

The Bay Area Rainbow Symphony in performance, led by Music Director Dawn Harms. The San Francisco-based orchestra was founded in 2008.

Courtesy of Bay Area Rainbow Symphony



Come Out and Play

Representation and inclusion of LGBTQ+ composers, musicians, and audiences is on the rise at U.S. orchestras.

by Brin Solomon

We're here, we're queer, and we're coming soon to an orchestra near you. While performers and composers who today would fit somewhere under the LGBTQ+ umbrella have been part of classical music for as long as this music has existed, such musicians have recently been gaining levels of acceptance, visibility, and celebration in the U.S. orchestral world that would have been startling even ten years ago. While queerness is far from universally celebrated, there's no shortage of brilliant figures working to embrace

queer visibility on the orchestral stage.

Before diving into the rest of this article, a few quick definitions are probably in order, as the language of queerness is somewhat fluid. Recognizing that the acronym LGBTQ+ (for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, and additional terms) keeps expanding, more and more people are using the reclaimed slur *queer* as an umbrella term for lives that fall outside cisgender heterosexuality, though it can also function as a specific label for certain individuals. *Cisgender*, frequently shortened to *cis*, refers to people who aren't trans, i.e., people who are the gender everyone assumed they would be when they

Courtesy of Bay Area Rainbow Symphony



Bay Area Rainbow Symphony Executive Director Richard Horan and Music Director Dawn Harms

ner in interviews; the Columbus Symphony Orchestra in Ohio has held an LGBTQ+ career day; the American Composers Orchestra has hired nonbinary musician and writer Aiden Feltkamp as its first director of emerging composers and diversity; the New York-based Luna Composition Lab gives early training to young female, trans,

and nonbinary composers. And this is to

While performers and composers who fit under the LGBTQ+ umbrella have been part of classical music for as long as this music has existed, such musicians have recently been gaining levels of acceptance and visibility at orchestras that would have been startling even ten years ago.

say nothing of composers and musicians like inti figgis-vizueta, Alex Temple, and

were born. Trans people, conversely, aren't the gender everyone assumed they would be when they were born. (In this usage, *trans* includes nonbinary people, who fall outside the Western system of binary genders; some people prefer to separate out nonbinary identities into a category that is distinct from the cis-trans dichotomy. This usage, in particular, is very much in flux.)

The array of initiatives, organizations, and individuals tackling LGBTQ+ representation in the classical orchestral scene is so vibrant that even the most cursory sampling of groups and figures is breathtaking: Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who holds two of the most prominent conducting jobs in the U.S. as the music director for the Metropolitan Opera and the Philadelphia Orchestra, freely discusses his same-sex part-



Kristin Pulido

Local nonprofit service groups, including Pridelines, a South Florida organization supporting the LGBTQ+ community, were spotlighted at the New World Symphony's April 2018 Transmuse concert and events. Transmuse was supported in part by a grant from the American Orchestras' Futures Fund, a program of the League of American Orchestras made possible by funding from the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.

Chrysanthe Tan (to name only three) who are building careers in the classical world while being open about their queer lives. The existence of LGBTQ+ individuals in the classical music field isn't new in and of itself; what's new is the explicit prominence of queer identity, however defined.

This abundance may seem sudden, but it has deep roots and many causes. The activism of those seeking to destigmatize homosexuality has built a political climate where embracing gays, lesbians, and bisexuals is less and less controversial, though transgender acceptance lags markedly on this front. The existence of online forums and social media

For his community project as a Clarinet Fellow at the New World Symphony, Zach Manzi (second from left), worked with local trans groups to produce Transmuse, where trans people could tell their own stories accompanied by music performed by New World Symphony musicians. In photo: Manzi with guests at the April 2018 event.



Kristin Pulido



Sara Davis Buechner in a 2017 performance with Canada's Edmonton Symphony Orchestra.



Pianist Sara Davis Buechner

Yukiko Orley

groups devoted to queer issues has helped many people come to terms with their identity with a speed that would have been impossible in an offline world, and queer people increasingly, though not universally, feel safe and supported being open about their identities in all parts of their lives

Growing numbers of artists feel an urge to be open about their identities. Still, even when they are out, artists may not want to foreground their queerness at all times.

and refuse to go back into the closet.

Many initiatives for LGBTQ+ visibility are relatively new, like the Florida Orchestra's Pride Weekend this past October. Featuring the music of Leonard Bernstein with a variety of local LGBTQ+ groups invited to perform and hand out information in the lobby beforehand, it was a decided success. "The response from the community was overall very positive," says Daryn Bauer, the orchestra's community engagement manager, and the organization has plans for a similar event in the coming season, this time bringing more LGBTQ health-and-wellness groups

on board. Other groups, like NYC's avocational Queer Urban Orchestra (founded in 2009), have had LGBTQ representation at the core of their mission from the beginning and have developed an audience specifically interested in the queer composers and performers they feature. "It's really

a blessing to have the audience we have," Artistic Director Julie Desbordes says, "because they are so enthusiastic about what we do."

Even in ensembles and concerts not built around queerness, growing numbers of artists feel an urge to be open about their identities. Erica Snowden-

"The response from the community was overall very positive," says Daryn Bauer, community engagement manager at the Florida Orchestra, of the orchestra's Pride Weekend events in October.



she knows, the only trans orchestral conductor—though she adds, "I would really love to be proven wrong about this!" She believes that visibility is key: "It's so hard to navigate being trans if you don't have anyone you can see, and if you search for the words 'transgender conductor,' I want people to be able to find me."

This openness can come at a personal cost. "After I started being more vocal,



Courtesy of the Florida Orchestra

In addition to mainstage concerts during the Florida Orchestra's Pride Weekend last October, community groups including the Tampa Bay Pride Band were invited to perform in the lobby of St. Petersburg's Mahaffey Theater.

Rodriguez is the principal cellist of the Akron Symphony Orchestra, and she's recently become more vocal about her queer identity. "If it matters just for one person to see me" as openly queer onstage, Snowden-Rodriguez says, "then I need to be myself, even if it means risking my sense of security." Alex Enyart, a member of Chicago Sinfonietta's Project Inclusion Freeman Conducting Fellowship, which is aimed at increasing diversity on the orchestral podium, is, as far as

there were certain people in the orchestra that I felt a change in, in terms of how we related," Snowden-Rodriguez says, "and that's something that, as queer people, we unfortunately have to deal with." Sara Davis Buechner, a multi-award-winning pianist who has been open about being transgender for more than twenty years, alluded to off-color remarks that she's heard from agents. "Normally, in polite society, people don't really say things to your face, but every now and again people let their guard

Courtesy of the Florida Orchestra



The Florida Orchestra handed out “pride kazoos” with Florida Orchestra logos as part of its initiatives to connect with community members at the 2017 St. Petersburg Pride celebrations. At the 2018 St. Petersburg Pride, the orchestra distributed flyers about its Pride Weekend events and invited visitors to try musical instruments.

down and you find out what they really think,” she says.

Identity Politics

If there are personal challenges to being out yourself, there are also challenges that come from trying to program LGBTQ soloists and composers. You can’t necessarily tell whether someone’s queer just by looking at them, and some people view their sexuality and cis/trans status as private matters that they don’t want to broadcast. Even with the best of intentions, mistaken assumptions sometimes lead to sticky situations. “We had a soloist one time who we thought was gay, but it turned out he wasn’t,” Dawn Harms, the music director of San Fran-



Jessica Griffin

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra (shown here) and the Metropolitan Opera, regularly discusses his same-sex partner in interviews.

cisco’s avocational Bay Area Rainbow Symphony (founded 2008), recalls. She tries to program an LGBTQ+ soloist on every concert, but this time it didn’t work out. “I had to ask him about it and it was very uncomfortable,” Harms says. The Bay Area Rainbow Symphony also once programmed a Brazilian musician who had to stay strictly closeted for fear of violent homophobia in their home country. Desbordes is sensitive to these concerns. “The first thing that the Queer Urban Orchestra is is *safe*,” she says. “It’s safe for anybody with any form of identity and any form of public expression of that identity.”

Even when artists *are* out, they may not want to foreground their queerness. “It’s



Courtesy of Chicago Sinfonietta

Alex Enyart, a member of Chicago Sinfonietta’s Project Inclusion Freeman Conducting Fellowship, which is aimed at increasing diversity on the orchestral podium. “It’s so hard to navigate being trans if you don’t have anyone you can see,” says Enyart, “and if you search for the words ‘transgender conductor,’ I want people to be able to find me.”

a really personal conversation,” conductor Alex Enyart says, of whether or not to highlight a performer or composer’s LGBTQ+ status. “For a queer soloist, what they want more than anything might be to have a standard orchestral experience without anyone making a big deal about this aspect of who they are.” And indeed, as an orchestral soloist, Buechner has some-

Engaging the LGBTQ+ Community at League’s 2019 Conference

At the “Engaging the LGBTQ+ Community” session at the League of American Orchestras’ 2019 National Conference, orchestra professionals and artists discuss events and artistic projects that bring the LGBTQ+ community into focus and welcome their engagement. Examining the successes and challenges of participants’ engagement with the LGBTQ+ community, panelists will lead a conversation on how to respond to the needs of their local communities. Speakers include **Daryn Bauer**, community engagement manager, the Florida Orchestra; **Julie Desbordes**, artistic director, Queer Urban Orchestra; **Miguel Garcia**, marketing and engagement manager, Chicago Sinfonietta; **Leo Hurley**, composer; **Laura Reynolds**, vice president of education and community engagement, Seattle Symphony. The “Engaging the LGBTQ+ Community” session takes place on Wednesday, June 5 at the League’s 2019 Conference in Nashville, and is part of the League’s focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion at the Conference.



Graphic for Chicago Sinfonietta's 2017 concerts celebrating LGBTQ+ artists and classical music. Conductor Michael Morgan led the orchestra and pianist Sara Davis Buechner, the Allegrezza Singers, and

the Musicality choir in works of Bernstein, Rachmaninoff, Barber, Jennifer Higdon, and David Conte.

times felt tokenized. The dean of one music school where she once taught would greet her on every occasion by saying how proud he was to have hired a trans pianist. "It was so insulting," she says. "You're saying you didn't hire me because I can play the piano great, or because I'm a fabulous teacher, or because I play chamber music like nobody's business—you hired me because I look good on your faculty diversity page?"

The idea that people are putting per-

sonal identity before artistic quality echoes certain complaints that focusing on issues of underrepresentation bastardizes music by politicizing it. While Harms, Desbordes, and Buechner all point out that there's plenty of stellar music that's been excluded from the standard orchestral repertoire—"We live in a world with so much cuisine, why are you always getting a burger and a milkshake?" Buechner quips—no one I spoke to saw politics and music as being at odds.

"I'm in a circle where people see art and politics as inseparable," Zach Manzi says when I asked him about charges of politicizing music by focusing on LGBTQ+ issues. Manzi is a clarinet fellow with the New World Symphony in Miami Beach. Fellows of the New World Symphony develop chamber programs to engage new communities in classical music in new ways, and for his project, Manzi, with the help of local trans groups, organized an evening where trans people could tell their own stories accompanied by music performed by New World Symphony musi-



Erica Snowden-Rodriguez, principal cello of the Akron Symphony Orchestra

cians, followed by a powerful candle-lighting ceremony in honor of those killed by transphobia. Enyart says that she's gotten to a point where she likewise struggles to disconnect politics from music. "Once you see how meaningful it can be to meld art and politics, it's hard to want to do it in some other way." Snowden-Rodriguez is blunter: "Yeah, maybe we are politicizing it, but for me it's a change to a direction that's more just."

The push for diversity in orchestral programming extends beyond LGBTQ

A Week in McCall, Idaho in July...Music Makes it Even Better!

SUMMERFEST 2019

Classical & Pops Music Festival ♦ July 14 - 20

Eric Garcia, Artistic Director & Conductor ♦ 50-Piece SummerFest Orchestra

JULY 14: MUSICAL MAGIC
Performances by soloists and ensembles featuring local musicians and members of the SummerFest Orchestra.

JULY 18: AN EVENING OF POPS WITH RACHEL & MATTHEW TYLER
SummerFest Orchestra with married vocalists Rachel and Matthew Tyler.

JULY 20: THE STORY OF BABAR, THE LITTLE ELEPHANT
SummerFest Orchestra presents a free morning family concert.

JULY 16: FAIN PLAYS BEETHOVEN
SummerFest Orchestra and festival favorite Tim Fain, violinist.

JULY 20: BOHEMIAN SOUNDSCAPES
Evening performance by the SummerFest Orchestra and Anthony Trionfo, flutist.

Schedule, details and tickets available at McCallMusicSociety.org.

PRESENTING SPONSORS

ALBERTSONS | THE LAURA MOORE CUNNINGHAM FOUNDATION | KENT & BEV HELLMAN | THE LUDWIG FAMILY | IDAHO visitidaho.org

PARTNERS

MCCALL AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE | IDAHO ARTS | ART WORLDS | McCall Music Society | Facebook

people, of course, and recognizes that queer people may also be targeted by other forms of societal marginalization. “Being both queer and a person of color is a different experience,” Snowden-Rodriguez says. “There’s an extra bridge that you have to cross there.” Those responsible for programming take different approaches to this issue. Desbordes says that for her, “it’s very organic to select who we work with, and it happens to be the case that it’s been intersectional, but that wasn’t intentional.” (*Intersectionality* can refer to the ways that seemingly different forms of oppression, like sexism and racism, interact in mutually reinforcing ways in the lives of those who experience both.) Harms, on the other hand, carefully ensures that there are composers from specific identity categories on each concert, and will present a concert this coming February exploring the intersection of anti-Semitism and homophobia in the Holocaust.

This gets at the larger truth that there is no singular LGBTQ experience that can be adequately represented by one piece

or event. “Every city is unique, every community is unique, and every person within those communities is unique,” says the Florida Orchestra’s Daryn Bauer. “Listen to your community.” Zach Manzi emphasizes the need for reciprocity: “When I first started reaching out to the trans community, they said, ‘If you want to do an event with us, start coming to our events.’ You can’t impose your vision on a community, it’s essential to talk to them.” Erica Snowden-Rodriguez concurs: “Any initiatives to make the orchestral world more diverse need to have people who are part of those groups in on the conversation, and really *leading* the conversation.” Those conversations may be difficult, but they serve a worthy goal. “Our flag, the pride flag, is many colors,”



Paul Cecchia

“Phenomenal Women,” American Composers Orchestra’s November 2018 concert at Zankel Hall, featured world premieres by Valerie Coleman (at left in photo) and Alex Temple (center). Interviewing the composers onstage is ACO President Ed Yim.

Julie Desbordes says, “not just one or two. We need them all.” **S**

BRIN SOLOMON writes words and music in various genres and is doing their best to queer all of them. Their music journalism has appeared in *VAN*, *San Francisco Classical Voice*, and the *National Sawdust Log*.

NEW MUSIC FOR AMERICA

(A Continuation of Ford Made in America)

Announces: A new commission by Grammy and Pulitzer Prize winning composer

Jennifer Higdon

An orchestra suite of music from her opera “Cold Mountain”

World Premiere by the Delaware Symphony in fall 2021

Buy-in \$1,200 – \$2,200 based on League orchestra group size



For more information contact Bob Rosoff bob.rosoff@gmail.com