BSO's next chapter begins with its musicians

With musicians and management working together on artistic planning, the BSO is building on a tradition of innovation.

By Chad Smith Updated September 15, 2026, 29 minutes ago

Andris Nelsons conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra in Sarah Kirkland Snider's Marmoris at Tanglewood on Aug. 2. HILARY SCOTT

Chad Smith is president and CEO of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

This week marks the beginning of the Boston Symphony Orchestra's 2026-2027 season. It comes at a pivotal time for our organization. We finished another exciting season at Tanglewood. We are marking a record-breaking fund-raising year for the second year in a row. This season is also Andris Nelsons' final year as our music director, and we intend to celebrate his accomplishments and his 13 years on the podium.

Last month, BSO musicians, the Boston Musicians' Association, and our Board of Trustees approved a new three-year collective bargaining agreement. This agreement, which was approved by 94 percent of the players, creates a historic partnership between musicians and management in artistic planning year-round. Musicians will now have an expanded, formal role in the artistic direction of the BSO — including in the search for our next music director. This comes at a time when we at the BSO, and the industry more broadly, are rethinking the role of a 21st-century orchestra.

The agreement puts in place a framework for collaboration that will help ensure that the BSO continues to build on its proud history of excellence in music and innovation and fulfill its mission for future generations.

A larger commitment to collaboration

The search for our next music director is the clearest expression of what this new partnership can achieve. With musicians holding half the seats on the search committee, this process will be shaped by the people who make music on our stage every night. That is by design.

Musicians and BSO leadership now have the opportunity to co-define the role for our next music director with our musicians. The starting point will be musical excellence: a conductor who can inspire our musicians and deliver unforgettable performances in Boston, the Berkshires, and worldwide. But this new chapter is a chance for players and management to think about who we want to be as an institution, and how our next music director can get us closer to that aspiration. How do we better serve our community? How do we serve young musicians and Boston students to ensure that they care about the BSO?

In short, the next music director will be someone who is present throughout the city, not just on the podium. They will set a culture and tone that ripples through every corner of this institution. In doing so, they will carry forward the legacy and original principles that the BSO was founded on nearly a century and a half ago.

A history of innovation

When Henry Lee Higginson founded this orchestra in 1881, he did so with a radical idea: that world-class music belongs to everyone. Four years later, he created the Boston Pops

so Bostonians of every background could find their way into the symphonic art form, and musicians could have year-round employment. He built Symphony Hall in 1900 as a civic monument, not a private club. His vision was both artistic and democratic, paying musicians a living wage to attract talent to Boston.

Serge Koussevitzky carried that spirit forward a century ago. He transformed Boston's relationship with new music, founded Tanglewood, launched a music education program at the highest levels of excellence, and changed this orchestra's sense of its own ambition.

Higginson set the example for what an American orchestra could be. Koussevitzky expanded it. Our new agreement with members of the orchestra builds upon that same tradition — not simply following in the footsteps of others but setting a new standard. The music director search is just one example. Our leadership wants to deepen our collaboration with the musicians in programming, in community engagement, and in shaping the artistic life of this institution. I hope it serves as a model for what musician-management partnership in orchestras can look like.

Collaboration beyond the podium

This contract expands and empowers our Artistic Liaison Committee, a mix of musicians and management, to meet on a monthly basis to discuss programming and future seasons.

This committee should work in tandem with our educational and community work to complement the outstanding artistry we see on stage. We want our programming felt in Boston's schools and neighborhoods. As a student, I used to sneak into Symphony Hall and was delighted by the beautiful music I heard. How do we inspire the next generation and welcome them through our doors? These questions and goals will be determined by our players and board working closely together in the years ahead.

All of this will happen while we invest in upgrading Symphony Hall itself, ensuring it remains one of the great concert halls in the world and a space that feels welcoming to both first-time visitors and longtime subscribers.

Our long-term success will depend on how we reach new audiences, how we develop exciting and innovative programming, how we honor the classical canon, and how we build on this agreement with our players. And it will be measured by whether Bostonians of every background walk through the doors of Symphony Hall and feel, immediately, that they belong there, too.

Coming out of these negotiations, the musicians, the board, and management all expressed our commitment to being one institution, all of our components working together to advance our artistic mission, inspire audiences, and serve our communities.

That was the heart of Higginson's vision 145 years ago. All we have to do is look at our history to chart our future. With the musicians and our leadership working closely together, I am confident we will succeed.

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