

May 17, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

Thank you for your leadership, for your compelling statement in April in celebration of Arts and Cultural Diplomacy, and for affirming that cultural exchanges are a vital way for people to connect and countries to build mutual respect. We write, on behalf of national arts and cultural organizations, to seek leadership by the United States Department of State to ensure the capacity of artists to travel to the United States in support of COVID-19 recovery and beyond.

U.S.-based arts organizations, in partnership with communities nationwide, are contributing to the economic recovery and cultural vitality of the country. American arts organizations and artists provide an important public service and advance cultural diplomacy by engaging international artists in leadership positions and presenting international artists in highly valued performances, educational events, and cultural programs in communities large and small throughout the United States. We urgently seek an opportunity to meet with the State Department to discuss both near-term and long-term opportunities to create a more supportive climate for international cultural exchange through U.S. visa and travel policies. Following are immediate areas of interest:

Specific clarification of artist eligibility is necessary to ensure that opportunities for the National Interest Exception are made equitably available to arts beneficiaries across all consular locations. Presidential Proclamations suspending entry of immigrants and nonimmigrants from specific countries based on public health and economic considerations related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and accompanying guidance issued by the State Department, provides an exception for “any alien whose entry would be *in the national interest* as determined by the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Homeland Security, or their designees.” While the terms of the current executive order permit NIE issuance for artists that meet this criterion, some consulates are inaccurately concluding that NIE issuance, as a matter of policy, is not possible. In [guidance issued on April 26](#), travel national interest exemptions were added for students and academics. We feel it is essential that consular posts receive a very clear directive that artists fall within an approved category of travel and that the national interest exception under these proclamations may be approved for them.

As consulates resume issuing visas, consideration should be given to the time- and date-specific nature of arts events. Flexibility should also be available for those artists that received visa approvals prior to the onset of COVID-19 and that will now need to alter the planned dates for U.S.-based performances. Artist beneficiaries are sought by U.S. petitioners for date- and event-specific duties which range from public performances to artistic planning to critical re-opening efforts, supported by O and P nonimmigrant visas. After a full year of unanticipated interruption for most performing arts organizations due to

restrictions limiting public gathering, it cannot be emphasized enough just how essential it is that arts organizations be able to rely upon the visa process to make plans and continue presenting art to communities throughout the U.S. – especially when recovery and resumption of key economic activities are top priorities for us all. After the highly unusual year of hybrid programming, the ability to plan and offer artistic content to audiences that are hungry to experience live performing arts again is of utmost importance to our cultural as well as economic health.

We greatly appreciate your attention to these matters. As national organizations, we are committed to ensuring that U.S.-based visa petitioners and international artists are well-informed about navigating both U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services visa petitioning requirements, and U.S. Department of State consular processing requirements. These efforts have long been supported through the [Artists from Abroad website](#), which has been informed by ongoing dialogue with State Department visa services professionals and which was initiated through critical support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Prior partnerships with the U.S. State Department in this area have also included shared presentations of learning events and articles that bring forward the expertise of State Department professionals while also providing insights from arts and cultural professionals navigating visa and travel requirements.

We look forward to ongoing partnership with the U.S. Department of State in support of international cultural activity, and look forward to the opportunity to coordinate a discussion. Should you require further information or to coordinate a conversation, please contact Heather Noonan, hnoonan@americanorchestras.org.

Sincerely,

American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada
Americans for the Arts
Association of Performing Arts Professionals
Carnegie Hall
Chamber Music America
Chorus America
Dance/USA
Folk Alliance International
Future of Music Coalition
League of American Orchestras
National Independent Venue Association
National Performance Network
North American Performing Arts Managers and Agents
OPERA America
Performing Arts Alliance
Performing Arts Managers and Agents Coalition
Recording Academy
Tamizdat
Theatre Communications Group