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Susie & Charles Morgan Give \$1M to Arkansas Symphony Orchestra To Expand Music Education Programs for Youth

*Five-Year Investment Launches Children's Choir, Enhanced Programming
On Anniversary of Music Center Grand Opening*

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (Sept. 16, 2025) — The [Arkansas Symphony Orchestra](#) (ASO) on Tuesday announced a transformative \$1 million grant from Susie and Charles Morgan of Little Rock to expand ASO music education programming for young people over the next five years. The announcement comes one year after the grand opening of the [ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center](#), which provides the foundation for these expanded youth programs.

The Morgan grant will immediately launch new programming beginning in October, including a free Children's Choir for ages 8-12 with a goal of 50 participants, introductory violin classes to help children discover their musical potential, expanded chamber music coaching including brass, winds and jazz ensembles, and continued violin instruction in Title I elementary schools at no cost to students.

"It's been one year since we opened the doors of the ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center with ambitious goals — to create a radically welcoming hub of musical activity for all," ASO Music Director and Conductor Geoffrey Robson said. "A year later, I'm proud to say we've achieved those goals, and today we're building on that success with this transformational investment from Susie and Charles Morgan that will create comprehensive, world-class music education programming right here in Arkansas."

The new programs will operate through ASO's [E. Lee Ronnel Music Academy](#), housed in the music center. The academy serves more than 30,000 students annually through various programs, including youth ensembles, string academy and the annual Children's Concert.

"This \$1 million investment from Susie and Charles Morgan represents more than funding — it's an investment in the next generation of critical thinkers, community leaders and Arkansas citizens," ASO CEO Christina Littlejohn said. "This expansion builds on the foundation we've established through our youth programs and creates a comprehensive music education pathway from early childhood through college preparation. We are profoundly grateful for the Morgans' extraordinary generosity."

The grant also builds on the Morgans' 23-year commitment to ASO. The couple has consistently supported the organization's mission and growth, including the development of the ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center. Its performance hall is named in their honor.

"Susie and I are thrilled to invest \$1 million over five years in ASO's youth programming because we believe deeply in the young people of our state," Charles Morgan said. "Music education creates disciplined, team-oriented problem solvers and excellent communicators — exactly the kind of well-rounded citizens and future employees Arkansas needs."

First-Year Programming Details

The 2025-2026 programming expansion includes:

- **Children's Choir:** A free choir for students ages 8-12, requiring only a simple audition to determine if a child can carry a tune. The choir will perform with ASO in its February Masterworks production of "Carmina Burana" and in holiday and spring recitals.
- **Introductory Violin Classes:** Low-tuition classes designed to help children discover if violin is a good fit, with successful students able to continue in the String Academy.
- **Enhanced Chamber Music Coaching:** Expanded opportunities beyond the current strings-only coaching to include brass, winds, percussion and jazz ensembles, led by ASO's professional musicians. Plus, the top youth string musicians will be named as part of the prestigious Morgan String Quartet.
- **Title I School Programming:** Continued in-school violin instruction at Title I elementary schools, where third- and fourth-grade students receive an average of 16 weeks of instruction at no cost to students or schools.

The grant also funds digital marketing campaigns to build awareness among diverse demographics and education-specific software that will streamline registration processes for families.

Over the five-year grant period, ASO expects to grow from hundreds of youth participants to more than 1,000 students across multiple ensembles, including at least 50 in a new wind ensemble and more than 100 in children's choirs. The organization aims to prepare hundreds of Arkansans with the opportunity to earn regular scholarships to attend prestigious summer music camps and universities.

Looking ahead, the Morgan grant will enable ASO to build on first-year successes with additional programming possibilities over the remaining four years. Additional expansions could include dedicated choir and wind program directors, new educational offerings such as music theory and composition classes, expanded early childhood programming, and a longer summer music institute. ASO will use data and community response from each year to determine which programs have the greatest impact, ensuring sustainable growth that best serves Arkansas' young musicians.

The ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center, which opened Sept. 14, 2024, provides the physical foundation for the youth education expansion. The 18,500-square-foot facility in Little Rock's East Village was

designed as a radically welcoming hub of musical activity, housing the E. Lee Ronnel Music Academy's programs, a broadcast studio and the Bank of America River Rhapsodies Music Series.

"The timing couldn't be better for this expansion," Littlejohn said. "This vibrant new facility is the perfect home for these expanded youth programs. We had a year to see how well our new home works for children, families, audience members, and, of course, the musicians. Now, we know we have some room in the schedule for more music for all. The music center was built with programs like these in mind — it's part of why this facility was so necessary for our community."

The Morgans' \$1 million gift directly advances ASO's vision for the next decade, to connect communities to serve Arkansans of all ages and cultures through music. The investment also strengthens central Arkansas as a desirable place to live and work by enhancing the quality of life that ASO provides to the community.

In addition to their monetary gift, the Morgans are donating a painting by Arkansas artist Barry Thomas depicting children playing violin, which they purchased at the Opus Ball in 2006. The artwork will be displayed in the Music Center's Private Studio, where it will serve as daily inspiration for young musicians. "It perfectly embodies what we're trying to achieve with this grant," Charles Morgan said.

The Morgans have been transformational supporters of Arkansas' cultural and educational landscape, with Charles bringing decades of business leadership and technology expertise to the couple's philanthropy. A Fort Smith native, Charles is a serial technology entrepreneur with more than 50 years of CEO experience. He co-founded what became Acxiom Corp. in Conway in the early 1970s, building it into a \$1.5 billion global leader in data management and database services. Following his departure from Acxiom in 2008, he became the major investor and eventual CEO of First Orion Corp. of North Little Rock, which develops innovative systems for scam protection and branded business communications. Susie Morgan is a Life Member of ASO's Board of Directors. She was ASO Board Chair from 2003-2005. The couple co-chaired the ASO Opus Ball in 2002.

About The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra

The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is the leading employer of professional performing artists in Arkansas and is celebrating its 60th season in 2025-2026. The ASO recently opened its first permanent home, the ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center, in the East Village between Heifer International and the Clinton Presidential Library. The state's first music center is a radically welcoming hub of musical activity for all Arkansans, housing programs of the E. Lee Ronnel Music Academy, a broadcast studio, and the River Rhapsodies Chamber Music Series. ASO is the resident orchestra at Robinson Center and performs over 60 concerts yearly for more than 165,000 people through its Stella Boyle Smith Masterworks Series, First Orion Pops Series, River Rhapsodies Chamber Music Series, and numerous concerts throughout Arkansas. The E. Lee Ronnel Music Academy reaches over 30,000 Arkansans in over 200 schools from ages 4 to 104 through the string academy, youth ensembles, bucket band, community orchestra, the annual Children's Concert, and more. In 2020, over 1 million people in over 30 countries viewed the ASO musician-led Bedtime with Bach series. The ASO employs 14 full-time musicians, over 70 part-time

musicians, and 16 administrative staff members with an annual operating budget of \$4.5 million. The ASO is a member of the League of American Orchestras and a partner orchestra of the National Alliance for Audition Support, an unprecedented national initiative to increase diversity in American orchestras. For more information about the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra call 501-666-1761 or visit www.arkansassymphony.org.

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