



**Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Celebrates Grand Opening
Of New, \$11.75M Stella Boyle Smith Music Center**
First-of-Its-Kind Music Center Marks New Era for Music Education, Performance

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (Sept. 14, 2024) — The [Arkansas Symphony Orchestra](#) (ASO) celebrated a major milestone in its 59-year history on Saturday, Sept. 14, with the grand opening of the [Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Stella Boyle Smith Music Center](#). The \$11.75 million, 20,000-square-foot facility at 1101 E. Third St. in Little Rock will serve as a radically welcoming hub of musical activity for Arkansas, marking a transformative step forward for music education and performance in the state.

Presented by [Simmons Bank](#), the event drew music enthusiasts from all walks of life, including children and families, community leaders, ASO partners and donors. The celebration included a parade through downtown Little Rock; a day of free live performances by ASO musicians, students and community collaborators; guided tours of the new facility; family activities; a free evening dance party; and a ribbon-cutting ceremony led by ASO CEO Christina Littlejohn.

“The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is committed to three things: building our community with music, being artistically innovative, and maintaining financial discipline,” Littlejohn said during the ribbon-cutting ceremony on Saturday. “The new ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center is the manifestation of these core values, and it will enable thousands of Arkansans to experience and make music together for generations.”

The state-of-the-art facility — the first of its kind in the country — boasts amenities designed to enhance music education and performance. These include a 300-seat performance hall, multiple rehearsal spaces, teaching studios for the [E. Lee Ronnel Music Academy](#), advanced acoustic treatments, and a cutting-edge broadcast and recording studio.

Located near the Clinton Presidential Library and Heifer International in Little Rock’s vibrant East Village, the center also houses the administrative offices of the ASO — the first time the orchestra has had a permanent home in its near 60-year history. Designed by Witsell Evans Rasco Architects and built by Bailey Construction & Consulting LLC, both of Little Rock, the music center represents a collaborative effort to create a world-class music facility in Arkansas.

Simon Woods, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras, called the ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center “an extraordinary embodiment” of how performing arts leaders are thinking “more creatively than ever before about how to create meaning in their communities.”

“Many orchestras are talking about this, but few have demonstrated such a stunning commitment to bringing that vision to life in brick and mortar,” Woods said on Saturday. “For the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra to make its home in a building that is, as Christina so powerfully said, intended to be a ‘radically welcoming’ hub for the community, is an inspiration and an example for others to follow.”

The multimillion-dollar project was made possible through the generous support of more than 200 donors. The center is named in honor of the late Stella Boyle Smith, an Arkansas philanthropist who founded what became the ASO in the living room of her Little Rock home in 1923. The group became the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra in 1966, and Smith supported the orchestra and its programs continually until her death at age 100 in 1994. Her namesake trust continues to support the performing arts and education today.

“Today, a beautiful new center bears Stella's name and carries her legacy forward,” said Mike Mayton, trustee of the Stella Boyle Smith Trust, during the ribbon-cutting ceremony. “This is a music center open to everyone ... a radically welcoming hub of musical activity for all Arkansans. The legacy of Stella and the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra continues with you, the community, and on behalf of Stella we cannot thank you enough.”

Various areas of the music center bear the names of key supporters: the Irene and Gus Vratsinas Lobby; the Susie and Charles Morgan Hall; the Simmons Bank Education Suite; the Pat Becker and Jim Wallis Broadcast Studio; and the Terri and Chuck Erwin Box Office.

While ASO performances will still be held at Robinson Center, the Stella Boyle Smith Music Center will provide the opportunity for additional community gatherings and allow ASO to grow its programs. For example, the music center is the new home of the ASO's popular River Rhapsodies concert series, which will hold its first performances in Morgan Hall [on Oct. 1 and 2](#).

Other speakers during Saturday's celebration, also supported by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), included ASO Board Chair Jan Hundley; ASO Youth Orchestra students Pranjal Arekar, 13, of Little Rock, Zoe Gallon, 18, of North Little Rock, and Isabel Lopez Furlong, 16, of Hot Springs; and Dr. Michelle Nelson, the widow of long-time ASO collaborator and Saint Mark Baptist Church Pastor of Music and Arts Darius Nelson, who called the music center “a tangible manifestation of ASO's commitment to community.”

“The Stella Boyle Smith Music Center is indeed a haven where all people feel valued,” Michelle Nelson said. “A space where people of various cultures, tastes, backgrounds, and ages feel at home, respected and relevant. A place where children and adults unfamiliar with the orchestra

can get an up-close and personal introduction to the symphony. A place where we can enjoy music together.”

The ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center will be a radically welcoming hub of musical activity for all Arkansans, serving youth and adults of all ages with an array of musical programming. The center will provide access to music education, music performances and music-making to residents from all corners of the state through new spaces and the broadcast and recording studio.

ASO broke ground on the music center on Aug. 10, 2023, following years of efforts by community supporters to privately fundraise and identify a suitable location. More than 200 donors have contributed to the project, including 48 musicians, raising more than \$11 million to fully fund the center and the endowment to operate it. Major donors include the Stella Boyle Smith Trust, Susie and Charles Morgan, Gus Vratsinas, Terri and Chuck Erwin, the Windgate Foundation, E. Lee Ronnel, Pat Becker and Jim Wallis, Simmons Bank, the State of Arkansas and members of the ASO Board of Directors. Additional supporters include the orchestra, staff, youth orchestra parents, volunteers and numerous community members.

About The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra

The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is the leading employer of professional performing artists in Arkansas and is celebrating its 59th season in 2024-2025. 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 will be 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 15 administrative staff members with an annual operating budget of \$4 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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