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Contact Glenn Petry (212) 625 2038
gpetry@21cmediagroup.com

Alexander Laing to Succeed Lee Koonce as President & Artistic Director of Gateways Music Festival in January 2024



Alexander Laing (photo: Jared Platt) & Lee Koonce (photo: Olubode Brown)

(March 2023)—Today, [Gateways Music Festival](#) in association with Eastman School of Music – a national organization dedicated to connecting and supporting professional classical musicians of African descent – announces succession plans for new leadership. The changes are set to begin in

July 2023, when long-time Gateways musician, volunteer leader and board member **Alexander Laing** will become Gateways' Executive Director. In this capacity, he will work alongside current President & Artistic Director **Lee Koonce** before succeeding Koonce as President & Artistic Director in January 2024. Once Laing has assumed this leadership position, Koonce will serve the organization in the newly created role of Senior Advisor.

The announcement was made by **Kearstin Piper Brown**, Chair of the Gateways Music Festival board of directors. She said:

"We are excited to welcome Alex into the role of Gateways' Executive Director and look forward to his becoming the festival's next President & Artistic Director. We are also pleased that Lee will take on the position of Senior Advisor beginning in January 2024 at the conclusion of his seven-year tenure as President & Artistic Director and, prior to that, an eight-year tenure as chair of the Festival's Artistic Programs Committee. Lee's leadership has been transformative for Gateways and we are grateful that he has agreed to continue to support the organization going forward."

To ensure continuity, Lee Koonce will remain Gateways' President & Artistic Director through December 31, 2023, and will become Senior Advisor starting January 1, 2024. A Gateways board member since 1997, Koonce will also remain on the board.

An internationally recognized performer and thought leader, **Alexander Laing** has been principal clarinet of the Phoenix Symphony since 2002. He has been a member of the Gateways Festival Orchestra since 2001 and has served on the Gateways board of directors since 2018. Laing is also a co-founder of the Black Orchestral Network, a nationwide community of Black musicians seeking to build a richer and more robust American orchestral community. He said:

"I am deeply honored and humbled to be appointed Gateways' next President & Artistic Director. Gateways has been a long-standing commitment and inspiration for me professionally and personally. I am thrilled about this opportunity and am looking forward to working with our community of artists, staff, board of directors, and supporters to fully realize the vision of a vibrant and thriving artistic home for Black professional classical musicians."

Jesse Rosen, a Gateways board member and chair of the festival's Succession Planning Committee, said:

"Alex is a testament to the original vision of Armenta Hummings Dumisani, Gateways' founder, who wanted Gateways musicians to go out into the world and provide opportunities for other Black classical musicians. During the more than 20 years that he has been part of the Gateways family, Alex has become an acknowledged and trusted leader in the field of classical music and we feel extraordinarily fortunate that he will bring his considerable experience, gifts and talents to this new role."

Kearstin Piper Brown acknowledged the important contributions of Lee Koonce to Gateways' evolution and success. In her announcement, the Gateways board chair said:

“Lee has been a transformative leader for Gateways since well before his appointment as President & Artistic Director in 2016. Building upon the founder’s vision of a home for classical musicians of African descent, he has developed Gateways into an institution of national significance that has empowered Black classical musicians and increased their visibility.”

Under Koonce’s leadership, Gateways has increased both the scope and frequency of its activities to include concerts and residencies beyond Rochester with a two-city festival that included engagements in New York City, culminating in the Gateways Festival Orchestra’s sold-out Carnegie Hall debut in April 2022. Additional tours, residencies and online activities are under development for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 seasons, including a return to New York City in fall 2023 and the orchestra’s Chicago debut in 2024. Koonce has also been instrumental in growing Gateways’ institutional capacity through effective board development, ensuring robust fiscal health, and expanding the staff to include new roles in development and operations. Most importantly, he has paved the way for Gateways’ continued success and growth.

Titus Underwood, principal oboe of both the Nashville Symphony and Gateways Festival Orchestra, said:

“Lee Koonce has been an amazing and forward-thinking leader and his work over the years has shown the depth of his compassion and his dedication to Gateways. Gateways’ debut at Carnegie Hall would not have happened without Lee’s tireless efforts. He has taken the festival to greater heights during his tenure and Alex Laing is the most qualified and elegant next step as leader. Alex has been strongly committed to the mission and work of Gateways for many years. He is a brilliant thinker and will take the festival even further as we enter this exciting next phase.”

Koonce responded:

“Working for Gateways Music Festival has been the highlight of my life and career. I feel extraordinarily fortunate to have had an opportunity to work with so many brilliant and talented musicians, volunteers, partner organizations and staff to advance the work of Gateways’ unique mission. Gateways will be in terrific hands under Alex’s leadership and I look forward to supporting and cheering him and the organization on.”

Koonce continued:

“There is so much to look forward to as Gateways begins to travel across the country, and eventually to travel internationally, highlighting and celebrating the contributions of Black classical musicians. Representation matters and the importance of seeing Black professional classical musicians in your hometown is immeasurable. I am particularly grateful to the foundations and individuals whose support has made this vital growth possible.”

About Alex Laing

[Alex Laing](#) is an internationally recognized musician, teacher and thought leader. He is principal clarinet for both the Phoenix Symphony and the Gateways Music Festival Orchestra. Named one of *Musical America’s* “Professionals of the Year,” his awards also include a Sphinx Medal of

Excellence. He has collaborated with leading musicians and ensembles including the Sphinx Virtuosi, tenor Lawrence Brownlee, baritone Thomas Hampson and, on the soundtrack of Disney's *The Lion King*, the Re-Collective Orchestra. Laing has been a featured speaker at major conferences including those of the Association of British Orchestras and the League of American Orchestras. As a teacher, he has partnered with the Los Angeles Philharmonic's YOLA (youth orchestra) program, the National Youth Orchestra of the United States (NYO-USA), the League of American Orchestras and the Juilliard School's Evening Division. Recently, he joined the creative team of *From The Top*, a nationally broadcast radio show. Laing serves on the boards of both the Gateways Music Festival and the Arizona School for the Arts. A graduate of Northwestern University, he also holds a master's degree in Orchestral Performance from the Manhattan School of Music, an artist's diploma from the Sweelinck Conservatorium Amsterdam and a certificate in nonprofit management from Arizona State University's Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation.

About Gateways Music Festival

The mission of [Gateways Music Festival](#) is to connect and support professional classical musicians of African descent and enlighten and inspire communities through the power of performance. Founded in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1993 by noted concert pianist Armenta Hummings Dumisani, the festival was brought to Rochester, New York in 1997 when Hummings Dumisani joined the Eastman School of Music faculty. Approximately 125 musicians – comprising players in major symphony orchestras, faculty from renowned music schools and conservatories, and active freelance artists – participate in each festival. In 2016, while remaining an independent non-profit organization, Gateways formalized its longstanding relationship with Eastman and the University of Rochester. Among other mutual benefits, this deepened relationship provided much of the infrastructure and resources necessary for Gateways to increase its programming capacity, appoint its first paid staff position and broaden its impact in and beyond Rochester, NY.

In addition to the annual full-orchestra festival held each spring, other Gateways initiatives include a yearly chamber music festival each fall; the "Daily Showcase," a social media campaign featuring a different Black classical composer each day on Facebook and Instagram; the Gateways Brass Collective, the only all-Black professional brass quintet in the country; the Gateways Residency, which presents renowned Gateways artists in recitals, masterclasses and community-based activities nationwide throughout the year; and, starting in January 2023, *Gateways Radio*, a one-hour syndicated radio program featuring Black classical artists on radio stations across the United States.

About the Eastman School of Music

The first professional school of the University of Rochester, the [Eastman School of Music](#) was founded in 1921 by industrialist and philanthropist George Eastman (1854-1932), founder of Eastman Kodak Company. George Eastman's dream was that his school would provide a broad education in the liberal arts as well as superb musical training. Today, more than 900 students – approximately 500 undergraduates and 400 graduate students – are enrolled in the Collegiate

Division of the Eastman School of Music. They come from almost every state, and approximately 23 percent are from other countries. All students are taught by a faculty comprised of more than 130 highly regarded performers, composers, conductors, scholars and educators, who include Pulitzer Prize winners, Grammy winners, Emmy winners, Guggenheim fellows, ASCAP Award recipients, published authors, recording artists and acclaimed musicians who have performed in the world's greatest concert halls. Each year, Eastman's students, faculty members and guest artists present more than 900 concerts to the Rochester community. Additionally, more than 1,700 members of the Rochester community, from young children through senior citizens, are enrolled in the Eastman Community Music School.

About the University of Rochester

One of the nation's leading private research universities, the [University of Rochester](https://www.unityofrochester.edu) is one of only 62 member-institutions in the Association of American Universities. Located in Rochester, NY, the University gives undergraduates exceptional opportunities for interdisciplinary study and close collaboration with faculty through its unique cluster-based curriculum. Its College, School of Arts and Sciences, and Hajim School of Engineering and Applied Sciences are complemented by the Eastman School of Music, Simon School of Business, Warner School of Education, Laboratory for Laser Energetics, School of Medicine and Dentistry, School of Nursing, Eastman Institute for Oral Health, and the Memorial Art Gallery.

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