

# Aiming for Board Room Diversity

Diversity and inclusion are central issues at orchestras, not only in the most visible spheres—in the audience and among the musicians—but in the board room as well. As orchestras are recognizing that their leadership ranks should reflect their communities, several orchestras reveal how they are working toward true board room diversity.

by Steven Brown

**T**he Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras take pride in their diversity. Nearly two-thirds of the ensembles' 600-plus budding musicians are people of color, Executive Director Susan Lape says. With students graduating every year, the group is always on the lookout for new members who will help it remain inclusive.

For years, though, the youth orchestra didn't advertise its auditions. Applications far outnumbered the openings, Lape explains, so the group's leaders saw no reason to spend money on ads. Then, as Lape remembers, an African-American board member spoke up at a meeting, saying, "Look. I know you don't think you need to budget for this. But you have to believe that my African-American, high-achieving son receives a piece of mail from Harvard every day. They're recruiting him. They're not saying, 'We have too much supply, so we're not going to budget for this.' If you want to see the students becoming increasingly diverse, you want to make the students feel that

they're welcome and that you're looking for them." Lape recalls the moment: "We said, 'You're right.'"

The orchestra began to invest in putting out the word when audition time approached, and its diversity has flourished.

**Orchestras need to engage in becoming more diverse, says New Jersey Symphony Orchestra President and CEO Gabriel van Aalst: "It's the right thing to do, and it's for the betterment of classical music in this country."**

That's just one example, Lape says, of how having an inclusive board helped an orchestra make better decisions.

Studies in the corporate world have found repeatedly that businesses with diverse boards perform better than others. Lape's story from the Chicago Youth Symphony illustrates the same lesson in the nonprofit world. Nevertheless, many orchestras—like many businesses—have



Members of Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras' Debut Orchestra, spring 2017

lagged in making their boards more inclusive. Orchestras are now moving to address the gap.

This is not to downplay the manifold contributions of the visionary groups that have long embraced inclusion in the orchestral field. In 1987, conductor Paul Freeman founded the Chicago Sinfonietta expressly to tackle the orchestral field's lack of diversity. Over its two decades, the Detroit-based Sphinx Organization has been dedicated to the development of young black and Latinx classical musicians. Those groups have diversity as their explicit missions.

"People have been saying this for years: diversity is good for business, because diverse minds produce better results," says Gabriel van Aalst, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra's president and CEO. "Orchestras need to engage in this area. It's the right thing to do, and it's for the betterment of classical music in this country."

As orchestras get serious about trying to serve their entire communities, they're recognizing that their leadership ranks should embrace and reflect the entire population. "Diversification starts at home," says audience researcher and arts-management consultant Alan Brown. "Diversification starts at the board level. If you want to change your organization, you have to change you who are."

That may sound obvious. But acting on it takes dedication and focus.



Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras Board Chair Henry Turner and Executive Director Susan Lape at CYSO's 2017 Gala

### Feeling Valued

The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra won a place in the history of orchestral inclusiveness in 1968, when it enlisted conductor Henry Lewis as the first African-American music director of a major U.S. ensemble. But only in the past several years, van Aalst says, has the orchestra begun seriously “grappling with the issues of diversity and inclusiveness not only in the orchestral space, but in New Jersey as a state.”

For an orchestra in one of the nation's most diverse states, “it's really important for us to reflect the communities we serve,” van Aalst says. The group performs concert series not just in Newark,



Musicians of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras' Accelerando Strings

but statewide, in towns and cities whose demographics vary widely. “If we're going to be intentional and thoughtful around engaging with community leaders, we want them on our side,” says van Aalst. “And we want to ask them how the NJSO can become a resource for community needs, rather than us foisting what we believe is right for the community. That's been a big change for us—to become more reflective and ask what people need of us.”

As one of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra's first steps, the board set up a diversity committee comprising board members, musicians, and staff. Surprisingly, that wasn't as simple as it may sound: making the group a full committee of the board, van Aalst notes, required a change in the orchestra's bylaws having to do with how committees are structured.

Over the last several

years, the orchestra has enlisted a diversity consultant and launched programs and initiatives to connect with more diverse audiences and communities. And since being appointed music director in 2016, conductor Xian Zhang has spearheaded outreach to Chinese communities, van Aalst says. The orchestra will present its first Chinese New Year festival next February. The 2018-19 subscription season will feature inclusiveness through a variety of works, from a focus on compositions by women to a concerto for the Indian sarod, a stringed instrument somewhat like a sitar.

While the staff planned all that, the board began looking for people from under-represented groups to bring onto its roster. Out of 22 board members who have joined in the past four years, four came from diverse backgrounds, NJSO Senior Manager of Public Relations and Communications Victoria McCabe says. A Latina attorney and past board member, Carmen Corrales, returned last winter in order to focus on diversity. The same group of board additions included newcomer Peter Webster, an African-American who is an executive at Aon, the financial-services firm. How did the orchestra find him? In one of the clas-



Third graders at Duke Ellington Elementary open new violins provided by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra for their participation in the Dresner Foundation Allegro Ensemble, a new entry-level training group, presented by the DSO's Wu Family Academy in partnership with Detroit public schools.

Detroit Symphony Orchestra Board of Directors Chairman Mark Davidoff and Classical Roots Celebration Co-Chairs Therese Peace Agboh and Janice Cosby speak during the 40th annual Classical Roots Celebration, March 3, 2018.



Courtesy of Detroit Symphony Orchestra

sic ways: Board Co-Chair David Huber, another financial-industry executive, knew him through business circles.

Aware that Webster had loved music since childhood, Huber and the orchestra's leaders told him about the organization, from its trailblazing hiring of Lewis to its programs teaching young people to play instruments. Webster recalls being struck by "the richness of that. I was thinking, 'Wow. I don't know how many people know this,'" he says. When he first heard the orchestra in concert, "it was unbelievable. The energy I felt from the orchestra was so exciting. It really spoke to me. So I began inviting people from my community to come with me to concerts and events."

At Aon, Webster takes part in a workplace inclusiveness initiative called Aon BUILD (Blacks United in Leading Diversity). That project and similar

**"What I hear resoundingly is that people want to feel valued," says New Jersey Symphony Orchestra Board Member Peter Webster. "They want to know that they've got a voice—that when they show up, somebody notices them, and that they're cared for."**

programs at other business groups, he says, have taught him a lesson that orchestras can apply to their audiences. "What I hear resoundingly is that people want to feel valued," Webster says. "They want to know that they've got a voice—that when they show up, somebody notices them, and that they're cared for."

An orchestra builds its board from people who bring a wide range of assets. They may offer professional skills in business or other areas. They may have influence with segments of the region's population. They may link the orchestra with the education world's students and resources. They may

have influence with corporate or foundation funders. They may have deep pockets of their own.

Many nonprofits expect their board members to make specific financial contributions. But to help pave the way for more diversity among its leaders, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra relaxed its requirements for donations. That's a recognition, van Aalst says, that some people bring assets other than cash. If the board had instead maintained a stricter policy and made case-by-case exceptions, that might "encourage the idea that there were some full, paying board members and some who were there on charity. We wanted to create an environment that has equality—and respect."

### Virtuous Cycles

The Pacific Symphony, based in California's increasingly diverse Orange County, has a similar history to the New Jersey Symphony's. It long engaged in "episodic outreach," Pacific Symphony President John Forsythe says. But it began focusing on inclusiveness more deeply in 2016, with assistance from a capacity-building grant from the James Irvine Foundation. That helped make diversity "part of our DNA," Forsythe points out. The orchestra has embraced new people, ideas, and programs. "We've been making aggressive efforts to engage with leaders from different com-

munities, and they're helping us recruit new board members," Forsythe says. Current board members' networking and peer connections also yield prospects. And as the orchestra's connections and programming extend further into the community, they feed a virtuous cycle.

"We're out in the community because we want to serve the community, not because it's a quid pro quo," Forsythe says. "That's inspiring to philanthropists. And that culture does emanate from the



Detroit Symphony Orchestra Board of Directors Chairman Mark Davidoff and Treasurer Faye Alexander Nelson during the orchestra's 2017 Classical Roots Celebration.

Courtesy of Detroit Symphony Orchestra

organization. The way our staff behaves, the way we solicit advice, the setting up of advisory groups, all will lead volunteers and philanthropies to see the orchestra in a different light. And they become more willing to involve themselves."

When newcomers come onto the



Fred Stucker

The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra's #ChoraleYou "sing-ins," which are part of the NJSO Accents series of pre- and post-concert events to enhance the concertgoing experience, draw a diverse crowd and are part of the orchestra's efforts to connect with multiple communities.

board, the group makes sure to weave them in and encourage them to speak up. A "strong orientation process" is just the beginning, Forsyte says.

"Newcomers have a partner on the board, whether you call that a mentor or a social partner," he explains. "We seat ongoing board members with new people all the time, which helps avoid the clique formation that can happen on boards with longtime members. We create many task forces around strategic issues. You have to get people engaged immediately in the tasks and committee work that will help build their sense of connection to the mission."

And the members' efforts on behalf of the orchestra compound over time. Board Executive Vice Chair Charles Zhang, who has helped lead the orchestra's diversity programs, headed a 2016 Chinese tour by the affiliated Pacific Symphony Youth Orchestra. That trip, Forsyte explains, established links that helped lead to the grownup Pacific Symphony's China tour this May. "It's kind of a domino effect of successive and increasingly important initiatives, which tie it all together," Forsyte says.

### Definitions of Diversity

As the United States moves toward a majority-minority population, orches-

tras operate amid an array of colors and nationalities. Newark has a large African-American population, but New Jersey also contains Chinese communities statewide, van Aalst says; Bergen County has a big Korean group. The Pacific Symphony's home of Orange County, California, includes a sizable Latino population in Santa Ana, and the region has long welcomed newcomers from across the Pacific Rim. The orchestra established a Chinese-American league in the 1990s, President John Forsyte

says, and the group is working to connect with the area's Vietnamese and Taiwanese communities.

When orchestra leaders of 30 or 40 years ago thought beyond the field's traditionally white audiences and musicians, they focused mainly on African-Americans. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra, based in a city with a substantial black population, came under scrutiny at the time for the mismatch between the city's demographic and the faces in the concert hall.

To redress that imbalance and better connect with its hometown's substantial African-American population, 40 years ago the Detroit Symphony Orchestra established its Classical Roots program, which spotlights African-American composers and musicians. The orchestra has added other initiatives over the years to support increased opportunities for



Rob Davidson

At the 2017 FiddleFest in Paterson, young musicians from the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra's NJSO CHAMPS program (Character, Achievement, and Music Project) perform with young musicians from fellow El Sistema New Jersey Alliance programs.

## League Resources

The League of American Orchestras' online Noteboom Governance Center offers a comprehensive range of support, strategies, and programs designed to strengthen governance practice in orchestras. Visit <https://americanorchestras.org/board-members-volunteers/the-governance-center.html> for governance information and resources including the League's Diversity and Inclusion Resource Center, case studies, guidelines, the *Music Director Search Handbook*, and more.

African-Americans in classical music, among them an African-American Composer Residency, Emerging Composer Program, and the long-running African-American Fellowship Program for early-career musicians. Today, 26 percent of the Detroit Sym-

phony's Board of Directors and Board of Trustees—totaling about 100 members—come from minority groups, says Director of Communications and Media Relations Matthew Carlson. African-Americans on the Classical Roots steering committee add further diverse viewpoints. But

“we’re never done,” DSO Board Chair Mark Davidoff says. “It’s a commitment. It’s not something you check the box on. Given the changes in demographics and the changes in generational perspective, the search for diversity is a continuous process. I can’t look around the board and say, ‘We’re thumbs-up good.’ Because there’s no such moment. It’s all about the continuation of the effort.”

As orchestras welcome more-diverse members into their boards, they have recognized that an individual’s background and experience go beyond ethnicity, says Susan Lape, of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras. A Hispanic or African-American person might be most interested in tackling subjects other than community engagement; a white board member may have insights about inclusiveness. As Detroit’s Davidoff puts it, “Diversity on the board is not just about race or whatever one or two indicators of an under-represented population you want to consider. It’s perspective. It’s where people have come from or where they’re going. It’s their professional view. It’s a holistic view of the person. And it’s the ecosystem of those people together that evolves into diversity of thought and diversity of perspective.”



Peter Webster, a recent addition to the board of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, says, “The energy I felt from the orchestra was so exciting. It really spoke to me. So I began inviting people from my community to come with me to concerts and events.”



“We want to ask community leaders how the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra can become a resource for community needs,” says NJSO President and CEO Gabriel van Aalst. “That’s been a big change for us.”



*“The results have been inspirational and we will be forever grateful for their partnership and support.”*

Anne Parsons, President and Executive Director  
Detroit Symphony Orchestra

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**The Work Continues**

The ultimate purpose of diverse boards, of course, is to help their orchestras broaden their reach into their communities. Here’s what three groups have in the works.

Chamber ensembles from the **New Jersey Symphony Orchestra** will perform community concerts in Newark and five other cities in coming seasons, thanks to a multi-year grant from Prudential Financial. The program, still in the planning stages, will begin in Newark, where Prudential's headquarters are located, then expand. To help formulate programming that serves the Newark community's interests, the orchestra set up a committee "that isn't made up, as it sometimes might be, of trustees and staff," van Aalst says. "Instead, that group is made up of community leaders across Newark. So we have Hispanic representation, African-American representation, corporate representation from Prudential. We're covering a lot of the bases of the various communities in just this one city. We are now asking people to help us play what's relevant to them."



Doug Gifford

At a "bon voyage" press event for the Pacific Symphony's 2018 visit to China, members of the orchestra's board of directors and (at center, from left to right) President John Forsyte, Chinese Consul General of Los Angeles Zhang Ping, and Music Director Carl St.Clair met at the Consul General's residence on April 27, 2018.

**Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras** will carry out an inclusiveness audit funded by a \$30,000 grant awarded in April by the American Orchestras' Futures Fund, a new program from the League of American Orchestras. Made

possible through the generous support of the Ann & Gordon Getty Foundation and administered by the League, the American Orchestras' Futures Fund is a competitive grants program designed to advance the innovative work of orches-



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From left: Ling Zhang, Board Executive Vice Chair Charlie Zhang, Pacific Symphony President John Forsythe, and symphony supporter Betty Huang at the 2016 opening of the Charlie and Ling Zhang Center for Musical Arts and Education, where the orchestra's offices are now located.

tras. Along with looking for ways to increase opportunities for diverse young musicians, the CYSO's inclusion audit will examine the group's board, which comprises about 30 percent people of color. That's a solid percentage for the board of a performing arts group—but it is half the ratio of the CYSO's ensembles themselves. "We'd love to see our board membership be more proportional to that

of our student body," CYSO Executive Director Lape says.

The **Detroit Symphony Orchestra's** Social Progress Initiative, announced in 2017, aims to make the orchestra a force for social progress, Davidoff says. The orchestra will reevaluate all its programming through the lens of helping drive the city of Detroit's resurgence, following several difficult years in the city. The first

steps include launching or expanding programs that offer free private music lessons; free entry-level instruction for underserved youth in the DSO's Civic Youth Ensembles; ensembles for adult amateurs; and partnerships with community organizations. "Because we have a diverse board, that helped us understand various perspectives of the community and how we might evidence our sincere and genuine commitment," Davidoff says. "We wouldn't have gotten there if we didn't have the kind of board we have today." **S**

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