

FAQs AND GUIDE TO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES  
LEAGUE OF AMERICAN ORCHESTRAS’  
STATEMENT ON RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

AUGUST 2020

This guide is intended to provide context for the League’s Statement on Racial Discrimination and to make our process and thinking about the statement transparent. The questions and answers are not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive.

**Why is the League issuing this statement and what is its purpose?**

- **Pursuing racial equity is critical to the future of our field.** Without sustained equitable practices, we will lose valuable musical contributions by generations of Black people, redirect career trajectories, and disenfranchise fellow Americans—all resulting in fewer people engaging with the musical culture we all share and love. This ultimately diminishes the vibrancy of the art form and the orchestral experience. We believe it is vitally important to acknowledge this and reckon with racial discrimination in order to advance this art form.
- The purpose of this statement, begun in December 2019, and the accompanying material is **to share our process** for deepening our understanding of racial discrimination in the League’s past and present and its impact on our work and effectiveness in service to the field, and **to acknowledge** this discrimination as an essential step toward being a more inclusive association and field.
- **Acknowledging racial discrimination in our field does not mean we have lost our faith in the unique art form of orchestral music. In fact, the reverse is true.** In a fragmented and hurt world, the inspiration of great repertoire of past, present, and future; the extraordinary artistry of our musicians; and the joyous communion of listening to music together all mean more than ever. We are sustained by a vision of orchestral life that reflects the vast diversity of American society, where all those who choose to immerse themselves in the joy of orchestral music have equal opportunity to do so and where all lived experiences are recognized and valued.
- **We are inviting our members to similarly examine their past and the roles they have played—and may still play—in racial discrimination, and to determine ways to move forward.**

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## Why is the League getting into politics and social justice? Shouldn't it stay focused on helping to keep orchestras healthy and remain non-partisan?

- **Our role in racial equity is grounded in our mission and vision.** Our mission is “to advance the experience of orchestral music, support the people and organizations that create it, and champion the contributions they make to the health and vibrancy of communities.” Our vision is that “the orchestral experience is shared by all and supported by artistically vibrant, robust, and civically engaged organizations, and the League is an indispensable leader, resource, and voice for the orchestra community and its value to the public.”
- “Advancing the experience of orchestral music and supporting the people . . .” means all the people, not just some, and **the experience of orchestral music cannot be fully realized when there is inequity.** Indeed, the pursuit of “vibrant, robust, and civically engaged organizations” demands a commitment to racial equity; inequity is a barrier to artistic vibrancy and authentic civic engagement.
- Being non-partisan means we neither support political parties nor endorse the election or defeat of candidates for public office. It does not mean we refrain from engaging in issues that may be controversial or that we abstain from positions on issues of public policy that affect our mission. Indeed, taking a position, as we deem necessary, is both a right and responsibility described in our resource [\*Playing Your Part, An Orchestra's Guide to Public Advocacy\*](#).

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## How can orchestras be expected to address a challenge like racism at a time when they're fighting for their very survival?

- The global pandemic has resulted in severe economic hardship for orchestras and the many musicians and staff they employ. **It has also revealed the pervasive extent and deep impact of systemic racism in American society.**
- As the expectations for inclusive practices among arts professionals, audiences, and public and private funders accelerate in response to the dual crises in the nation, orchestras will be expected to model change in order to sustain necessary talent, audiences, and funding. **This is arguably the best time for orchestras to address racism and disrupt systems of inequity. Change is required as orchestras reimagine their own values and systems in order to prepare for and thrive in a more inclusive, post-pandemic world.**
- Virtually every sector, including arts and culture, is turning its attention to redressing a history of complicity and seeking reform. American orchestras stand as an outlier in stark contrast to many sectors for their longstanding lack of inclusion, remaining predominantly white institutions for decades. **If orchestras wish to remain a vibrant field that is in line with professional norms, it is crucial that we join our arts and culture colleagues in this growing collective effort.**

## What is some of the history of the League's work in this area?

- In 1993, we issued a report to members called *Americanizing the American Orchestra* (composer Alvin Singleton is credited with the title), informed by two years of discussion with members and stakeholders. It was an analysis of the limitations of the status quo and guidance for change, and it included a 60-page chapter on increasing “cultural diversity” and decreasing racial discrimination. The report, and that chapter in particular, received a blistering critique in a *New York Times* article that included this comment: “In bringing the racial politics of the streets into the concert halls, *Americanizing* may very well Americanize the orchestra into extinction.”
- The story in *The New York Times* triggered fierce pushback against us from influential orchestra leaders for issuing the report, resulting in both the League and the field retreating from a prescient and courageous call for change. The retreat was a major setback and long-lasting. Our current statement and activities on racial discrimination represent the League's push to not only resume this critical work, but to also use what we have learned from our past mistakes to do better.
- While the League was intermittently involved with matters of race and diversity in orchestras before and after *Americanizing*, we began a sustained investment in December 2015 with a major national convening, co-hosted with The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. This meeting explored barriers to Black and Latinx musicians seeking careers in orchestras and considered strategies for change. The meeting brought together musicians, managers, and educators, and established a network of change agents committed to reform.
- We subsequently organized five national working groups to pursue change strategies; re-organized our National Conferences to place diversity as the central focus; revised and relaunched a statement of common cause in support of more equitable access to music education, which supports pathways to inclusion; and commissioned two major studies on race and ethnicity in orchestras. The national working groups and the National Conferences served as the incubators for what became the [National Alliance for Audition Support](#), a partnership with the Sphinx Organization and the New World Symphony, and our [Catalyst Fund](#) grant program supporting equity, diversity, and inclusion consultancies.

## What is the League's current activity?

- In 2018, we launched an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) planning process to guide and focus our work. It began with extensively listening to and learning directly from orchestra staff, boards, and musicians about the state of EDI conversations and efforts in their home orchestras, and their expectations of the League. [The result was An Evolving EDI Framework.](#)
- One frequently and emphatically repeated recommendation for League action was to “acknowledge the painful history of discrimination within the orchestra field.” Our Board EDI Committee took up that task in fall 2019 and completed a first draft of a statement on racial discrimination by the end of the year. **On June 25, 2020, the full board, and both current President and CEO Jesse Rosen and incoming President and CEO Simon Woods, enthusiastically and unanimously adopted the Statement on Racial Discrimination.**
- Since then, we have held fourteen “partner conversations”

with members and other stakeholders to help us anticipate questions and concerns that may arise in reaction to the material; test the usefulness of the accompanying contextual information; and inform us on ways we can be of greatest assistance to our members in this effort. The feedback we received was constructive, overwhelmingly supportive, and affirmed the importance of our statement on racial discrimination for member orchestras and for the future of the field.

Today, we continue to offer field-wide initiatives. We are also focusing on our internal work: understanding our past, increasing board and staff diversity, and developing a strategy for our internal culture work, which begins with anti-racism training in September 2020.

We know this is only the beginning, and we are committed to sustained learning and action. We acknowledge that the answers can be elusive and uncomfortable, but we enter into the work of EDI and anti-racism with humility, openness, objectivity, and deep institutional commitment. We will continue to partner with our members as we do this work together.

## Why are you focusing on anti-Black racism? What about the people of many other identities that experience marginalization and discrimination?

- Black contributors to orchestral music in America have been uniquely undervalued and marginalized. The League's 2016 *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field* report indicated that only 1.8% of orchestra musicians self-identify as African-American and 2.4% as Hispanic; **these percentages have hardly moved in the last 25 years. Taking steps to repair our relationship with Black people in particular will have ripple effects across all of our anti-discrimination efforts.**
- Efforts to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion are about acknowledging and correcting historical systems that have disadvantaged and oppressed certain populations to maintain white privilege. **This work develops sensitivity and care for all human beings in a way that can benefit people of all marginalized identities.**
- For orchestras in the aggregate, the extreme lack of racial and ethnic diversity represents a major and overarching challenge that merits sustained attention and action across the field. And yet, the League's 2016 diversity study also indicated the underrepresentation of women in certain roles, noting the dominance of men as music directors (91%) and conductors (80%). **Each individual orchestra should consider its local circumstance in efforts to understand and advance equity, diversity, and inclusion** and to lift its own ability to address inequity among the marginalized communities relevant to its context. This may include diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, or other characteristics of personal identity such as individuals who represent the first generation to attain higher education, have followed non-traditional pathways to professional life in the face of adversity (such as societal, economic, or academic disadvantages), or have various experiences in terms of sexual identity, gender identity, age, disability, geography, and/or faith and religion.

## What do you mean by white supremacy as it relates to orchestras?

- While many people primarily associate white supremacy with extremist hate groups, white supremacy itself is a racist **belief system**. It does not refer to individual white people and their individual intentions or actions, but to an overarching political economic and social system of domination. A white supremacist belief system asserts that white people and their culture are superior to all other peoples and cultures, and it aims to maintain the dominance, power, and privilege of white people and their culture. This racist belief system has manifested itself in orchestras through our history and traditions and through non-inclusive policies and practices.
- **White supremacist beliefs and thinking—conscious or unconscious—can affect our actions and perpetuate racial discrimination.** Examples include: how and from where we recruit staff and musicians; the type of repertoire chosen and the forums in which the music and guest artists are presented; the primary audience served; what defines appropriate concert etiquette; imagery and other marketing materials used; the extent to which humility and cultural curiosity are prevalent in the work culture; and the types of partnerships, suppliers, and vendors engaged. **In order to effectively build an equitable, diverse, and inclusive field, we must examine root causes of inequity, which include white supremacy.**

# What actions can I take in my own orchestra?

- One of the purposes of our statement on racial discrimination is to affirm our commitment to supporting work in equity, diversity, and inclusion. Some of you are no doubt feeling an urgent need to take action—now. Perhaps you are wondering how to address your programming or diversify your staff and board. Others may want to know how to recruit a broader array of musicians for your orchestras, or how to create a fellowship program. And still others may want to know what terms like racism, anti-racism, and racial equity mean. Some may be ready to reflect on your organization’s culture and dismantle practices that may keep it from being inclusive. There are resources that address many of these questions on the League’s [online EDI Resource Center](#).
- These resources include repertoire directories, guidance for boards, research, a glossary of terms, and details on our programs that, in the case of [The Catalyst Fund](#), offer grants for retaining experts to guide your EDI and anti-racism work, and the [National Alliance for Audition Support](#), through which orchestras can access a network of Black and Latinx musicians and be part of a collective national effort that aims to increase their representation in orchestras.
- **Equity, diversity, and inclusion and anti-racism work are tied to culture change, which takes serious and ongoing effort.** One of our takeaways from our *Forty Years of Fellowships* study was that action not supported and complemented with authentic and aligned values and norms will have limited impact. To get better acquainted with some of the foundational concepts that orchestras should consider as they begin or advance their own actions, we encourage you to read three documents in particular in our EDI Resource Center:
  - o [Considerations for EDI and Anti-Racism Work at Orchestras](#)  
by Jessica Schmidt from *Orchestrate Inclusion* and the League’s Senior Advisor for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.
  - o [Glossary from Racial Equity Tools](#)
  - o [“Anxious to Launch a Diversity Equity Inclusion Program at your Nonprofit? Here’s how to know if you should wait”](#)  
by Lisa Brown Alexander, Founder and CEO of Nonprofit HR

## A Sampling of Resources for Learning

### General Resources

[EDI Resource Center](#), League of American Orchestras

[Glossary from Racial Equity Tools](#)

[How We Arrived Here](#), a brief video from Bryan Stevenson

[The Groundwater Approach, Building a Practical Guide to Understanding Structural Racism](#)

### Anti-Racism Training Organizations

[Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training](#)

[Equity in the Center](#)

[Racial Equity Institute](#)

[The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond](#)

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## A Sampling of Resources for Learning

### Resources for Staff and Board Development

[A Message to My Fellow White Board Chairs](#), Cathy Trower, Chair, BoardSource

[Beyond the Board Statement: How Can Boards Join the Movement for Racial Justice?](#),  
*Nonprofit Quarterly*

[Considerations for EDI and Anti-Racism Work at Orchestras](#)

by Jessica Schmidt from Orchestrate Inclusion and  
the League's Senior Advisor for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

["Anxious to Launch a Diversity Equity Inclusion Program at your Nonprofit? Here's how  
to know if you should wait"](#) by Lisa Brown Alexander, Founder and CEO of Nonprofit HR

[Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture](#),

Publication of Equity in the Center's Research Outlining the Race Equity Cycle

League Conference Session Videos, 2018-2020:

[Anti-Black Racism and American Orchestras](#)

[EDI at the San Francisco Symphony](#),

[Foundational Work and the COVID-19 Challenge](#)

[Outside the Box: An \(Unconventional\) Orchestra Musician's Perspective](#)

[Valerie Coleman, Keynote Speech](#)

[Tania Leon and Joan Tower, Keynote Speech](#)

[Alex Laing, Keynote Speech](#)

[Giancarlo Guererro, Keynote Speech](#)

[Jennifer Koh, Keynote Speech](#)

[Anthony McGill and Demarre McGill, Keynote Speech](#)

### League Research and Publications

[Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field](#)

[Forty Years of Fellowships: A Study of Orchestras' Efforts  
to Include African American and Latino Musicians](#)

[Americanizing the American Orchestra](#)

["Anti-Black Discrimination in American Orchestras"](#)

by Dr. Aaron Flagg in *Symphony* magazine