

# Anti-Black Discrimination in American Orchestras

**A broad historical look at American orchestras puts into context the field's persistent lack of ethnic and racial diversity and examines the underlying culture of privilege, exclusion, and unacknowledged bias that contributes to it. Greater awareness of our shared history will contribute to fieldwide change in behavior—and ultimately improve equity.**

by Aaron Flagg

*As part of its planning for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work in 2018, the League of American Orchestras engaged in extensive listening and learning from orchestra staff, boards, and musicians about the state of EDI efforts in their orchestras as well as their expectations of the League. One of the frequent and emphatic messages to the League was to “acknowledge the painful history of discrimination within the orchestra field.” That view was echoed by Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, who said in his June 16 video How We Arrived Here: “We need an era of truth and justice in America. We need to commit ourselves to being honest about our pasts. Truth and justice [are] sequential. You have to tell the truth before you get to the restoration, before you get to the reconciliation.” These beliefs gave rise to the article that follows, one effort in the League’s ongoing work of coming to grips with the past and working toward a more inclusive and equitable future.*

—Jesse Rosen, President and CEO,  
League of American Orchestras

Thy magic power re-unites  
All that custom has divided,  
All men become brothers,

Under the sway of thy gentle wings.

—from Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,”  
later used by Ludwig van Beethoven in his Symphony No. 9

When we speak of the world of symphony orchestras in America, we say “the field.” “The field” has included many different stakeholders over the decades. Of course, we mean the orchestral music itself; the musicians who compose, organize, play, and conduct the music; the staff who arrange and publicize concerts to share the music; the audiences who listen to the music; and the volunteer community members who set policy, hire lead staff, govern, and raise the non-earned income needed to fuel the organizations that house the above. There are other stakeholders such as guest artists, musicians’ unions, service organizations like the League of American Orchestras, public and private foundations, governmental agencies, vendors, and more, all of whom support and impact the work of “the field.”

Despite a broad and functionally diverse group with many sincere individuals and well-intended initiatives, the field has never effectively engaged a fair representation of the racial and ethnic talent in the country within all the onstage and offstage roles noted above. One might ask: In 2020, are the musician, staff, and board roles equally accessible to everyone interested in this music? Sadly, the simple answer is no.

The reasons why include an ignored and uncelebrated history of minority artistry in classical music (by composers, conductors, performers, and managers); ignorance of the history of discrimination and racism against classical musicians of African-American and Latinx heritage by the field; and a culture in the field that is indifferent to the inequity, racial bias, and micro-aggressions within it.

What the above question, and those like it, ignores are the discriminatory practices embedded in the critical systems that people need to access the field. These practices, by which I mean exclusion, harassment, micro-aggressions, and an absence of cross-cultural sensitivity, discourage engagement and disrupt many aspects of one's journey into the field. They impede formal educational pathways, regular interaction with the art and its artists, networking opportunities, informal mentorship, and access to industry information and performance opportunities that build confidence in and increase commitment from people of color to classical music.

**In 2020, are the musician, staff, and board roles at orchestras equally accessible to everyone interested in this music? The simple answer is no.**

These practices make the field inequitable. The only question is, how committed are we—individually and collectively—to changing the status quo? Since the victims of these practices did not create and do not control these systems, it is the field's responsibility to remain aware of the history that built them, fix the inequitable practices, and then mitigate the damage caused by them.

*Here is an analogy:* If I said that anyone in town can come to my home to eat dinner this weekend, but assumed there was no need to include my address, shared this invitation only with people I already knew and liked, spent no time learning how to make all guests feel welcome, and neglected to consider that for decades my ancestors had literally and figuratively burned most of the bridges from certain parts of town to my home, you would advise me to not be surprised by a lack of diverse attendees. The systems in place to enact my invitation are not sufficient or equitable despite the possible sincerity of my offer. In the case of orchestras, there is a documented history of conscious exclusion, harassment, and discrimination that includes segregated unions; hostile groups of musicians, staff, and board leaders; and bifurcated access to gatekeepers and mentors. This history, like all history, has a present-

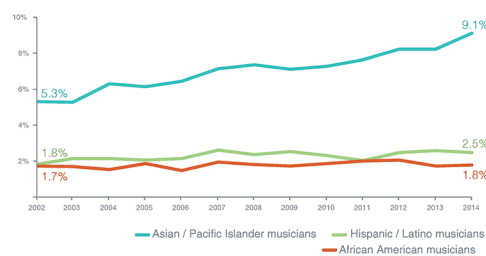
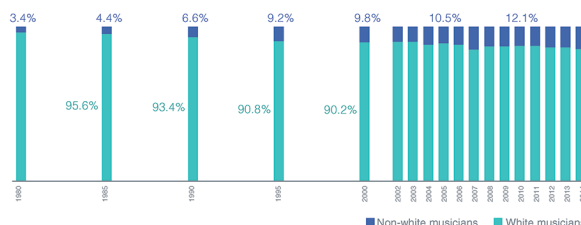
#### Racial / Ethnic Diversity: Musicians

Over a span of 34 years, the proportion of musicians from African American, Hispanic / Latino, Asian / Pacific Islander, American Indian / Alaskan Native, and other non-white backgrounds increased four-fold, from 3.4% of all musicians in 1980 to 14.2% in 2014. Nonetheless, by 2014 these musicians still constitute less than 15% of the orchestra musician population.

This chart is based on data submitted by over 500 distinct orchestras that participated in the League of American Orchestras' Orchestra Statistical Report (OSR) survey at least once between 1980 and 2014.

When the data are more closely examined, it is clear that **the modest shifts towards diversity that we observe have been largely driven by Asian / Pacific Islander musicians.** Since the League first reported detailed racial / ethnic categories in 2002, the proportion of Asian / Pacific Islander orchestra musicians has increased by 70%, from 5.3% in 2002 to just over 9% in 2014.

Comparatively, **the growth in representation of other racial / ethnic groups has been much more modest.** Specifically, the proportion of Hispanic / Latino musicians started at 1.8% in 2002 and grew to just 2.5% in 2014. Meanwhile, the proportion of African American musicians hovered at around 1.8% throughout the 12-year period.



Racial / Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field | 3

The League of American Orchestras' 2016 *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field* study, with research and data analysis by Dr. James Doeser, documents gender and ethnic/racial diversity in U.S. orchestras among musicians, conductors, staff, executives, and board members. Read the complete report at <https://americanorchestras.org/knowledge-research-innovation/diversity-studies.html>.

day impact: a legacy embedded in the routine processes of life that we may not even see. Therefore, the roles within our music profession are not accessible to all.

In my analogy, it would be surprising and illogical for me to assume that the reason I lack diverse dinner attendees is because people were simply not hungry. This is the same type of irrational conclusion many in American classical music make about the lack of diversity in the field.

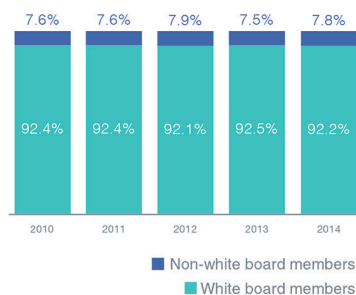
#### What Statistics Reveal

Per 2018 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, 13.4% of Americans identified as African American/Black, and 18.3% of Americans identified as Hispanic or Latino. This adds up to a total of 31.7% of the country. In 1980, the total percentage of African

American/Black, Latino, and Asian people was 30.4%. However, in 2014, per the League of American Orchestras' *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field* study, 14.2% of orchestra musicians identified as non-white—and this figure includes African American/Black (1.8%), Asian/Pacific Islander (9.1%), Hispanic/Latino (2.5%), and others. To break down other orchestra roles, 10% of conductors and music directors identified as non-white; 14% of orchestra staff identified as non-white; and 6% of governing boards identified as non-white. By comparison, a national survey by the nonprofit organization BoardSource found that non-white people on all types of nonprofit boards totaled 21% in 2017. The League's study on diversity, issued in 2016, covered

### Racial / Ethnic Diversity: Board Members

The League began collecting race / ethnicity data on orchestra board members in 2010. Since then, the percentage of African American, Latino / Hispanic, Asian / Pacific Islander, American Indian / Alaskan Native and other non-white board members has hovered at just under 8%, including 3-4% African American and 1-2% Hispanic / Latino representation. For comparison, a national survey by BoardSource<sup>4</sup> found that the representation of non-white people on nonprofit boards across the United States had increased from 16% in 2010 to 20% in 2014.



As documented in the League's *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field* report, board membership at orchestras remained predominantly white during the period studied.

the years 1978 to 2014. It is important to note that over this span of time the musician portion of the field became proportionally more representative of the general population in terms of gender (from 38.2% women musicians in 1978 to 47.4% women musicians in 2014) and has seen

an increase (from 5.3% to 9.1%) in the presence of individuals with Asian/Pacific Islander backgrounds (race and ethnicity data on musicians began to be tracked by the League in 1980).

For comparison in another field, Major League Baseball refused to hire play-

ers of color for decades, just as orchestras did. Both industries would claim they welcomed all who would audition or try out—but ensured behind the scenes that no players of color were ever engaged. Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the first Commissioner of Baseball from 1920 until his death in 1944, famously enforced this status quo. Jackie Robinson's entrance into the Minor Leagues on October 23, 1945 and the Major Leagues on April 11, 1947, were only possible after Landis's demise. Similarly, in his 2001 memoir *Fiddle and Fight*, former St. Louis Symphony Orchestra bassist Russell V. Brodine notes an apparent ban in his orchestra on hiring any African-American artists during the same period until after the death of "the most obstinate bigot on the Symphony Board."

As reported by the Society for American Baseball Research, in 1980 0% of Major League Baseball players were Asian, 11.6% were Latinx, and 17.4% were African American. However, in 2016, 2.1% of MLB players were Asian, 27.4% were Latinx, and 6.7% of MLB players were African American.

I'm reminded of a saying attributed to the business management guru Peter Drucker: "What gets measured gets improved." The League began collecting race/ethnicity data on orchestra musicians in 1980 and on orchestra board members in 2010; Major League Baseball began tracking comparable data in 1947, and the United States Census has enumerated people by race since 1790.

### A Grassroots Organization for Orchestras

In 1941, Leta Snow was an enterprising new manager of the semi-professional Kalamazoo Symphony in Michigan. She was interested in learning solutions from other orchestras on the various problems of pro-

## Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at the League

In addition to its longstanding commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the orchestra field, in 2018 the League of American Orchestras launched two major initiatives to increase EDI: The Catalyst Fund and the National Alliance for Audition Support.

The **Catalyst Fund** provides annual grants to help League-member orchestras increase their understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion and to practice more effective EDI strategies. The Catalyst Fund awards one-year grants, ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000 each, to multiple U.S. orchestras; participating orchestras are required to use the funds to support the costs of retaining a skilled EDI practitioner to advance EDI learning objectives. The Catalyst Fund is supported by a three-year, \$2.1 million grant to the League from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Grantees share their learning via an online forum as well as remote and in-person convenings, made possible by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation. Visit the League's [Catalyst Fund](#).

In 2018, the League partnered with the Sphinx Organization and the New World Symphony to create the **National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS)**, a field-wide initiative with the goal of increasing diversity in American orchestras. Supported by a four-year, \$1.8 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, along with additional financial and programmatic contributions from America's orchestras, the Alliance offers a customized array of support to Black and Latinx musicians to enhance their audition skills, increase their participation in auditions, and expand their representation in orchestras. Participating orchestras help provide funding for NAAS and also provide mentoring and guidance for musicians of color. Visit the League's [National Alliance for Audition Support site](#).

The League's online **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Center** provides advice, insight, and paths to greater diversity and inclusion at orchestras. Hundreds of free resources are available to help orchestras better understand and create deeper connections with their communities. Resources include the recent *Update on the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Work of the League of American Orchestras*; information and best practices on advancing EDI work among board and staff; *Symphony* magazine's report on how representation of LGBTQ+ composers, musicians, and audiences is increasing at orchestras; and more. Visit the League's [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Center](#).

ducing symphonic music for the community. She inquired whether a group of managers from smaller orchestras could join an annual meeting of managers at larger orchestras. The request went to Arthur Judson, then the manager of the New York Philharmonic (Judson was also involved with the founding of Columbia Artists Management and CBS). He felt the two types of orchestras—large professional groups and smaller community-based ensembles—were too dissimilar and turned down Snow’s request, instead suggesting she form a separate organization dealing with the special problems of the “civic” orchestra. She and those like her were not welcome. Fortunately for us, Snow went ahead and arranged a meeting in Chicago on May 21, 1942. The meeting consisted of 23 representatives of orchestras, most of them managers but some of them conductors, orchestra players, and board members who served also as managers. They organized and founded the American Symphony Orchestra League (the original name of the League of American Orchestras). Over time, the League became a primary source to which local orchestra boards and staff turned for business recommendations and other advice about running orchestras. Interestingly, after Snow’s successor at the League, Helen Thompson, led a successful grassroots letter-writing campaign in 1951 to persuade Congress to repeal a federal tax on symphony concert tickets and other forms of entertainment, the large orchestras decided to join the “civic”-orchestra-minded League. Those included in Thompson’s campaign were conductors, orchestra officials, musicians, patrons, and members of women’s volunteer committees. A broader, more inclusive definition of the orchestra field won the day.

### **Musician Unions: Don’t Go it Alone**

By 1855, New York City had the third-largest German population in the world, just behind Vienna and Berlin. In 1860, a number of German-speaking musicians banded together to form the first musicians’ organization, “organized for social and benevolent purposes,” called the Aschenbroedel Verein, or Cinderella Club. It purchased the building at 74 East 4th Street, then in the heart of Manhattan’s Little Germany. Members included instrumentalists as well as conductors Theo-

dore Thomas, Carl Bergmann, and Walter Damrosch. The Philharmonic Society of New York, which eventually became the New York Philharmonic, shared space in the same building. Also in New York around this time, a group of musicians was demanding fair remuneration for their services from a group of theatrical producers. They formed the Musical Mutual Protective Union (MMPU) in 1863 for the purpose of “protecting the members and their interests.” This was the same year that Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

In 1865, the same year as the abolishment of slavery in America through the enactment of the 13th Amendment, the new union posted an announcement in *The New York Times* of a planned strike. The purpose was to “protect the profession from imposters who had entered its ranks

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and by dint of smart management had the business all in their own hands, and paid the performers whatever they saw fit, oftentimes pocketing the amount due the musicians for their whole engagement.” The musicians described discriminatory practices. For example, “If a member of a band or orchestra complained [about delayed or low wages], he was suspended or excluded from the business altogether.” They also made a point of stating, “The present strike is by no means of a national character; that is, it belongs to no particular nationality, but is purely one involving a fair and just demand for payment for services faithfully rendered by the musical profession, who are organized into a Mutual Protective Association.”

### **Segregated Musician Unions**

The unionization of musicians, like that of other industries in the late nineteenth century, came with the social prejudices of the time, which discouraged solidarity among racially diverse musicians. Black musicians

generally could not join white unions and were treated as competitors in the marketplace. Most musician unions could not certify the professional quality of their members, having no internally imposed standards, as did other artisan unions. Employers therefore could hire the musicians they preferred and who had the skills they sought, be it sight reading, improvisation, knowledge of certain repertoire, or presentation abilities. There were cities such as Cleveland, Ohio where Black musicians held a majority share of the local performing arts business due to their musical skills. To avoid being underpaid or otherwise mistreated, these musicians founded their own organizations that standardized pay rates and enforced fair treatment. (Throughout this and subsequent eras, professional musicians were male by overwhelming margins.)

In 1875, Black musicians in Boston formed the Progressive Musical Union to protect themselves. Other establishments were formed for Black musicians, such as the Clef Club in New York City and Philadelphia, that served as booking agency, social club, and a type of trade union. By 1886, several of the unions federated into a loose organization named the National League of Musicians. The successor to this is the American Federation of Musicians. The work to consolidate and unify these various organizations under one national banner would take many years.

Also in 1886, Walter Craig, a Black violinist residing at 103 West 29th Street, joined the otherwise all-white New York musicians’ union, the Musicians’ Mutual Protective Union (MMPU). His action—integrating a white musicians’ union—would take 88 more years to complete within all chapters of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). By 1910, about 300 Black musicians had joined the MMPU, comprising a small but not insignificant segment of the roughly 8,000-member union. By 1920, their ranks had swelled to about 600. However, the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision authorized the “separate but equal” doctrine, which allowed state-sponsored segregation. This encouraged separate schools, societal institutions, and musicians’ unions. In 1902, the AFM authorized the first charter for a union local specifically for Black musicians. Local 208,



in Chicago, Illinois, was formed because Local 10, formed in 1901, excluded African Americans. This began the clock of segregation within the AFM. Although the U.S. Supreme Court found “separate but equal” to be unconstitutional in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education*, it took several decades to overturn all segregation laws and until the 1970s for musicians’ unions to integrate.

This overview of musicians’ unions provides a backdrop to the 72 years of segregated musician unions within the American Federation of Musicians, from 1902 to 1974. As noted above, there were often two different unions in a town or city based on race and symbolized by two



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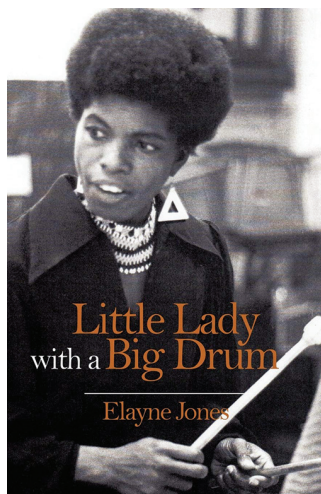
In 1886, Walter Craig (1854-1933), a Black violin soloist and orchestra conductor, joined the otherwise all-white New York musicians’ union, the Musicians’ Mutual Protective Union. His action—integrating a white musicians’ union—would take 88 more years to complete within all chapters of the American Federation of Musicians.

different numbers (e.g., Locals 47 and 767 in Los Angeles). This period symbolized a clear disenfranchisement of African American musicians from the orchestral world. For example: the notice of an orchestral job opening was for many decades shared by word of mouth and later by notice only in the white musicians’ unions. This presented another obstacle for prospective minority orchestral candidates. The union halls themselves provided access to audition notices, rehearsal facilities, and camaraderie, in addition to protected work. These were the places where you

could rehearse, meet, and network with other musicians, and obtain access to gigs. Since unions and their halls were segregated, not all musicians had access to the same information and networks. Segregation occurred not only at the unions, but at places of employment as well. Jazz musician and former Berklee College of Music faculty member Andy McGhee recalled how in 1945 only whites could work at Blinstrub’s Village club in South Boston, while the Crawford House in the Scollay Square section of what is now downtown Boston had all Black players. Musicians’ unions were segregated by custom until the federal government forced the merger of white and Black unions in 1967. It still took years to enact. According to one source, Boston had “protracted, tense and divisive discussions ending in 1970 with the creation of Local 9-535,” the now-integrated Boston Musicians Association.

### Motivating Change

In May of 1958, the Urban League of Greater New York published *Job Status of the Negro Professional Musician in the New York Metropolitan Area*. The report stated that throughout their histories, neither the New York Philharmonic (founded in



Elayne Jones, shown here on the cover of her 2019 autobiography, was a percussionist at New York City Opera Orchestra when the New York Philharmonic hired her in 1958 as an extra player. Philharmonic Associate General Manager George E. Judd described Jones as “the first Negro orchestral musician to perform with the New York Philharmonic.” Jones was subsequently a member of the American Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, and others.



Patricia Prattis Jennings was hired by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra as principal keyboard in 1966; she is considered to be the first Black woman hired as a principal player in a major American orchestra. Jennings also appeared as a soloist with multiple orchestras; edited *Symphonium*, which reported on African-American orchestral musicians; and wrote for *Symphony* magazine and other publications. She retired from the Pittsburgh Symphony in 2006.

1842) nor the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra (founded in 1883) had ever hired an African-American orchestral musician. It also noted that three Black musicians were engaged in 1956 to perform with the Symphony of the Air (1954-1963), an orchestra organized by former members of the NBC Symphony, which was conducted by Leopold Stokowski. Those three musicians were not rehired the following season due to a racist campaign within the orchestra to exclude them.

The minutes from the New York Philharmonic’s November 24, 1958 board meeting note that Managing Director Bruno Zirato discussed the Urban League report, commenting, “In the past ten years not one Negro has showed up for a Philharmonic audition.” A few weeks later, in a December 11, 1958 memo to file, Associate General Manager George E. Judd noted the hiring of Elayne Jones, a member of the New York City Opera Orchestra, as an extra percussionist for Philharmonic concerts a week earlier. To be clear, Jones did not apply to audition. The Philharmonic sought her out and invited her multiple times until it could work with her schedule. Judd points out that the performances “caused no public notice whatsoever,” and expresses surprise or perhaps frustration at

## SUMMARY

The general opinion of the community is that the Negro musician experiences little or no discrimination. This unfortunately is not true. The Negro musician experiences both discrimination and segregation by the music world.

The full impact of the New York State Fair Employment Practices Law needs to be brought to bear on this industry if corrective measures are not taken immediately.

The 'hands-off' policy of the union does not necessarily mean that the union supports discriminatory hiring practices. In this instance the act of omission is as significant and harmful as an act of commission.

Competent, qualified Negro professionals have had to contend, hopelessly with an iron curtain of discrimination, barring them from any opportunity to build a career in their chosen field. This is true in every branch of the music industry—orchestral musicians, conductors, composers, arrangers, contractors, managers, etc. In effect we have a pattern of economic discrimination practiced against a total segment of our community.

This report documents and underscores the need for immediate change in hiring policies and the need for further review of employment practices in the music industry.

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New York Philharmonic Archives

In May of 1958, the Urban League of Greater New York published *Job Status of the Negro Professional Musician in the New York Metropolitan Area*, an in-depth report on the employment of Black musicians at orchestras, opera companies, Broadway, and media. The study's summary reaches stark conclusions.

not receiving press attention for the Philharmonic's efforts toward a historic moment. In his memo, Judd describes Jones as "the first Negro orchestral musician to perform with the New York Philharmonic." The Urban League report and subsequent articles catalyzed a new level of action or at least attention within the orchestra.

In 1989, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra received political pressure to hire more Black musicians. Two state legislators withheld \$1.24 million in state aid and threatened to boycott and picket the orchestra if it did not hire more Black musicians. Bassist Rick Robinson, who was performing with the orchestra on tour at the time, was voted in by the musicians and hired. The Detroit Symphony also started its African-American Orchestra Fellowship the next year.

For its entire history, the orchestra field has been branded as being by and for white men. There is no natural, biological, environmental, or talent-based reason for this. And this is despite the history of racially diverse orchestras, among them La Société Philharmonique du Nouvelle Orleans (active in 1840), the Camden Negro Symphony, Baltimore Negro Symphony, and the Symphony of the New World. Early-twentieth-century symphonic composers such as Florence Price and William Grant Still, and even such relatively recent con-

ductors as Dean Dixon (1915-1976) and James DePreist (1936-2013) are part of the tradition but not sufficiently known despite the unquestioned excellence of their artistry. Also ignored are the many nineteenth-century American instrumental soloists of color, among them Hazel Harrison (piano), Joseph White (violin), John Thomas Douglass (violin), and Joseph Douglas (violin), who played with orchestras and gave recitals around the world. They are the ancestors of today's soloists such as Melissa White (violin), Tai Murray (violin), and Terrence Wilson (piano) as well

as contracted members of professional orchestras in the mid- to late 20th century, such as Henry Lewis (bass, Los Angeles Philharmonic, hired in 1948; Lewis also

**The history of discrimination at America's orchestras is not discussed or commonly known, because it is painful, embarrassing, and contrary to how we want to view ourselves.**

had a distinguished career as a conductor); Charles Burrell (bass, San Francisco Symphony, hired in 1949); Elayne Jones (percussion, New York City Opera Orchestra, hired in 1949); Donald White (cello, Cleveland Orchestra, hired in 1957); Sanford Allen (violin, New York Philharmonic, hired in 1962); Wilmer Wise (principal trumpet, Marlboro Festival Orchestra and associate principal trumpet, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, hired in 1965); Patricia Prattis Jennings (principal keyboard, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, hired in 1966); Ann Hobson Pilot (harp, National Symphony Orchestra, hired in 1966; hired at the Boston Symphony Orchestra in

1969 and served as principal harp from 1980 until her retirement in 2009); Robert Lee Watt (French horn, Los Angeles Philharmonic, hired in 1970); Langston Fitzgerald (trumpet, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, hired in 1970); Jerome Ashby (French horn, New York Philharmonic, hired in 1979); and Judy Dines (flute, Houston Symphony, hired in 1992).

In the twenty-first century thus far, orchestras have hired musicians of color including, among others, Tage Larsen (trumpet, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, hired in 2002); Demarre McGill (principal flute, Seattle Symphony, hired in 2011); Alex Laing (principal clarinet, Phoenix Symphony, hired in 2012); Sonora Slocum (principal flute, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, hired in 2012); Ryan Murphy (cello, San Antonio Symphony, hired in 2012); Anthony McGill (principal clarinet, New York Philharmonic, hired in 2014); and Titus Underwood (principal oboe, Nashville Symphony, hired in 2019).

These individuals and others like them are wonderful artists, but unfortunately, they are exceptions in a field that remains overwhelmingly white.

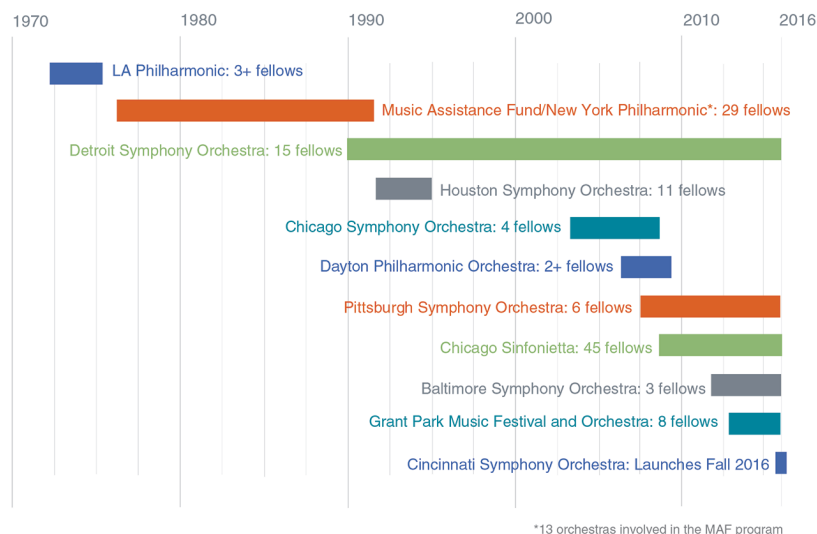
## Diversity Efforts

"Most important of all, of course, is the sociological impetus behind the project—a truly integrated symphony orchestra. The success of this project will certainly stimulate more of the same, and may provide us with our first big step out of the unfair and illogical situation in which we now find ourselves with the Negro musician."

—Leonard Bernstein, writing about the debut of a new orchestra called the Symphony of the New World, 1965

The pathways for people to be identified, nurtured, mentored, and accepted in the orchestra field have not welcomed ethnic or racial diversity. To address this, the League of American Orchestras has redoubled its efforts to support the field in embracing ethnic and racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. To do so, it is paramount that the field document and acknowledge its heritage—including the systems of separation and discrimination. These systems help explain the relative failure of the first 40 years (1976-2016) of orchestra fellowships to effect noticeable change in

Figure 1: A timeline of orchestra fellowship programs for African American and Latino musicians



Published in 2016, *Forty Years of Fellowships: A Study of Orchestras' Efforts to Include African American and Latino Musicians*, commissioned by the League of American Orchestras with research and analysis by Nick Rabkin and Monica Hairston O'Connell, examines orchestras' past efforts to diversify their musician ranks with fellowships for African American and Latinx musicians. Read the complete report at <https://americanorchestras.org/knowledge-research-innovation/diversity-studies.html>.

the profile and inclusive culture of orchestras. Although begun in the 1970s to stem nepotism and favoritism, not to increase diversity, the blind audition process (e.g., screen up from preliminary through final auditions) has contributed to a reduction in some preferential treatment and contributed to the increase of women musicians in orchestras. However, the blind audition process has not helped diversify our organizations in terms of ethnicity and race. Whether or not an orchestra has successfully recruited a racially diverse pool of qualified applicants, say 13.4%, before the audition starts is not asked or tracked. Currently, a racially diverse applicant pool is not viewed as a requirement for an orchestral search to be legitimate, as the Rooney Rule is in the National Football League. It could and should be.

The American symphony orchestra began as private, musician-led collectives in cities like New Orleans, Charleston, Boston, and New York. Their predecessors included private subscription concert organizations like the St. Cecilia Society (1766) and amateur orchestras such as the Euterpean Orchestra Society (1799). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many cities started all-volunteer, com-

munity, or "civic" orchestras. Over time, many of these entities transformed into professional, board-led institutions, as the New York Philharmonic became in 1909. Congress enacted tax-exemptions for the charitable and voluntary sector between 1894 and 1969. Most orchestras are now public, board-led, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) charitable non-profits chartered for the

**Similar to the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements, there is an increased awareness of and willingness to disrupt cycles of oppression and stand up for equity and fairness.**

purpose of education. The term "charitable" is used in its generally accepted legal sense and includes relief of the poor, distressed, or underprivileged; advancement of religion; advancement of education or science; erecting or maintaining public buildings, monuments, or works; lessening the burdens of government; lessening neighborhood tensions; eliminating prejudice and discrimination; defending

human and civil rights secured by law; and combating community deterioration and juvenile delinquency.

Given the origin of some professional orchestras as private societies or as projects of single benefactors, such as William Andrew Clark for the Los Angeles Philharmonic or Henry Lee Higginson for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, there is often a false conflict between a private ethos and a charitable public mandate. The private focus is on perpetuating one group's cultural norms and an undefined, subjective definition of "excellence," while the public focus is concerned with remaining worthy of taxpayer support in many ways, including providing equitable access.

Throughout their long history, American orchestras have not evolved in isolation. They have developed within the context of a country whose unprecedented economic growth and pillar institutions of church, state, and academy were built on the sin of African slavery. This "peculiar institution" existed from 1581 to 1865, but its destructive impact lingers in the country's racism, which has a personal and internal manifestation in the form of denial, as well as external acts of discrimination based on a racial superiority belief system.

These actions are undergirded by a fear of difference and theories of biological supremacy and inferiority. We see the gruesome reality of anti-Black racism in recent headlines about the deaths of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Ahmaud Arbery and Rayshard Brooks in Georgia, George Floyd in Minneapolis, Jamel Floyd in Brooklyn, Dominique "Rem'mie" Fells in Philadelphia, and in the inhumane actions of Amy Cooper in New York, and Robert Larkins and Lisa Alexander in San Francisco. The history of discrimination in America's classical music field, particularly in orchestras, is not discussed or studied or commonly known, because it is painful, embarrassing, and contrary to how we want to view ourselves.

There is, to be sure, positive movement in the field to actively seek and embrace more diversity; to address the internal cultural practices that undermine true equality; to learn the full heritage of the field; and to build pathways to welcome more diverse talent. In the mid-1980s the New York Philharmonic began the Music Assistance Fund, now housed at the Sphinx



## Anti-Black Racism and Symphony Orchestras in America

League of American Orchestras  
Conference Session

Dr. Aaron A. Flagg

June 4, 2020

On June 4, Aaron Flagg, the author of this article, led *Anti-Black Racism and Symphony Orchestras in America* as part of the League of American Orchestras' 2020 National Conference, which was held online. The session explored racism's connection to orchestras, what orchestras can do about it, and how the League's EDI Committee is engaging with and furthering its understanding of racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The session was introduced by League President and CEO Jesse Rosen, and Flagg was joined by members of the League's EDI Committee of the Board of Directors. Watch the session at <https://leagueconference.org/schedule/2020/6/4/anti-black-racism-in-american-orchestras-hty48?rq=flagg>. Slides from Flagg's session examine the field's history—and suggest ways forward.

Organization in Detroit, “to identify and support African American and Latino string players who aspire to orchestral careers.” A number of orchestral fellowship programs followed. In April 2018, the League of American Orchestras, the Sphinx Organization, and the New World Symphony announced the establishment of the National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS), which prepares Black and Latinx musicians to enter and succeed in auditions for orchestras (see the article elsewhere in this issue of *Symphony* reporting on NAAS). Also in 2018, the League launched the Catalyst Fund, a three-year pilot program that awards League-member orchestras annual grants to support effective practices to advance their understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Additionally, the League's Board of Directors embraced and recently achieved an aggressive diversity recruitment goal.

Today, it is clear that the field by and large wants to dismantle the impact of systematic discrimination on future generations of musicians. Similar to the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements, there is an increased societal awareness and willingness to disrupt cy-

### Hiring Musicians - The Audition System

- **Black musicians were not permitted to audition.**
  - For over 100 years: From 1820's to 1940's
  - Opportunities to be heard had to come from bold advocates like George Szell, Leonard Rose, and Leopold Stokowski.
  - Racial discrimination, nepotism and favoritism limited access to audition notices and apprentice playing opportunities.
- **One had to be a union member to be hired.**
  - Late-19th/early-20th-century unions were only for white people.
  - Segregated unions in the 20th century from 1941-1974 offered unequal access to audition notices, opportunities and representation.

### 8 Ways to Combat Anti-Black Racism

1. **Center the people** who are being harmed to understand and work from their perspective.
2. **Learn the history** of systematic discrimination (unjust treatment) to be able to empathize with Black people.
3. **Grow your awareness** of words, behavior, assumptions, and processes that communicate racist beliefs of superiority or inferiority.
4. **Stay open** to new perspectives on the familiar to remain vulnerable and tolerant.
5. **Find your own way** to stand up against racism in your life, your community, your organization and our country.
6. **Be an ally**, increase the number of allies, and support them.
7. **Embrace discomfort** and demonstrate a deep, unwavering commitment to the goals of equity and inclusion.
8. **Develop mechanisms** to keep yourself accountable, educated and sensitive to the journey of others.

cles of oppression and stand up for equity and fairness within orchestras. Recently, an orchestra manager told me how a finalist of color for a principal position was being met with discrimination and unfair practices by at least one vocal player in the orchestra. Several musicians, staff, and board members came together to ensure that this highly qualified candidate was not kept from the principal position

### How committed are we— individually and collectively— to changing the status quo?

that they had rightfully earned. Despite the shock of realizing that this was racism at work, the manager had the strength of character to step forward and stop it. The manager also grew in appreciation for the type of perseverance required by all of us to overcome the status quo.

The League of American Orchestras is determined to play a useful role in helping all stakeholders build a more inclusive classical music field. This includes becoming more aware of our shared heritage, so our shared future can better reflect the beauty of the music we all love.

Begin by asking some questions. For example:

- What support is in place to educate your orchestra employees on the industry's history and core values including equity and inclusion?
- Are you aware of the “locker-room culture” that exists with orchestra musicians, staff, and orchestra boards? How are standards of behavior communicated and enforced?
- How does your orchestra hire substitute and extras players? Is it possible those systems can be made more inclusive?
- How do you advertise vacancies in your orchestra and recruit candidates? How can these practices evolve to ensure an inclusive pool of candidates?
- How are programming decisions made in your organization? What does your decision group look like? How can it be more inclusive to represent broader views, access more repertoire knowledge, and advise on how to support musicians in learning to play repertoire less familiar to them?

To help face these and other questions, the League and each of us must play a role in acknowledging our field's history and demonstrating our shared commitment to do better. All the critical stakeholders in the orchestral field—artists, musicians' unions, boards, staff, orchestra committees, elected officials, and audiences—must be willing to do the same. This article is one action in that ongoing effort. **S**

DR. AARON A. FLAGG is chair and associate director of Jazz Studies at the Juilliard School; former dean and professor of The Hartt School, University of Hartford; a professional trumpeter; a former board member of the Stamford Symphony Orchestra; and a current board member of the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project and the League of American Orchestras, where he serves as secretary and chair of the League's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee.