

Toward Genuine Board Diversity

Everyone agrees that orchestra boards of directors should represent the rich diversity of the communities they serve. But most orchestra boards remain overwhelmingly white. In the last few years, North Carolina's Charlotte Symphony has aimed for—and achieved—a sharp increase in board diversity. League President and CEO **Jesse Rosen** interviews the president and a board member of the Charlotte Symphony to learn how they did it.



Chris Lee

Jesse Rosen, President and CEO,
League of American Orchestras

JESSE ROSEN: The boards of American orchestras are predominantly white—92 percent white, in fact. You have achieved a very substantial proportion of non-white board members in Charlotte, about 52 percent. What was the impetus for achieving that degree of diversity on your board?

MARY DEISSLER: When I arrived we were a typical symphony board, with some diversity but roughly 75 percent white—predominantly older affluent white individuals from one area of town. Two months after I arrived at the Charlotte Symphony in June 2016, the protests erupted after the fatal police shooting of an African American man. It makes you realize that Charlotte is a very segregated town.

To demonstrate the value and impact the symphony might have in the wider community, I've always believed that you start at the top with your leadership. If we didn't have voices around the table who are able to reflect the community and their views, we would never change. So I and my great VP of development, Michelle Hamilton, set out to deliberately broaden the board in a number of areas. Raquel Lynch was one of the first people who very kindly, at a time when we were still figuring out our way, agreed to join forces with us, and help lead that charge.

ROSEN: Raquel, you were not on the

board at that point. Were you recruited?

RAQUEL LYNCH: Correct. The reason I joined—and I am not a typical classical music lover, I am not someone who typically they would have recruited—is because I believe what Mary and what Michelle were telling me, which was that they understood the power of music, and they also recognized the need of the community. That convinced me that this was important. I am really interested in system change, and I come from a social justice lens. I think music should be democrati-

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cally accessible to everyone in the community and not something that is for those few who can afford it.

I come from Venezuela, where El Sistema proved to the world that music could change the lives of children, in the poorest neighborhoods and countries. This is related to the work that I do daily. At that time, I was working for a nonprofit, where I met Michelle, in which we were helping people avoid homelessness. We were serving those who were the working poor, or those who were about to be evicted.

So to me, it was attractive to partner with people in the arts who understand poverty and also understand the power of art in the lives of people.

ROSEN: What were the conversations like with the rest of the board? Did you bring this new direction up in the nominating committee or your governance committee? And did people say, yes, let's go for it?

DEISSLER: We conducted a skills audit of the board when I arrived, and discovered we had a few holes, largely in community representation. The board governance committee allowed me to run with the idea of broadening our base, but I wouldn't say there was a ringing endorsement initially. Some board members believed it was the right thing to do; other board members are focused on producing the best Mahler performance possible from our fine orchestra. We collectively need to understand that this is part of the future. We are a minority-majority city. If we can't figure out a way to be relevant to a wider base of the citizenship, the CSO won't have the support it needs to be strong and resilient into the future.

LYNCH: This journey toward inclusion has just started. If we had been working on it for ten years, this would be a very different conversation. But for the past

two years, the relevance of this conversation is in our face in Charlotte, so it's not something we could avoid, given the protests and that we are in the national news. That has propelled us into action, not just conversation.

When I hear about the conversations Mary is having about race and who should be represented, I think of her courage to bring them up as a white woman. I wonder how much more the board could be doing to support her. She shouldn't be doing that alone.

ROSEN: Charlotte has very substantial African American and Hispanic populations. Were you recruiting for the board for race and ethnicity? Was that something that you articulated clearly? Did you consider age, or other types of diversity? Did you set goals?

DEISSLER: All of the above. We needed younger people around the table. The average age of symphony boards is upward of 60. We now have two members in their early thirties on the board. That was very important. They are both young people of color. It is also important to have different geographic representation—not everybody from wealthy South Charlotte. When you are recruiting board members, not everybody is going to be interested, so you look at where you can find pockets of interest. Raquel was wonderful because she was interested in the puzzle. As she said, being from Venezuela, a fan of the El Sistema program, she understood what we were trying to do with our Project Harmony.

Then we found another partner, an older Chinese American gentleman who is a lawyer. Once you have a couple of people it's not that hard to recruit others. The first people are really brave. Over about eighteen months we were able to place six new members on the board.

LYNCH: Sometimes when people recruit, they only think about the makeup of the individual, to have optical representation. What I respect from Mary and Michelle is that this is not a tokenism strategy. They recognized us by what we can contribute, they understand us as people and our distinct skills, understanding

we can impact the orchestra, as much as we also happen to be Chinese Americans, Venezuelan Americans, young, not so young, or where we live in this community. That is important as you recruit—that there is also a value-add to the board.

ROSEN: Did you set out with the goal of 50 percent? Or did that kind of happen?

DEISSLER: We didn't have a target. I knew we had to have different voices around that table or we could not possibly have a chance of figuring out how to connect deeper into the community.

ROSEN: Often in board conversations about this topic, I hear people say, "we just don't know anybody," meaning that people get stumped when trying to know and engage with people outside their usual circles. What did you do that enabled you to identify candidates and eventual new board members?

DEISSLER: I have a great partner in Michelle Hamilton, who spent years in the social service sector. She knew people in the community, including Raquel. Jeff Lee, a Chinese American board member, knew Jalal John Azar, who immigrated from Aleppo when he was ten years old. He loves classical music, so he came on the board. It is almost like a domino effect. When you are serious and intentional about it, it is not all that hard.

LYNCH: You have to go beyond your usual circle when thinking of board leadership. Consider who might be in your network you have not thought of who may work with you, or who you see at events. Be willing to say hi and get to know each other. That is how Mary and I got to know each other. I could have made assumptions about Mary solely based on her role with the symphony, but getting to know her, I understood her previous work on poverty internationally, and that shifted my mindset about who she was as a leader. This process is not only from whites dismantling assumptions about people of color or vice-versa; you also have to address the board environment—would other groups feel welcome in an environment that traditionally has been structured by one group—white? Both of those



Justin Drescott

Mary Deissler is president and CEO of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra in North Carolina. Previously she worked at Artis—Naples in Florida, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Boston's Handel & Haydn Society.

are important to address as you start an inclusion strategy.

ROSEN: The way that Mary presented herself was an important part of your own calculation about wanting to be part of the Charlotte Symphony board?

LYNCH: Yes. I like to be associated with organizations that are willing to understand who they are and transform themselves. That is at the core of how good leaders lead extraordinary organizations. I see that in Mary. She is willing to



Gina Esquivel

Charlotte Symphony Orchestra board member Raquel Lynch is the chief program officer at Goodwill in Charlotte, where she leads workforce programs and talent development efforts. She is a system leader focused on the development and implementation of social sector solutions.

go where it is uncomfortable to transform the organization forward. The world is thinking about transformation, so how do we become part of that transformation? In my view, you have to be vulnerable, invite diverse voices, and think of future generations.

ROSEN: In terms of board culture, have you had to learn or do things differently because it is not a homogenous group?

DEISSLER: I always struggle with getting board members to actively engage at meetings. Board meetings are not always a welcoming environment to ask a lot of questions and get to know each other and feel comfortable. So we have tried to

break down into smaller groups around some key questions.

LYNCH: I want to go back to the earlier conversation about feeling welcome in different environments as a person of color, and who we are in a community. These smaller groups allow us to have more in-depth conversations. Now I know two board members well. I opened up about who I am as an individual and how I see myself on the board, and they opened up as well.

Another thing that I liked happened at the onboarding session for new board members. So many of us were starting at the same time, and at face value, you would have seen a room full of men, and from my point of view, a majority of men from corporate America. But after that session, we all had to say a little bit about each other, and we learned that half of us had some relationship with immigration, whether as the children of immigrants or as immigrants ourselves. We didn't know each other before that. At that moment, we are experiencing the culture that we want to create.

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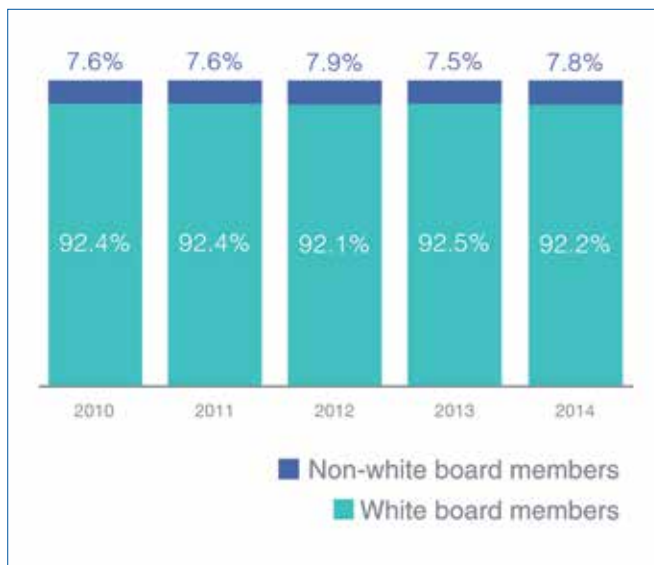
Today, the narrative I use to talk about my role with the symphony includes talking about Project Harmony, sharing how we go to schools and help children have access to classical music and have a relationship with an instrument. I have invited immigrant friends to a Charlotte Symphony concert, and having a musician from Spain who had been to our respective countries to play and spoke with us at the end of the concert, was an incredible opportunity for my friends to think differently about the Charlotte Symphony orchestra.

Mary has been strategic in bringing composers of color. The orchestra partnered with a composer of color, Nkeiru Okoye, to celebrate the 250th anniversary

of Charlotte, and there was a specific song that she rearranged. I remember the audience going crazy for it, and the Latino and international people who were there recognized it. They felt connected and welcome.

DESSLER: All orchestras do education programs in the community, but we have exponentially increased our work in the community in the last three years. I have a presentation that focuses on our commitment to access, inclusiveness, and diversity. I talk about this aspect of the CSO with public officials, funders who would have never looked at us, and community members. Most of them say, “I had absolutely no idea that the symphony did this kind of work.” We're trying to figure out how we can be better at getting the message out—that while we do great Mahler One's on the mainstage, we also deliver wonderful experiences in a number of different communities where you wouldn't expect to see the Charlotte Symphony. It is starting to change, but we have a long way to go.

ROSEN: Often when people talk about boards and diversity, you hear things like, “how are we still going to get people who meet our required level of support, our minimum gift?” When people ask that question there is an underlying assumption—which we all would agree is false—that when you recruit for a diverse board, somehow people who aren't white don't have money. Have you encountered this question? Do you have a minimum gift, and has that been revisited as you have embarked on this effort to diversify the board?



This chart, from *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field*, a 2016 report by the League of American Orchestras, documents racial and ethnic diversity among orchestra board members from 2010 to 2014. The League began collecting this data 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.

DESSLER: We don't have a minimum gift. We used to. But we realized if we truly want voices from the community, we need to be flexible. What we say is that we would like the symphony to be one of your top three philanthropic endeavors, and that you will make a gift to us every year, and it will be a stretch gift for you. We have a gift range of a few hundred dollars up to \$100,000. We ask each person to give what is a significant and personally important gift, but by setting minimums you are excluding a swath of the population. The exclusion is not just ethnically. You are excluding younger people who couldn't give, say, at the \$25,000 level. We need to find resources elsewhere. But we will be so much richer for those voices around the table, that it is absolutely worth that tradeoff.

ROSEN: What would you say you have learned, and what would you want to pass on to orchestras that want to achieve greater board diversity?

LYNCH: We have more to learn. As a person who comes from other types of boards, I had to listen patiently and un-



Randall Goosby
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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, including regional seminars, groups focusing on top-level challenges, peer exchange and learning sessions at the League's National Conference, and more. Visit <https://americanorchestras.org/edi> for insight, advice, and a path to greater diversity and inclusion on boards and in every part of orchestras. A report from Koya Leadership Partners at <https://americanorchestras.org/koya> provides an overview of the current state of diversity on boards as well as steps that boards can take to increase diversity and inclusion. Also of interest may be a policy statement adopted by the League's board of directors about its own diversity and inclusion goals, at www.americanorchestras.org/LeagueBoardDiversity.

derstand what board members who have passion for the symphony were coming from as they passionately expressed adherence to the classics. To appreciate their love for the music—you may have people who are particularly all about the music, or people who were impacted by that music as a child. Understanding that will help us have a better conversation as to why we make decisions at the board level.

It is essential to recognize this not only about representation of diversity; it

is the culture that allows for diversity to thrive. You may start by bringing in board members from different backgrounds and ages and genders. But the most important thing that any board could do is understand their own culture, to know where you may need to make adjustments to have a welcoming and thriving culture.

DEISSLER: You have to be open. You have to listen. As orchestras, as a field, we know how to put on great big concerts and produce exceptional music. We're not

really that good at listening to voices from different communities. We have to be humble. That is a hard thing.

Our field is still predominantly white. I am a white woman, I have all of the privilege that comes with that. I am still trying to learn. So you have to be humble and you have to be willing to open yourself up. You have to be intentional about change, and focused on it for the long haul.

LYNCH: I am excited and proud to be part of an organization that allows us to go through this change, and to impact the lives of people who I would never imagine an orchestra could impact. Whether that is someone who is experiencing Alzheimer's and music brings them back to the present, or a child in a school where that child is holding a violin which no one ever imagined they could play—and play the music that is relevant to their culture. As well to attract an audience who wants to have a live musical experience. All of those things are equally important to me. Music connects us all. **S**



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