

Are Orchestras Culturally Specific?

A recent article suggests that orchestras are culturally specific to white people. Are they? Four thought leaders discuss diversity, equity, and inclusion in orchestras and American society at large.

by Jesse Rosen

The League has prioritized the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout its work in recent years and is committed to the ongoing process of learning what advancement across these important areas requires. While diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are complex topics that require thoughtful consideration and strategic action, the concept of equity can be especially nuanced. It challenges us to fundamentally reconsider what it means for orchestras to play a constructive and responsive role in their communities—a role that acknowledges and responds to past and current inequities in the arts and in society. We intensified our engagement with some of the challenges around equity last year when we invited diversity and inclusion experts Justin Laing and Keryl McCord to speak with about a hundred orchestra CEOs, and we continued the discussions at our National Conference in Detroit. A recent post by Create Equity’s Ian David Moss, “[On the Cultural Specificity of Symphony Orchestras](#),” raises some new and very provocative questions, presenting us with another opportunity to explore the place of orchestras in the equity discussion and in the wider arts ecology.

This fall, I asked four thought leaders—a conservatory dean, an orchestra executive director, an orchestra musician, and a public funder—to continue the important practice of discussion of these questions and to provoke further reflection and conversations throughout the field, with the understanding that DEI work is an ongoing practice. In the discussion were: Gary Ginstling, executive director, National Symphony Orchestra; Chris Jenkins, associate dean for academic support at Oberlin Conservatory; Alexander Laing, principal clarinet, Phoenix Symphony; Cecilia Olusola Tribble, community and organizational development coordinator, Metro Nashville Arts Commission.

JESSE ROSEN: I’m curious to explore this question of cultural specificity. It’s a fascinating concept to be introduced in relationship to orchestras. We’ve heard it more frequently with other art forms and artists, and arts organizations that are based within communities of color. In the

Create Equity piece it’s being suggested that maybe orchestras themselves are culturally specific. Chris, I know you have thought a lot about orchestras through this lens, studied with some rigor and discipline as an academic. I would love for you to start us off with some of your



Chris Lee

Jesse Rosen, President and CEO, League of American Orchestras

reflections about cultural specificity, and then comment on how you think that may or may not apply to orchestras.

CHRIS JENKINS: I spent most of my summer working on an annotated bibliography for the American Society for Aesthetics, related to African American classical music and the aesthetics thereof. It occurred to me during the research of this project, and combining that with the experience that I have as an African American classical musician, that a lot of the aesthetics of performance in the concert hall and on stage by orchestras do not resonate with the cultural aesthetics of many communities of color.

Most of the repertoire programmed in the concert hall with a symphony orchestra is composed by white men who are not living. There have been efforts to diversify that repertoire, but these more diverse composers are kept in a box for special occasions: every orchestra is going to have an event for Black History Month or for Martin Luther King Day, but that doesn’t signal true diversity. True diversity has to do with expanding the range of repertoire, thinking more carefully about programming works by composers of color all of the time.

I like to joke that as a classical musician I will not lose my union card for not

liking Monteverdi. That's acceptable today. Maybe that wasn't acceptable several hundred years ago, but now I can do that and still be accepted as a classical musician. I'm wondering what this field will look like if in 50 to 100 years a classical music fan can be someone who says that they like Julius Eastman and William Grant Still and David Baker, and they don't like Beethoven that much—but that's okay. What if that can be the paradigm of a classical music fan? That is what actual diversity looks like.

I just mentioned all black composers, and that in itself would not be diversity. But that's one way to think about opening up the repertoire and imagining what a totally different world could look like where black and brown people are sincerely attracted to classical music.

JESSE ROSEN: Gary, if orchestras and the repertoire were to be different in the way Chris described, how might that change what orchestras are and who is attracted to them?

GARY GINSTLING: Everything that an organization does sends a message; what you wear sends a message that is tied to a certain time and place and culture. When orchestras talk about diversity, one of the first things they point to is the fact that they do an MLK concert or a Black History Month concert. I always get uncomfortable with that because it feels like it's reinforcing the notion that you can do one thing, check a box, and move on.

There's nothing wrong with the fact that maybe 50 years from now there will be a classical music fan who likes the music of African American composers but not Beethoven. But that raises the question: why can't we imagine a world where there's a diverse audience who appreciates all music? Let's not label what music is based on the color of the skin of the composer, let's label it great music or not great music. How do we get to that place where a broader audience can appreciate the music that we play and have played for years, and music that we should be playing that we don't play? I know that's a question, not a statement, but it's one that I grapple with a lot.

CHRIS JENKINS: Gary, I get that, and I'm a person who loves Beethoven and Mozart and Brahms and all the things that we traditionally grow up learning and loving as classical musicians. I would never want to give those up. I hear this a lot when we talk about diversity in classical music—that we should strive for a world where everyone appreciates all music. That's certainly what I feel, because I love a whole range of music. But I always suggest, especially when I talk with white colleagues who are looking for diversity, that real diversity might require decentralizing composers who are white icons, and the marginalization of some of those composers. If we truly want to embrace diversity, we have to be open to that possibility to find all of the pathways to diversity.

“I'm not advocating losing Beethoven; that would be terrible. But I am saying that if you relinquish control of this art form to other people, to people who aren't white, and let them drive where it goes in the future, that might happen. Real diversification requires that you be okay with that possibility.”—Chris Jenkins

JESSE ROSEN: Are the white icons the problem, or is it the way that they are presented, or is it that there is not enough room for other voices? Is there something intrinsic to the core orchestral repertoire that is problematic with respect to being able to connect to diverse audiences and artists of diverse backgrounds?

CECILIA OLUSOLA TRIBBLE: I don't think so. But we're thinking about this divorced from history. If we think about how white art forms, white people, white icons, composers, have always been at the fore of writing history—that is the issue. The question of cultural specificity is raised in a way that doesn't take responsibility for the fact that classical music, historically and presently, is a

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Chris Jenkins: “Part of the issue in our country has to do with the historic racism against composers and performers of color, and the way

they have been limited such that a lot of their works are not very well known.”

colonizing force, and is a tool of colonization. Not only here in the United States, but globally.

I don’t think that the fact that this is a European art form is the issue, but the fact that this is the only thing that we are talking about is the issue. We are maybe conflating two different issues: one issue is not being excluded from an art form that is a standard, and another is not seeing art that is reflective of one’s experience and culture. Those are two different things. When we add people of color to the canon, then you see how much richer classical music is.

“Diversity isn’t enough. The end game is not just having more black or brown people on stage, though that certainly has an impact. That is meaningful, but on its own it won’t change the direction and priorities of organizations, because musicians are seen as the hands of the organization and others are seen as the brains. We should have a structure that supports a workforce of artists.”—Alex Laing

ALEX LAING: Maybe we look past these issues the same way that a fish doesn’t see the water around it. We don’t see the cultural affirmation that is happening around this art form and its music. What I heard Chris saying was an imagined future whereby other groups could be affirmed culturally, if you’re not white within this art form and its presentation. The displacement of Beethoven Chris is



By Ian David Moss on October 4, 2017



Beginning this year, New York City cultural organizations seeking funding from the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs will need to report on their staff and board demographics, and describe [how they are addressing equity and inclusion](#) in their work. Meanwhile, in the grant cycle that begins two years from now, applicants to the Los Angeles County Arts Commission are required to [submit board-approved diversity, equity, and inclusion plans](#) as part of their proposal. And these are just the two largest cities in the United States. Organizations in the UK and Canada [already face similar requirements for funding](#) from Arts Council England and the Canada Council for the Arts respectively.

As longstanding concerns about cultural equity find voice in policy initiatives like these, administrators at organizations that celebrate European art forms, which are [noticeably overrepresented](#) among the biggest-budget nonprofit arts institutions in the United States, are snapping into action. Several years ago American Ballet Theatre, better known to some as the house of [Misty](#), launched [Project Plié](#), “a comprehensive initiative to increase racial and ethnic representation in ballet and to diversify America’s ballet companies.” Chamber Music America released a robust new [statement of commitment](#) to racial equity earlier this year. The 2016 League of American Orchestras conference was, for the first time, [devoted entirely to the topic of diversity in the field](#). Hosted by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the choice to convene in a majority-black city and bring in Black Lives Matter activist [DeRay Mckesson](#) as a keynote speaker [did not go unnoticed](#). Sessions focused on helping orchestras become more reflective of the country, including diversifying boards, audiences, and the players themselves.

The initial paragraphs from Ian David Moss’s article “On the Cultural Specificity of Symphony Orchestras” on the Create Equity site. Find the complete article at <http://createequity.com/2017/10/on-the-cultural-specificity-of-symphony-orchestras/>.

talking about isn’t necessarily a clapback or some sort of reparative act. It’s people just feeling that Beethoven doesn’t resonate with them in the same way as this other music that they’re getting this other thing out of.

The trappings of the concert hall, the concert hall experience and orchestras that we see as the way things are—as my brother Justin [Laing] has spoken about, we call these things *mainstream*, but it’s really *a stream*. What I heard Chris talking about was the possibility of other streams that would offer the potential for cultural affirmation within this art form to people who aren’t white.

JESSE ROSEN: Could you say what you think that might look like?

CHRIS JENKINS: We’re talking about creating synergy or something syncretic, that is really for the future of classical music to exist in a liminal space between multiple cultures. One of the essences of what we refer to as Western classical music is that it’s written down, through-composed, that it has minimal if any improvisation. Imagine a classical music that retains those elements, that utilizes Western instruments, but that also introduces other cultural elements and compositions of black American music in a synergistic way. A perfect example of that synergy is the fact that Alex just used the word “clapback” and the name “Beethoven” in the same sentence. That’s not supposed to happen. People who know one of those



Gary Ginstling (above right): “If you’re going to see change, you have to invest in it. Orchestras have to be willing to invest in producing music that represents the communities that we’re talking about, and invest in ways to attract musicians and audiences.” Ginstling, executive director of the National Symphony Orchestra, is seen here with NSO Music Director Gianandrea Noseda at the Kennedy Center.

things are not supposed to know the other thing. But it’s actually possible to be in that space.

Again, I’m not advocating losing Beethoven; that would be terrible. But I am saying that if you relinquish control of this art form to people who aren’t white, and let them drive where it goes in the future, that might happen. Real diversification requires that you be okay with that possibility. There’s a real attempt to put boundaries around what is black American music, to say that it cannot be classical. There’s a reluctance to label a hip-hop symphony as real classical music. But you can blend elements of both of those things together, and create something that could still be labeled classical music. It doesn’t have to be called crossover, it doesn’t have to be called hip-hop, it’s music that we can label as classical. This kind of music will no longer be in liminal spaces, it will be in real space and will be fully realized and able to express itself as part of the classical music canon.

Part of the question of the diversification of classical music has to do with region. If we’re talking about diversifying this music inside the United States, you’re talking about finding ways to increase the aesthetic appeal, to create increasing population of folks who are African American and/or Latino. This is the population that is expected to grow in the next 50 years. We’re thinking about ways to engage those populations, appeal to those aesthetics.

But part of the issue in our country has to do with the historic racism against composers and performers of color, and the way they have been limited such that a lot of their works are not very well known.

“There’s nothing wrong with the fact that maybe 50 years from now there will be a classical music fan who likes the music of African American composers but not Beethoven. But that raises the question: why can’t we imagine a world where there’s a diverse audience who appreciates all music? Let’s not label what music is based on the color of the skin of the composer, let’s label it great music or not great music.”—Gary Ginstling

If we’re talking about how we’re going to diversify classical music here, we have to grapple with issues like that.

ALEX LAING: In performance at the Phoenix Symphony, I’m the only black person on the stage, one of the handful of black people in a room. I would be very pleased if we programmed *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* [composer Joel Thompson’s 2016 choral work about seven African-American men who were killed by police or authority figures]. That would

be wonderful. But if it happens the way it usually happens, that would be a very different experience of the piece for me as an artist and a black man than if I was playing it at Gateways Music Festival, on stage with all black people and an audience that’s at least 50 percent black. We have a default setting in our business to focus on the arrangement of the notes: composers are alchemists, and by arranging these notes in these orders and with this sort of timing, then if we do our jobs right and recreate them, magic happens. We see music mostly as a monologue, and if we do our job right this monologue is going to transform you. We don’t see it as a dialogue, and when we play music by black composers, we think we have diversified ourselves. That’s not a very high bar to get over—if we play a little bit of music by black people we’ve checked that box.

JESSE ROSEN: Could you say more about what dialogue looks like as opposed to a monologue?

ALEX LAING: We’re always in dialogue. But we don’t build ourselves around that belief system. When I think of being in dialogue, the case I think of is Beethoven 9 when Bernstein conducted it at the fall of the Berlin Wall, and how that piece in that context for those people had an import that is unique to that moment. That sort of exchange is happening all the time, but I don’t think we’re intentional enough about it or value it particularly. That relates to the aesthetics and cultural roots of the art form, and the role of music in society for the people who made this art form.

CECILIA OLUSOLA TRIBBLE: It is important to think of composers as not only people writing music or their ideas, but as people in time and space. In *The Last Words of the Unarmed*, which is going to be performed here in Nashville in January by Intersection, with Kelly Corcoran conducting, composer Joel Thompson is in conversation with a community that he is from and about what is happening right now in society. He has the capacity to have conversation in the present and in the future. Your past example is a beautiful example of a composer writing in a par-



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PREPARED BY CHRISTOPHER JENKINS

SYNOPSIS

Scholars and performers of American rock and pop music have a relatively coherent understanding of the relationship between these styles and African-American musical traditions, as well as the general aesthetic profile of African-American popular music. The influences of the blues, swing rhythms, improvisation, and reliance on a driving beat/groove on these styles of music have been well-documented and are even taught in conservatory classes with a focus on "African-American music."

The history and aesthetics of "classical" music compositions by African-American composers - defined here as musical compositions written by persons identifying as African-American, utilizing both European notation and historically European compositional structures, for instruments or instrumental groups originating in Europe - have enjoyed less robust inquiry. The most obvious feature of this genre is its diversity, as no single description could adequately capture the variety represented in this canon. While some of these composers utilize techniques or idioms similar to

JENKINS, AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR AESTHETICS

Part of the synopsis of Chris Jenkins's annotated bibliography of African American classical music, published by the American Society for Aesthetics. Visit <http://aesthetics-online.org/> for more.

ticular time, and then artists much later in a different time and context pick that up and make that piece resonant for them in their time.

ALEX LAING: For me, one of the most poignant or powerful examples of music being a dialogue actually came when that dialogue was forced upon us. With the "Requiem for Michael Brown" protest at the St. Louis Symphony in Powell Hall [in 2014], the protesters wanted to find people who were maybe not involved, and say that you can't be on the sidelines. Where do they go? They go to Symphony Hall. As much as we talk about universality and music for everyone, that's not how orchestras are seen. That was one of the more powerful dialogues that I've heard about with an orchestra, and it wasn't a dialogue that we initiated or entered into willingly.

GARY GINSTLING: We've spoken about repertoire and composers. We haven't spoken as much about a central

question—investment. If you're going to see change, you have to invest in it. Orchestras have to be willing to invest in producing music that represents the communities that we're talking about, and invest in ways to attract musicians to their stages, and audience to their concert halls.

Not only am I running an orchestra, but one affiliated with the Kennedy Center, which has this presence as perhaps welcoming to a certain segment of the community, but not to others. What choices can you make as an orchestra to start to change the perception that we're talking about? What kind of things work and feel authentic, and what kind of things feel disingenuous? I don't know the answers to those questions. But the National Symphony has in the last few years really broadened

its programmatic reach. The Kennedy Center appointed Q-Tip as its first-ever artistic director for hip-hop culture. In the last eighteen months, the National Symphony Orchestra has done concerts with Common, Nas, and Kendrick Lamar that are outside the core genre of what you would expect to see on a classical subscription series. Earlier this season we did a screening of the film *Selma* where the orchestra played the soundtrack live. It was written by Jason Moran, the Kennedy Center's artistic director for jazz. It was an incredibly powerful evening, and after the performance we had a panel session with Ava DuVernay, the film's director, and Congressman John Lewis. The topic of the session was the role of music in the civil rights movement. It was a powerful evening that connected music with these issues of our time, and the audience was a very different audience than what you would typically find at a National Symphony concert. What does that mean to

these questions that we're talking about? Can we get that audience to come back and experience a broader range of what we do? I ask my colleagues on this call, have you seen any orchestra doing things that caused you to say, yeah, that's going to make a difference in these issues? Have you seen anything that gets you excited?

ALEX LAING: Gary, just to be a little provocative, you said that one of the questions you guys were asking is, how can we get more of this *Selma* audience to come to some of the other stuff that we do? But

"What do equity and inclusion look like at every level of your organization? From the bottom up, who has power in your organization? What does your board look like? Your budget says a lot about your value system—do you allocate funds towards certain programs so that your organization can shift itself towards a more equitable and inclusive mission and vision?"—Cecilia Olusola Tribble

you could also flip that to ask, how can we get our current audience to accept, embrace, attend different programming? You ask, how can we get more of an audience that looks like this? Well, make it sustainable to do more of what brought them in.

CECILIA OLUSOLA TRIBBLE: As a public funder, I know that we in Nashville have been in conversation with our grantees about their organizations and their budgets. What do equity and inclusion look like at every level of your organization? From the bottom up, who has power in your organization? What does your board look like? If you have an all-white-male board, well, that's a problem. Your budget says a lot about your value system—do you allocate funds towards certain programs so that your organization can shift itself towards a more equitable and inclusive mission and vision?

JESSE ROSEN: In the “Cultural Specificity” piece at Create Equity, the redistribution argument is given more oomph with the notion that classical music is culturally specific, that it’s meaningful only to white people, who represent only one part of America. But the funding history has been “mainstream,” and classical music organizations, along with opera and museums and so on, have captured a very large chunk of philanthropic support as well as command of the cultural space. The redistribution argument is that some redistribution ought to happen—which



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means something from this slice of the pie gets a little smaller so that slice of the pie can get a little bigger. From your perspective as a funder, how do you think about that?

CECILIA OLUSOLA TRIBBLE: At Metro Arts we have been grappling with that for a few years. It gets at the heart of the way many funders have been founded, what their missions have been from their inception. As a public funder that supports the arts in Nashville and Davidson County, we had to come to grips with

the fact that we are here to serve all of Nashville and Davidson County. If most of our funds are going toward the big three or four arts organizations, then we’re not doing service to Davidson County. We had to look at how our funds were structured and what our application is like.

We had to look at what kinds of things we were funding. Basic operating support is something our organization believes in, so that’s going to be there. Program funding is something that we also believe in. If we are serious about not only funding all of Davidson County, but recruiting organi-



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Alex Laing: “We see orchestral music mostly as a monologue, and if we do our job right this monologue is going to transform you. We don’t see it as a dialogue, and when we play music by black composers, we think we have diversified ourselves.”

zations for that funding, we have to think about accessibility. We are re-editing our application process, and may be moving toward a multi-lingual application. If you are in a black organization in Nashville that has been traditionally discriminated against by Metro Arts in our 40-year history, what are the tools, who are the people we can send to you to have a conversation to say that the culture of our organization is changing? The program that I’m in charge of, the Racial Equity in Arts Leadership Learning Cadre, has been in partnership with our arts ecosystem to have a conversation about racial equity in the arts on a large scale and locally. It has been a great learning tool for our grantees and for our agency. We get feedback from our grantees. We can strive to be a better organization.

JESSE ROSEN: Can you tell us more about that cohort?

CECILIA OLUSOLA TRIBBLE: We’re in our third cycle. It’s in partnership with the Curb Center for

Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University. It’s a professional development opportunity for arts executives, administrators, local artists, and other community members to dig deeply into how racism has shaped the arts—not only in our own art forms, artistic practices, institutions, but as a whole ecosystem in Nashville. We started with anti-racism training. All of us are deeply rooted in the making of race and the perpetuation of white supremacy over 500 years in the Western hemisphere, as well as waves of resistance. We also engage in free lectures to help us with our public conversation.

JESSE ROSEN: The Nashville Symphony participates in the program, and [President and CEO] Alan Valentine has been outspoken about the value that it had for the orchestra. What have you learned from that experience that would be helpful and meaningful for our community?

CECILIA OLUSOLA TRIBBLE: It has been meaningful for organizations to think about their institutional structure. It has been helpful for me and Metro Arts to think about the things that our organization needs so that we can support them in building their organizational capacity and to think about equity and inclusion at every level of their organization. It has also been useful in making connections. At many organizations, it is mostly white and mostly male at the executive director level. But at the artist level, or the community organization level, there are more people of color. Being able to connect artists, community organizers, and community organizations with what we call major organizations has been exciting to see. It’s exciting to be a part of those parties building coalitions together.

JESSE ROSEN: Here’s another question from the Create Equity post: “What is the end game in diversity work?” One scenario is that it doesn’t work, that orchestras will not become more diverse—and then what? Another scenario is that they do become more diverse—and then what? Is that the end game, that the people on the stages of orchestras are

more representative of their communities? Is there some other larger goal?

ALEX LAING: One end game might be that orchestras no longer hold the position of primacy that they’ve traditionally held in the cultural consciousness. Obviously, a lot of people see that as a loss that we can’t afford. I understand that people are running organizations where every two weeks there’s a little bit of a fire drill to make payroll. On the other hand, what might be beneficial is that it gives us an opportunity to perhaps reposition ourselves, move beyond some of the fixed ideas of what an orchestra is and does, and move beyond our history and the role that we played as a colonizing force. But that would come with a cost—we don’t get as much as we used to, and we have to figure out how much we love this music, and what we need to do for it.

Diversity isn’t enough. To me, the end game is not just having more black or brown people on stage, though that makes a nice picture and certainly has an impact on audience members and musicians on stage. That is meaningful on its own, but on its own it won’t change the strategic or artistic direction and priorities of organizations, because musicians are seen as the hands of the organization and others are seen as the brains. In terms of a profound systematic change, orchestras will have to shift how we see and structure ourselves. We don’t see ourselves as culture makers; we see ourselves as culture protectors or culture preservers. To make that shift we should have a structure that supports a workforce of artists that will change and grow—as hands and brains—because we expect society to change and grow around us.

CHRIS JENKINS: Personally, I feel strongly that if the first vocation—defined as responding to the community in which organizations are located—is really important, then there is no end game. You would never cease this process of reflecting on what you’re doing and seeing if you’re achieving that goal. Society is always going to be changing, so if you want to reflect that society, then your organization is always changing as well. [S](#)