

by Susan Elliott

# Breaking Through

**Inclusiveness is a goal for every American orchestra. Some progress is being made, but true diversity onstage and off remains elusive.**

Every ten years, the U.S. Government conducts a population census to determine what America looks like. By the middle of this century, the number of “non-Hispanic whites” will comprise a little over half of the total U.S. population; Hispanics and, to a lesser degree, African Americans and Asian Americans, will make up the difference. This year, there will be more “minority” than “majority” births in the U.S. Suddenly, the minority is the majority.

We are, to put it mildly, a rapidly shifting paradigm.

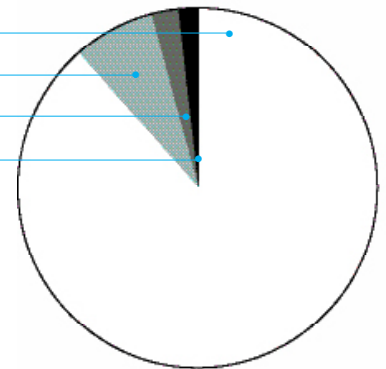
You wouldn't know it by looking at American orchestras. The overwhelming majority of their musicians are white, even though many of the cities in which they play are largely black and Hispanic. What's the problem here? Why don't American orchestras look like America?

According to figures from the League of American Orchestras, in the 1994-95 season, with 189 orchestras reporting, African-American musicians accounted for 1.31 percent of all musicians in orchestras; Latin or Hispanic musicians accounted for 1.6 percent; and Asians accounted for 4.54 percent. The most recent figures, for the 2007-08 season, with 154 orchestras reporting: 1.83 percent African Americans, 2.42 percent Latinos, 7.34 percent Asians. Not much progress.

“This is a problem that has literally been talked about since the 1960s,” says Aaron Dworkin, founding president of the fourteen-year-old [Sphinx Organization](#), whose vision is “a world in which classical music reflects cultural diversity and plays a role in the everyday lives of youth.” Successful initiatives like Sphinx, [Project Step](#) in Boston, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra's [Young Strings](#) program, [Youth Orchestra LA](#) (a



88.41% of players in American orchestras are white  
7.34% are Asian  
2.42% are Latino  
1.83% are African American



program of the Los Angeles Philharmonic), and numerous other laudable efforts by orchestras of every size are making inroads. Minority conductors are a growing presence as music directors and guests on podiums nationwide. The use of “blind” au-

ditions—where musicians perform behind a screen when auditioning for orchestras, so that only their music-making, not their race or gender, is perceived—has long been industry practice. Still, for the most part, the statistics speak for themselves. “There’s



Cellist Mitzi Okou, with accompanist Sharon Berenson, performs at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's annual Talent Development Program Spring Recital.

As Dworkin points out, orchestras lag behind virtually every other profession in hiring minorities. The United States has a black president—admittedly, the first in the country's 234-year history—while black college presidents, governors, doctors, lawyers, and high-profile entertainers, from comedians to movie stars to rap musicians, are familiar figures.

In conversations with musicians, educators, and administrators, the reasons for the dearth of minorities in our orchestras are myriad and complex. The problem has historical precedent, and it is solidly entrenched. It is educational, generational, psychological, practical, and all of the above.

Ann Hobson Pilot, recently retired principal harp at the Boston Symphony Orchestra, early in her career (below) with the orchestra; and performing the world premiere (bottom) of John Williams's *On Willows and Birches* with Music Director James Levine and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, September 23, 2009.



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been very little change," says Dworkin.

In other areas, change has occurred: few would question the healthy influx of women in orchestras in the last half-century. Asian-American musicians are now represented in orchestras in greater proportions than their percentage of the general U.S. population. All the same, black and Latino representation remains alarmingly low.

Changing the face of American orchestras—not to mention their audiences, boards, and staffs—requires vast amounts of time, money, and sweat equity. Allison Vulgamore, president and CEO of The Philadelphia Orchestra and, formerly, of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, believes that unless an orchestra commits to making

diversity a priority, it won't happen. Vulgamore is considered something of an expert on the subject of diversity, having overseen the sixteen-year evolution of the Atlanta Symphony's [Talent Development Program](#), credited with sending some 88 inner-city high school students to colleges and conservatories, nearly half of them playing in the Atlanta Symphony Youth Orchestra along the way. (For more on the ASO's Talent Development Program, see sidebar.) "Can we change our orchestra to be 50 percent Latino and African-American tomorrow?" Vulgamore asks. "No. Can we have a long-term objective with milestones and goals to achieve? Absolutely. For right now, let's just get started better."



Michael J. Lutch



First-year students at Project Step in Boston

Project Step

And it's not necessarily about racism. "We look very little to the past," says Dworkin. "There's no overt prejudice out there today."

Ann Hobson Pilot, who was principal harp at the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1969 to 2009, and, as such, a pioneer in the field, points to the educational system. "The issue of minorities in orchestras

has not improved as much as it might have, because there's so little opportunity for kids to study instruments at an early age," she says. "I began the harp in 1958 at the [public] Philadelphia High School for Girls, which had an extremely extensive music program. If it hadn't been for that program, I never would've started the harp."

"Generally speaking, African-American and Latino communities do not value symphony orchestras," says trumpeter Stanford Thompson, a recent graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music who went through the Atlanta Symphony Talent Development program. "It's hard to get those students motivated and to keep them engaged." Thompson recently returned from Venezuela as one of ten musicians in the [Abreu Fellows Program](#), which is based at New England Conservatory. The Fellows were studying El Sistema in its home country in order to develop locally appropriate versions of it in the U.S.

Then there is the issue of role models—or lack thereof. Hobson Pilot considers herself lucky to have "fallen in love with the harp," because going to concerts as a child in Philadelphia, she remembers, "I never saw anyone on stage—or in the audience—who looked like me." Norman Johns, assistant principal cellist of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, recounts how, as a young musician, he didn't know there were other black string players until he played a job for Aretha Franklin in the 1970s. Franklin had stipulated that she wouldn't perform without more blacks in the orchestra; Johns was among those recruited for the gig, from all over the country.

## Committed to Change

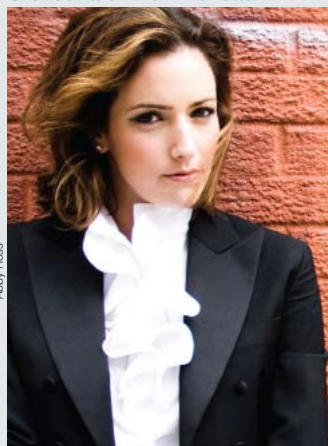
For promising young African-American and Latino student musicians, the [Talent Development Program](#) of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra opens the door to opportunity and achievement at the highest level. At the [League of American Orchestras's 2010 National Conference](#) in Atlanta this June, a Perspectives Session provides an overview of the best thinking and practices of this nationally recognized minority talent-development initiative. The session offers an opportunity to learn about this program from those who have experienced it first-hand and think about how to change the face of American orchestras.

The [Chicago Sinfonietta's](#) very *raison d'être* is diversity: in the orchestra, on the board, and in the audience. African Americans and, to a lesser degree, Latinos, comprise over half of the orchestra and board and slightly under half of the staff and audience. The Sinfonietta, a professional freelance ensemble, was founded in 1987 by Paul Freeman, who remains its music director. Its programs promote diversity in schools, one of which, Project Inclusion, provides fellowships for promising musicians to play with the orchestra. The Sinfonietta, which also promotes composers of color, does not use screens in the audition process.

Founded in 2004 by Mexican conductor and pianist Alondra

de la Parra (who at the time was 23), the [Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas](#) is a professional New York-based ensemble whose mission is to promote musicians and composers of the Americas. The instrumentalists, mostly age 35 and under, hail from 22 different countries. De la Parra programs repertoire and hires [Alondra de la Parra, founder and artistic director of the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas](#)

soloists only from the Americas. No German violinists, Swedish nightingales, or Beethoven symphonies. "Many orchestras will give a chance to a young Russian pianist," she says, "but not a young Brazilian." As to living composers, De la Parra's proudest success is 36-year-old Enrico Chapela, whose music had never been heard outside of Mexico until the Philharmonic played the North American premiere of his *Inguesu*, composed to commemorate a soccer match (!) between Mexico and Brazil. Since then the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has played the work and the Los Angeles Philharmonic has commissioned a new score from him. Chapela has also been signed by music publisher Boosey & Hawkes.



Abby Ross



Aaron Dworkin, founder and president of the Sphinx Organization, with Sphinx Overture Students in Detroit

Glenn Freest

As to the psychological aspect, orchestras' whiteness begins, and is perhaps most crucial, at the top. Conductor Michael Morgan, who has served twenty years as music director of the Oakland East Bay Symphony and ten as music director of the Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra, points out that "When a board of directors has to choose someone who will be the physical representation of the orchestra, it's hard to go out on a limb."

The overriding obstacle to true diversity within the American orchestra is cultural—what Vulgamore calls "the barrier that's going to take decades" to remove. Which is why Venezuela's El Sistema program has been successful: it gets to the root of the issue by using classical music as an agent of change. Thompson reports how, before El Sistema, Venezuelan orchestras hired mostly foreign players because there were not enough qualified nationals. Now the country's orchestras—and there are many—are filled with Venezue-



Mark Churchill, dean and artistic director of New England Conservatory's Department of Preparatory and Continuing Education, as well as director of El Sistema USA

the program, which has been in place for over three decades, encompasses the entire country.

"The cultural barrier that surrounds orchestras is huge," says Mark Churchill, dean and artistic director of New England Conservatory's Department of Preparatory and Continuing Education, as well as the director of El Sistema USA. "El Sistema has not only broken down those barriers, it has turned them inside out." Venezuelan orchestras now look like the populations they serve. "The orchestras are in their space, they are part of the community," says Churchill. "The affluent kids have to go into the barrios, because that's where the best instruction is. Until we achieve something like that, where large communities of young people of color are really embracing classical music and playing orchestral instruments as part of their own cultural identity, I don't think we're going to turn around the situation in our orchestras."

### Taking Steps

In the meantime, some orchestras and organizations like Sphinx are making progress. Project Step boasts a high rate of success: all of its graduates go on to college, and many to conservatory. The program was founded in 1982 by the Boston Symphony's then-personnel manager, William Moyer, who had been given a mandate by the administration to find minority musi-

cians to audition for the orchestra. That he could find so few led him to bring the BSO, New England Conservatory, and the Boston University School of Music together to create Project Step, which provides musical instruction and mentoring to students from ages five to eighteen. Project Step Executive Director Mary Jaffee reports that two-thirds of its graduates make their livings in classical music. One of them, Mariana Green-Hill, who holds a masters degree from The Juilliard School, is now the artistic director of Project Step.

Sphinx is the largest and perhaps most visible of programs promoting diversity in classical music. Through its annual competition; its neighborhood, school, and camp programs; instrument loans; the Sphinx Orchestra, and more, the Detroit-based organization is credited with directly reaching 65,000 students in schools, awarding \$1.7 million in scholarships, and setting up some 200 performances with major orchestras for its competition winners. Dworkin points with pride to the six competition alumni who are now members of full-season orchestras.

"Sphinx is the search engine of the talent we're looking for," says Vulgamore, "because orchestras can't do everything." Atlanta's Talent Development Program actually started as a community-engagement initiative and evolved over time into a professional training program for minority music students, using orchestra members as mentors and teachers. Two of its graduates are now playing professionally in orchestras, and all of them have gone on to college or conservatory.

The same is true of Dallas Symphony Orchestra's Young Strings, launched in 1992 for minority public-school students: the 90 alumni who made it through the program, which starts in kindergarten and goes through high school, have gone on to college or conservatory, or are there now.

"Affirmative action is supposed to repair the ills of the past," says harpist Ann Hobson Pilot. "And that's what a lot of these programs are doing. For so many years, blacks didn't even have the opportunity to go into the orchestra field. Putting instruments in kids' hands, encouraging them, giving them lessons" are appropriate ways to make up for the past. She says that these methods are more effective than simply "taking a somewhat accomplished player

and putting him into an orchestra chair.”


### Widening the Pool

So while the number of minority musicians in orchestras may not have changed significantly in the last 50 years, it's a safe assumption that the pool of qualified players has increased. Dworkin believes that, these days, the argument that the talent pool isn't big enough is no longer true. Hobson Pi-

lot, too, sees more young musicians of color coming out of the conservatory. They just don't necessarily choose to play in orchestras. “The numbers are not improving as far as blacks in orchestras, but the numbers are improving in terms of blacks being excellent players,” she says. Hobson Pilot herself is producing a film on the subject, tentatively titled *The Changing Face of Classical Music*. “A lot of blacks don't even want a job



Michael Morgan in action as music director of the Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra. He holds the same title at the Oakland East Bay Symphony.



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in an orchestra,” she says. “They consider it too restricting.”

From where he sits at a major conservatory, Churchill sees the ratio of minority musicians landing orchestral jobs about equal to the ratio of majority musicians landing them. There just aren't very many positions open. The National Association of Schools of Music reports that, for the 2008-09 academic year, master's degree graduates broke down as follows: 4.7 percent black or non-Hispanic Latino; 0.2 percent American Indian or Native Alaskan; 1.3 percent Pacific Islander; 5.4 percent Hispanic/Latino; 60.6 percent Non-Hispanic White; 6.6 percent Asian (5.1 percent were Asian women); 21.2 percent Other/Race Ethnicity Unknown.

Of course, the odds of any student of the performing arts actually landing a secure job in his or her chosen field are slim. But for classical musicians of color it's particularly difficult because there is so little precedent. “In the 30 or 40 years I've been involved with music education, I've seen extremely talented students of color who certainly had the potential to develop into fine orchestra players,” says Churchill. “But making the choice to go in a direction that is high-risk—we all know the statistics of how many people actually wind up in orchestras—is more difficult for them. The pressure from families in their communities to excel in more mainstream professions is far greater, especially when they have access to medical and legal careers that are crying out for their participation.”

Dworkin thinks orchestras should make a recruiting effort at least equal to that made by other professions, by calling conservatories and asking specifically about upcoming students of color who are possible audition candidates.

## Advertising Access

“Access” is a word that comes up repeatedly in any discussion of diversity. Related to Churchill’s point, talented young people of color feel they have access to the legal and medical professions partly because of out-and-out recruitment efforts, but also because they may know doctors and lawyers personally. The chances of their rubbing elbows with classical musicians are pretty slim, unless they or someone they know is in the orchestra field.

Orchestras need to create access to their musicians, says Vulgamore, not only for aspiring young players but also for potential audience members. “You have to let people know they have access,” she says. “You have to authentically spend time listening and understanding. You can make a lot of presumptions, but unless you know what access really looks like in your community, you’re not going to be successful.” In many cases, particularly the South, that means going into the churches. “You can’t just hang out a poster and expect everyone to come visit,” says Vulgamore. “Sometimes they need to be invited.”

“Any self-respecting company located in a city that is 70 percent or 80 percent minority, whose customers represent only 2 or 3 percent [of that group] would make it their No. 1 priority” to fix the imbalance, says Dworkin.

Diversity in an orchestra goes beyond the ensemble and the audience that comes to hear it. At many orchestras, a large number of board and staff members commute to the concert hall from the suburbs to the inner city. Dworkin points out that, without the issues of tenure and union regulations, creating diversity on the staff is far less complex than it is in the orchestra. And yet, he says, “Less than half of one percent of executive directors are black. Less than one percent are Latino. There are no black or Latino artistic administrators. Education, outreach, development—3 or 4 percent.”

Will a non-minority marketing team know how and where to reach a minority audience? Can the development department approach the black middle class and win its trust? What is the board make-up? It’s far easier to turn to the known sources,

time after time. But many of those wells are running dry, particularly in these economic times.

So what’s an orchestra to do?

“There are no simple solutions,” says Dworkin. “The reality is it’s complicated, and it’s hard.”

Perhaps simply acknowledging that there’s a problem—and then setting milestones en route to fixing it—is enough to, as Vulgamore put it, “get started.”

“It has to be a priority,” she says. “When you take this on, it has to be from top to bottom. It’s all-consuming. And you can’t fake it.” **S**

SUSAN ELLIOTT writes frequently on the arts and is the editor of MusicalAmerica.com. Recent articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *BBC Music*.

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