It's no secret that the effect of the pandemic on the performing arts throughout the nation has been profound. As you read this, all of us had hoped to be in our seats celebrating the opening of the Virginia Symphony's 100th Anniversary Season – and welcoming a new music director. But like performing arts institutions everywhere, we are meeting this unprecedented situation by being ever-more flexible and coming up with new and creative ways to bring the Symphony to you in the future under safe and realistic conditions. With gratitude and optimism, we are writing to update you on our plans going forward.

Despite the cancellation of our concerts last spring, the VSO is meeting its current financial challenges, thanks to the many supporters who have stepped up to help. First, patrons have donated a total of $147,000 worth of tickets back to the organization since last March, which has helped tremendously! Hundreds of other donors have contributed, too. Along with the Virginia Stage Company, the Virginia Opera and the Virginia Arts Festival, the VSO received a very generous challenge gift which leveraged more than $300,000 before our fiscal year ended in June for the VSO alone.

Thanks to every one of you who helped when we needed you most – and who continue to be as generous as you can.

We are now planning for a robust season of programming to begin in mid-February through June 2021. Even prior to that, we will present JoAnn’s farewell concert (rescheduled from last spring) - an all-Beethoven program featuring world-renowned pianist Olga Kern performing the “Emperor” Concerto – January 8, 9 and 10 in participation with Virginia Arts Festival.

Fans will have many more opportunities to see JoAnn next spring and in the coming years, as she continues with us in her new role as the Connie and Marc Jacobson Music Director Laureate. In fact, JoAnn will conduct our opening program in February and be with us later in the season to celebrate our 100th anniversary at the conclusion of the season (details to be announced later this fall).

While we are unable to perform this fall, we are investing time and attention in other mission-critical areas – education, our efforts to become a more equitable organization, and our search for JoAnn's successor.

• Education - School music programs need more support than ever in these times, and last spring our musicians helped to fill the gap with virtual coaching, providing videos to support teachers in their virtual classrooms. Our close relationships with music supervisors throughout the region mean we can address specific needs they identify. This work will continue as our school partners are able. The same goes for our sensory-friendly and health and wellness programs.

• Equity - While the country comes to a new understanding of the harm racism has done to black Americans, the VSO has embraced with new urgency our ongoing commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and access. Our musicians, staff and board will continue to focus on identifying and removing barriers and diversifying our programming to reflect and be more relevant to more people in our community.

• Artistic Leadership - Our international search for a new Music Director began more than 18 months ago, under the leadership of a highly engaged committee of musicians and community members. We now anticipate the selection and announcement to be made by the summer of 2021.

The VSO normally operates on a “very lean” budget, of which private support makes up about a third. Even after significantly reducing operating costs, the generosity of subscribers and donors will be even more important as we anticipate reduced capacities in halls in the coming season. Our Board of Directors is committed to a fiscally responsible business plan and to ensuring that the VSO will thrive again once this crisis has passed.

The Road Ahead

At the VSO we talk a lot about resilience. The current crisis has brought into sharp focus the need for the kind of long-term financial resilience we’ve been working so hard to establish over the past few years. Our primary effort in that regard has been our Vision Forward campaign to build our endowment to at least $12 million. Please consider a contribution if you are able - through a pledge, gift of cash or stock, or by including the VSO in your estate plan. It is by planning for the future now that we can preserve the Virginia Symphony for future generations – and ensure we meet the next unforeseen crisis with increased strength and resilience.

In the meantime, our top priority is planning for a safe return to concerts – both for our musicians on stage and our audiences in the hall. As you know, the VSO performs in multiple venues, and it’s important that we consult with everyone involved including our venue partners, public health experts, our musicians, and colleagues around the country – and make sure we get this right.

We are so excited to see you again in just a few months! Until then, please stay safe and well and thank you so very much for your care of the Virginia Symphony.
The VSO moves its “Vision Forward” with recently announced campaign

This past January, the Virginia Symphony Orchestra announced the public phase of the largest fundraising campaign in its history. To date, the VSO has raised over $9.61 million of its $12 million capital campaign goal. In addition, it has secured more than $2.54 million of a $4 million goal in planned giving commitments. We are thrilled that more than 70 donors have invested in this special campaign to secure the next 100 years of service for the VSO.

The largest in our history, the “Vision Forward” campaign will preserve the orchestra as a strong community asset for generations to come by significantly increasing the size of our endowment and providing the stimulus for future innovative programming both on and off the stage.

The campaign has received generous support from early leadership donors including Susan and David Goode, the F. Ludwig Diehn Fund of the Hampton Roads Community Foundation, James A. Squires and Karen Jones Squires, Connie Jacobson, Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Banks, the Perry Family Foundation, and TowneBank Foundation.

If you would like to learn how you can participate in this special fundraising effort, please contact Elizabeth Baroody, Vice President of Development, at 757/213-1419.

Creating Connection through Music During the Pandemic

When the Covid-19 crisis hit, the VSO musicians and staff pivoted quickly to ensure we continued delivering on our mission—providing meaningful and accessible musical experiences for our community. The VSO created a free resource hub of approximately 50 videos featuring 35 VSO musicians, and will continue to build upon this webpage in months to come. This new Music Learning Lab (virginiasymphony.org/learninglab) is hosted on the VSO website and has been accessed by teachers and students, from pre-K through college.

The VSO’s annual Young People’s Concerts series were performed live for about half of the Hampton Roads school districts before being forced to be cancelled due to school closings. However, a recording was made available online to our school partners. This allowed elementary school students across Hampton Roads to experience the music at home as a culmination of their school music class. The video consists of an audio recording of the concert paired with the concert PowerPoint of play-along sheet music and visual aids. Students were able to play recorder and sing along with the VSO as they would in the live concert.

Many of our student coaching programs continued in the virtual space via zoom with our partners at Old Dominion University and the Kroc Center of Hampton Roads. By creating digital content and continue working with Hampton Roads students via zoom, we were able to enrich students’ lives through music even as they studied from home.

The VSO was also able to continue serving our healthcare community by providing services both virtually and in-person. The VSO partnered with Children’s Hospital of The King’s Daughters (CHKD) to stream content throughout the hospital in lobby spaces and patient rooms through the hospital’s closed-circuit TV system. Two of our musicians also performed in a safe, socially-distanced manner as part of the hospital’s annual memorial service for patients. In addition, VSO musicians also performed a small “pop-up” concert at the Sentara Rehabilitation and Care Residence – Chesapeake where a small group of residents were able to enjoy the performance outside the covered entrance of the building.

A Heartfelt Thank You

Last Spring, the VSO was fortunate to be part of a very generous fundraising challenge. Along with the Virginia Stage Company, the Virginia Opera and the Virginia Arts Festival, the VSO leveraged more than $300,000 to support our activities before our fiscal year ended in June.

A special thank you to all who contributed and especially the lead donors below who made this extraordinary challenge possible:

Anonymous (2)
Joan Brock
Dr. Sally Clarkson and Dr. John Herre
Minette and Charles Cooper
Mr. Leslie Friedman
The Goode Family
The Honorable Andria McClellan & Mike McClellan
Oriana McKinnon
The Perry Family Foundation
A Donor Advised Fund at the Hampton Roads Community Foundation
Prudence and Louis Ryan
Jane and Win Short
The VSO at 100: A Century of Service

The 100th Anniversary of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra is upon us! What a tremendous milestone! Though our celebration will look a bit different than originally imagined, we will commemorate this remarkable achievement throughout the coming months ahead and hope you will join in the celebration.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Slover Library Foundation, we will be producing both a commemorative book and an historic exhibit to mark the occasion. And through the generosity of Virginia Humanities, we have the assistance of three professionals to assist us with on these projects. Peggy Haile-McPhillips, recently retired historian for the City of Norfolk; Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Norfolk State University; and Jean Major, retired Old Dominion University Librarian are the core of the historic committee working on this. We have also invited former Daily Press writer Dave Nicholson to assist with the writing. We anticipate debuting both the book and exhibit in January 2021.

The Special Collection Archives at the Patricia W. and J. Douglas Perry Library at ODU and the Sargeant Memorial Collection at the Slover Library have been very helpful with our research efforts, but we know over the course 100 years there is more! If you have a personal story to tell or piece of history - perhaps a letter or photo, please consider sharing with us.

We are actively posting entertaining and informative posts on social media (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) related to our history and special memories people have sent us. Look for more of those and share your own favorite VSO stories at our website virginiasymphony.org/celebrate100#share. If you would like to write us specific to the 100th, please email us at vasymphony100@gmail.com.

The pandemic has created new challenges for the VSO but as our 100th Anniversary season continues to unfold, we plan to honor the history of the VSO with several opportunities to celebrate in person with our audiences and supporters including a 100th Anniversary “Gala” when circumstances permit.

Thank you for your continued support.

Sentara Healthcare and Optima Health Expand Community Partnership

The Virginia Symphony Orchestra is pleased to announce a very important collaboration with our longstanding community partner, Sentara Healthcare and Optima Health. Our musicians and audiences have been inspired by our collective work over the past three seasons through our Music and Medicine program, which assists with emotional and physical healing and teaches the community about the impact of music on human health. Building on this successful partnership, the VSO is happy to welcome Sentara Healthcare as our first-ever Regional Presenting Sponsor. Just as the Virginia Symphony Orchestra is a regional cultural asset in Hampton Roads, Sentara is a healthcare leader throughout the region, committed to improving the health and well-being of all individuals in our community. The VSO is deeply appreciative of this new partnership, and we look forward to highlighting our collaboration in our 100th anniversary season ahead.

The VSO is pleased to welcome the following series sponsors to our 100th anniversary season!

Regional Presenting Sponsor:

Virginia Symphony Orchestra

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VSO Board member
Renee M. Howard said, “I’m proud to be part of the VSO at a time when diversity, equity and inclusion are front and center on the agenda. Whether on or off the stage, or in the audience, I look forward to the evolving face of our organization as a clearer reflection of our community.”

Amanda Gates, assistant concertmaster, has been an enthusiastic champion of this initiative. She commented, “Serving on the EDI committee of the VSO is some of the most rewarding and important work I have done in my twenty years of tenure with the orchestra. Our very future depends on this initiative, and I was very proud to point to our work on this committee as the theme of social injustice continues to rise to the forefront of public discourse.”

VSO to Broaden Community Service through Focused “EDI” Effort

A reckoning of racism and racist attitudes has come to the forefront in America this year. All of us have had to examine ourselves individually and consider how systemic and institutional racism within our society has limited the promise of “liberty and justice for all.”

The Virginia Symphony is no exception. We acknowledge that while the VSO strives to be a caring organization, welcoming and respecting of diversity, we have also shared in the systemic and institutional racism that has plagued America. We resolve to develop and work to implement strategies that dismantle racism within all aspects of our organization. We know that while dismantling racism is the right thing to do, it is also the way to provide the best quality musical experiences to our community.

Our focus on intentionally building a more inclusive VSO began more than a year ago. In the summer of 2019 the VSO was one of only a few orchestras in the country to receive special funding from the Getty Foundation through our industry trade group, the League of American Orchestras, to build consensus around steps we could take toward becoming not just more welcoming but more relevant to our entire community – especially African Americans, who make up 33 percent of Hampton Roads residents, but a far smaller percentage of our patrons, staff, governing board, and orchestra. We engaged the services of local diversity, equity and inclusion experts Barbara Hamm Lee and Susan Feit to lead us through this multi-faceted process.

We continue to be vigilant and in a constant state of learning, with our 14 member “Equity Diversity and Inclusion Leadership Team” made up of Board, staff, and musicians to hold us accountable in this work.

Focused efforts of the Leadership Team have inspired us to invite new partnerships and ideas into our business. Building on the introductory educational sessions held with Board, staff and musicians last year, this year each constituent group will receive an additional opportunity for learning about unconscious bias, how social identities impact attitudes and behavior, microaggressions, and allyship. VSO Staff are designing plans to advance equity in four specific areas of operations: human resources, programming, development and community engagement.

In addition to the statement of purpose, we have accomplished the following:

· We completed an initial audit report, benchmarking our current diversity, equity and inclusivity, and established individual action steps to advance equity, access and inclusion in our day-to-day operations, across departments, in leadership and in our interactions with and support of our community.

· The VSO is a member of the National Alliance for Audition Support, an organization that addresses longstanding underrepresentation of Black and Latinx musicians in American orchestras by providing financial and mentorship support.

· VSO concertmaster Vahn Armstrong attended the Sphinx Orchestral Partners Auditions to identify potential players for the VSO and VSO principal viola Beverly Baker served as a judge for the annual Sphinx Competition, as she has done for many years.

· Led by a team of musicians, we created a Fellowship Program for four early-career African American professional orchestral musicians, a program that will be unique in the nation. The Fellows, who will earn a master’s-level certificate from ODU, will simultaneously serve one-year teaching residences in local public schools and perform with the VSO. (This program had been set to begin this fall but is currently on hold until conditions permit and funding is obtained.)

· With funding from the F. Ludwig Diehn Fund of the Hampton Roads Community Foundation, Hamm Lee will engage the African American community in discussions about how to create relevant, quality musical experiences, integrate more diverse content into the VSO’s core programs and create new partnerships and programs that are meaningful to African Americans in our community.

Our diversity statement expresses what we stand by:

Virginia Symphony Orchestra

Our sound is richer when it is diverse.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are music to our ears.

We are dedicated to creating extraordinary musical experiences with and for our entire community.

We at the Virginia Symphony Orchestra will build an organization that reflects the place we call home.

We value our neighbors regardless of their race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, identity, physical and mental ability, and experience.

“Having already been at work on efforts towards EDI within our organization made discussions about the current state of events as they unfolded, all the more open and honest. I was grateful for that safe space and am still. We have great attitudes and good traction throughout the VSO and moving forward I see us one day becoming what we all truly want to see!” said Brooke Bates, a 20-year VSO staff member.
Continuing a Legacy of Support

This past year, the VSO was honored to be the beneficiary of planned gifts from the following donors’ estates:

- Ms. Anna Mae West Duffy
- Mrs. Eugenia W. Ferrell
- Mrs. Doris Kocher
- Mrs. Sunshine T. Williams

We are very fortunate that these individuals made a provision for the VSO in their planning. These gifts will ensure that the VSO continues its work both on and off the stage. We are grateful for these donors and their willingness to support the VSO in this most meaningful way.

If you would like to learn more about how you can make an impact through your estate, please contact Elizabeth Baroody at 757-213-1419.

Remembering Two Special VSO friends

This past season, the VSO sadly lost two of its long-time advocates and supporters with the passing of Mrs. Eleanor Marshall and COL. Thomas H. Meurer (USMC) (Ret).

**Mrs. Eleanor Marshall** taught piano, played the organ at local churches and in her later years, traveled extensively. Being a musician was a big part of who she was — she played the cello and piano well into her 90s, including as a cellist with the Virginia Beach Symphony Orchestra (now Symphonicity).

Eleanor had a love for the Virginia Symphony and was a subscriber since the early 1960s, often attending with her husband, John Marshall, Jr, until his death in 1995. Eleanor also took her children (and some of her grandchildren) to the Young People’s Concerts whenever she could, as she had a strong interest in growing the younger generation’s engagement with live symphonic music. She was a very faithful supporter and even served as a member of the VSO board for 15 years. Her friendship and kindness will be greatly missed. Eleanor passed away on December 11, 2019.

**COL. Tom Meurer** was a wonderful volunteer, supporter, and cheerleader for the VSO. There wasn’t a task that Tom wasn’t willing to do — whether that was serving as President of the Virginia Symphony League, running the VSO boutique at a performance with his wife Jaci, or even stuffing envelopes in the VSO office…Tom just loved to help! Tom also loved a good party and bringing people together — each year, he and Jaci hosted the annual barbecue for the VSO musicians as well as the joint Virginia Opera/Virginia Symphony Holiday party. We miss him greatly. Tom passed away on January 18, 2020.

Both Tom and Eleanor loved the VSO and were ardent supporters of our work in the community for many years. The VSO recognizes their service and friendship and sends our deepest condolences to their families.