jim Atwood, timpanist for the LPO and its president during the year of the hurricane. "But it made an enormous impact on employees. The orchestra went into debt to put a thousand bucks in our wallets and basically make sure everyone could survive."

At Home on the Road

The LPO was determined to survive, so finding its audience was the next logical question. Calamity hit deep all over the LPO's community. Would people grappling

Fountains enhance the atmosphere outside Mahalia Jackson Theater, now the Louisiana Philharmonic's primary performance venue.



with such monumental problems as lack of permanent housing show up even if the LPO could organize a local concert? "We were ready to play, but we all wondered what would really happen," says Atwood.

But people did turn up. One of those early concerts was particularly moving for many LPO members, who recall that at the end of the performance, as the audience broke into applause, someone in the crowd shouted out "thank you" as loud as he could. It sounded to the orchestra like unbridled gratitude, like the expression of relief from classical music lovers that one part of their New Orleans world was back again. The memory still makes some musicians well up. "There's just nothing like being in a room full of people enjoying this art. It's the power of that communal experience and being part of it as it all comes together," says Atwood.

As New Orleans staggered through its first phases of recovery, the LPO took to the road to bring its music to other parts of the region. It staged side-by-side performances with other orchestras, and LPO musicians frequently performed with other organizations' conductors and directors.

"We saw regional business on the horizon for a long time before Katrina, and we were trying to figure out how to get there," Mollere recalls. "But the hurricane did that for us, because through necessity we went from performing in three or four different venues to performing in 22. We were just willing to try an enormous variety of things and venues because we had to. What we discovered is that people were ready to respond to that—they would embrace the orchestra when we came to them."

The great number of venues is just one

of the ways the LPO has expanded and engaged its regional audience. Before even staging its first post-Katrina concert in New Orleans, the LPO began working with the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. on new programs to bring music instruction back to Louisiana public schools. This ongoing work has thus far produced classical music-based teaching guides, CDs and DVDs aimed at grades five through eight, and most recently the LPO helped write a new comprehensive arts curriculum for K-12 classrooms that is being distributed across the state this school year.

Another fruit of this effort is a long-term collaboration with the Historic New Orleans Collection. Lemmon, the center's research director, began developing a five-year plan for a concert series with related classroom guides and CDs, all based on the rich history of classical music in New Orleans. One program, "Music of the Mississippi," focuses on the role of the Mississippi River in spreading culture and commerce, while another spotlights the accomplishments of Ernest Guiraud (1837-82), a New Orleanian perhaps best known for his orchestral recitatives to Bizet's *Carmen* and Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. "Creole Orchestras of Louisiana" focuses on the contributions of free people of color to the state's classical-music heritage during antebellum days; other programs under development will examine the influence of German immigrants on Louisiana music and the impact of Louisiana's many different ethnicities on the state's musical culture. "Both organizations put their hearts into the project, and it has grown faster and bigger than I think any of us originally imagined," says Lemmon.

A pre-concert lecture for the very first performance, in February 2007 in the French Quarter, bulged with audiences twice as large as expected, and turnout for the second event was so large the Historic New Orleans Collection had to relocate the event from its own lecture hall to the ballroom of a nearby hotel. "I think this program and the turnout have demonstrated not only the LPO's role as an educational resource, but also just how eager people are to have cultural attractions when times are tough," says Lemmon.

Art for Demanding Times

The LPO completed its short season that first year following Katrina, and set about planning its future. For the first full season back, 2006-07, Prieto decided to program a piece by a living composer in every concert and to invite that composer to attend the performance. So, interspersed with standard symphonic repertoire were contemporary works by such varied composers as John Corigliano, Jennifer Higdon, David Del Tredici, and Paquito d'Rivera, as well as several composers from Prieto's native Mexico.

"You sometimes hear resistance from people who think this or that won't sell," Prieto says, "but the lesson is, when something is good you have to trust it. You have to trust the quality of the music and the audience. When things get difficult, you either make the decision to risk it and do what you do even better, or you become fearful and fall back on what you think people will buy. People will be with you if they feel you're taking a risk that's worth it."

The orchestra's commitment to embrace and encourage emerging classical music talent continues in the 2009-10 season. There will also be visits by leading soloists including cellist Yo-Yo Ma and violinist Midori, world and New Orleans premieres, and an over-arching theme exploring the ways dance, literature, and other art forms inspire music.

"When the economy is so tough, in the nineteenth year of the LPO, you won't be able to tell anything is different with our orchestra or with our music," says Prieto. **S**

IAN McNULTY is a freelance journalist based in New Orleans and author of *A Season of Night*, a memoir about life in New Orleans during the first months after Hurricane Katrina.



Music Director, Cape Ann Symphony Orchestra
 Music Director, Melrose Symphony Orchestra
 Music Director, Quincy Symphony Orchestra
 Conducting Faculty, The Boston Conservatory

tel 617.821.4641
 email: Email@yoichiudagawa.com
 website: www.yoichiudagawa.com



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