

# Rethinking Blind Auditions

---

Blind auditions, in which musicians perform behind a screen to shield their identity, were instituted to redress the longstanding exclusion of people of color and women from orchestras. Blind auditions were successful in some regards, but the percentage of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color musicians has not risen significantly over the years. Is it time to rethink blind auditions? Here, Afa Dworkin moderates a discussion in which several Black musicians offer their views on where things stand now, share their lived experience, and suggest new ways to approach the audition process to create more diverse, equitable American orchestras.

Discussion moderated by Afa Dworkin.

---

Starting in the 1970s, American orchestras implemented “blind auditions,” whereby screens concealed musician candidates from the audition committee and promised anonymity. The impetus for blind auditions was to address orchestras’ enduring racial and gender disparity: most orchestra musicians were White men. By eliminating visual characteristics such as race and gender, blind auditions meant that a musician’s artistry became the central consideration, and that in turn would lead to greater representation and hiring of long-excluded musicians. Orchestras would look more like the communities they served.

However, it should be acknowledged at the outset that the term “blind auditions” is a misnomer, since very few orchestras have engaged in truly blind auditions. Most orchestras have a process which determines a musician’s readiness for an audition based upon the individual’s resume and, more importantly, the vast majority of orchestras eliminate the screen during the later rounds of the process, thus introducing direct opportunities for bias.

Until blind auditions, auditions were held as they are for actors, singers, dancers—you saw exactly who was auditioning. When positions opened at orchestras, conductors often handpicked players in advance. Frequently, even learning about auditions depended on word of mouth, and knowledge of opportunities

belonged to a self-reinforcing network. Musicians’ unions were segregated until the federal government ordered the merger of Black and White unions in 1967. Some adjustments were made to blind auditions along the way: carpeting was installed when people realized that the sound of women’s shoes indicated gender. But despite the name, the process was never entirely blind.

Particularly in terms of gender, blind auditions changed the face of orchestras. In 1970, according to a 2000 Harvard study, women comprised about 6 percent of musicians at some larger orchestras. In 1978, according to the League of American Orchestras’ 2016 *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field* study, the percentage of women musicians at orchestras was 38.2 percent, and in 2014 women comprised 47.4 percent of orchestra musicians. The League study reported that the percentage of musicians with Asian/Pacific Islander backgrounds rose from 5.3 percent in 1980 to 9.1 percent in 2014. However, the percentage of musicians identified as African American/Black in 2014 was 1.8 percent, and 2.5 percent identified as Hispanic/Latino. Those percentages had not significantly increased over time, and they have risen only marginally since. Orchestras continue to be among America’s least racially diverse institutions.

Is it time to reconsider blind auditions?

---

AFA DWORKIN: Though this conversation is about blind auditions, I hope that we look at it more broadly, remembering that blind auditions are only a method toward creating a more representative, more vibrant, more diverse, and richer collective that is the orchestra of tomorrow.

While they are a central piece relative to the enduring lack of representation in orchestras, auditions are merely a means to an end—a method or a process—for an intended result.

Alex, what other adjacent or equally important and tangible actions need to be

considered when we’re visualizing our end goal of creating and building an artistic collective that is an American orchestra today or tomorrow? Should we be focusing on blind auditions as much as we have been, and are there equally important elements that contribute to a lack of progress

and could turn us around?

ALEX LAING: The screen is a tool, not a system. I've been fortunate to get to work with my brother Justin Laing in his consultancy, Hillombo. Through that work I've gotten introduced to a lot of things, in particular a way that Justin sometimes brings the work of Donella Meadows, Ibrahm X. Kendi, and the Heifetz and Minsky "Adaptive Leadership" framework into dialogue with each other.

All three of those sources would say there's no such thing as a broken system, and the results that we are seeing in terms of hiring and auditions are the outputs of a system operating correctly—though the stated intention of the system might be otherwise. Donella Meadows wrote a

**If we're looking for different results, we have to be doing things differently, our methodology must change.**  
—Afa Dworkin

piece called "Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System," in which she says that the most impactful place to intervene in a system is at the level of mindset. If the question about auditions was, where should we be focusing in order to cascade the biggest difference in the system, believing that the system is operating correctly for itself right now, I would locate the screen as being towards the margins of this system. It's a tool that relates to this question of "diversity in orchestras," but where there's a need for attention—in addition to looking at the tools and the techniques and the procedures—is around our mindset. What's the aesthetic or mindset argument for this and how does that show up?

DWORKIN: Perhaps the focus needs to be on how orchestras want to see themselves, how they act as inclusive bodies that intentionally attract musicians of color so that what they offer is a richer, more diverse, more representative version of themselves. How to get there depends on whether they do the right work at the onset.

## ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

**Jennifer Arnold** joined the Richmond Symphony as Director of Artistic Planning and Orchestral Operations in the fall of 2019 to further her work in increasing representation on orchestral stages. She spent fifteen seasons as a violist with the Oregon Symphony and served as Director of Artistic Operations for 45th Parallel chamber music collective in Portland. She is a faculty member of the Sphinx Performance Academy and a violist with the Gateways Festival Orchestra, Sphinx Symphony, Chineke!, and the community engagement quartet *mousai REMIX*. Arnold is a member of American String Teachers Association, Suzuki Association of Americas, American Federation of Musicians, and Urban League, and enjoys volunteering, mentoring, karaokeing, and traveling. Follow her on most social media platforms @24caratviola.



**Afa S. Dworkin** is a musical thought leader and cross-sector strategist driving national programming that promotes diversity in classical music. She serves as President and Artistic Director of the Sphinx Organization, the nation's leading organization transforming lives through the power of diversity in the arts. She designed and built Sphinx's programming since its inception, which included creating more than 100 partnerships worldwide. A frequent speaker and writer on racial equity in the arts, Dworkin has written for the *New York Times* and *Strings Magazine*, and has spoken at events at the League of American Orchestras, Chamber Music America, and ICSOM, among others. A trained violinist, she is on faculty at Roosevelt University's master's in arts administration program.



**Jeri Lynne Johnson** founded Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra in 2008 as a model for the 21st-century American orchestra. In its brief time, the Philadelphia-based Black Pearl has emerged as a powerful advocate for artistic excellence and racial equity in classical music, winning numerous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2015, Johnson created DEI Arts Consulting to share her strategic and creative solutions for cultural institutions. As a conductor, Johnson was awarded the Taki Alsop Conducting Fellowship in 2005. She has since broken barriers in Europe and the U.S. as the first African American woman on the podium for many orchestras, and has conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra, Dallas Symphony, the Bournemouth Symphony (U.K.), and the Weimar Staatskapelle (Germany), among others.



**Alex Laing**, principal clarinet of the Phoenix Symphony, is a nationally recognized instrumental artist, speaker, and thought leader whose work represents a modern take on orchestral practice. He was recently a soloist with the Sphinx Virtuosi at Carnegie Hall, and has collaborated on Tyshawn Sorey's *Cycles of My Being*, in Thomas Hampson's *Song of America: Beyond Liberty* project, and as a member of Gateways Festival Orchestra. Laing has spoken at the conferences of the Association of British Orchestras and the League of American Orchestras and, as a teacher, has partnered with the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Youth Orchestra Los Angeles and the National Youth Orchestra of the United States of America (NYO-USA).



Violinist **Melissa White** has performed around the world as a soloist and a chamber musician. She makes her debut this season with the Cincinnati and Albany (NY) symphony orchestras; past engagements include the Cleveland Orchestra, Boston Pops, Louisville Orchestra, and the Atlanta, Baltimore, Colorado, Detroit, and Pittsburgh symphony orchestras. A first-place laureate in the Sphinx Competition, she is a founding member of Harlem Quartet, with which she has performed and engaged in educational activities throughout the U.S. and internationally since 2006. A native of Michigan, she holds degrees from the Curtis Institute of Music and New England Conservatory.



LAING: It's about mindset. You could use a screen and have an orchestra made up entirely of Black women, and you could not use a screen and have an orchestra made up entirely of Black women. The real determinant in that would be your mindset, in terms of why you want that result and what that is about for you artistically, as an ensemble. Mindset is where I think there's the opportunity to cascade change. Because of the work I get to do with my brother, I was able to deliver a provocation for the Association of California Symphony Orchestras where I riffed on this question of paradigm and mindset, and how you answer the question of "for what purpose?" For a symphony orchestra, if the answer to that "for what purpose" question necessitates having a more diverse orchestra, then you would have a more diverse orchestra. You would either use a screen or not use a screen in pursuit of that.

DWORKIN: Jeri, could you discuss your view on why we haven't been able to evolve our mindset heretofore—not to any measurable extent where we could say that the difference was made by way of having orchestras be more representative on a systemic level. Could you reflect on what might stand most significantly in our way, and also the role of blind auditions relative to that.

JERI LYNNE JOHNSON: Alex and I first met at the Shift Festival in D.C. at the Kennedy Center, and the speech that I gave there was about transforming the paradigm. To me, language is a very important indicator of people's thought processes. One of the points I made in that speech is that, when we speak about diversity in future terms, that speaks as though diversity is not a feature of reality. Diversity is a fact. The sooner that orchestras begin to deal with the fact of diversity, that will help shape mindsets about what they do. Diversity is not an endpoint that describes a set of fixed variables. Diversity describes the relationships between members of a living system, whether it's an orchestra, a school, a society. To the extent that relationships between the members of those living systems continue to change

and evolve, the process of achieving and maintaining diversity is a lifelong core operational process. Blind auditioning, the screen, is a tool, not a system.

Maintaining and achieving diversity within a living system is a constantly shifting target that doesn't stop after one or two years. There are no reductionist, external methodologies or practices or tools that will achieve something permanently and finally. It is a living system, and this is the way that people have to think about how you adapt your organization. This is an adaptive strategy for not just surviving

**The screen is a tool, not a system. Mindset is where I think there's the opportunity to cascade change. —Alex Laing**

the moment politically, but for thriving within society as a functioning part of a democracy as an arts institution. Going back to mindset: understand that diversity is a fact of reality. Starting with that fact, what do you do?

DWORKIN: The biggest hurdle for our sector to overcome is the unfortunate myth that whenever we speak about representation or diversity or inclusion, we need to succumb to a compromise relative to artistic merit and need to expect a lesser standard. This tale is long overdue for being eliminated and combatted. There is no lack of talent, not even a lack of preparedness. There is a respectable roster of qualified, poised, incredibly talented, and prepared musicians of color. What we have lacked is true change, because orchestras have not prioritized it.

There seems to be now a greater volume of conversations among orchestras, to be precise the 103 orchestras that partner with the National Alliance for Audition Support [a collaboration among the Sphinx Organization, New World Symphony, and the League of American Orchestras]. That conversation seems to be about: we're ready to do something differently, let's develop new methodologies and new ways to prioritize this so that

we can come out of the pandemic and set a different tone relative to diversity in orchestras. My biggest objective, personally and professionally, is to make sure that when we look back on this year of George Floyd, of Breonna Taylor, of triple pandemics, we don't say to ourselves, great, we've created more diversity committees, engaged a few keynote speakers of color, and are now centering the work of Black and Brown artists a couple of times a year, rather than once. Let's not permit ourselves a reality where our stages and decision desks go without tangible change.

What can we tell orchestras to do or not to do, so that when we get back on stage we can be proud of our efforts? How do we begin to see a real shift of what is both on stage and behind the stage?

JOHNSON: It's critically important to involve everyone in the process. These can't be externally driven; they need to be internally motivated projects and activities. That's not to say that there aren't tools and resources and strategies where we leverage inflection points in the system. It's about how we do it in a much more nuanced and conscientious manner. For example, everybody is focused on fellowships, which are an important tool, but from the standpoint of getting people actively engaged in this work, we need to go beyond fellowships into creating mentorships that are inclusive mentorships, not just diverse mentorships. What I mean is that there is a more reciprocal relationship between a mentor and a mentee, where everybody can learn from each other, where the flow of information and experience and insight is not unidirectional. Young people or new people coming into orchestras have insights and experiences and points of view that are of deep value to an orchestra as we continue to maintain relevance and survive in a new era. These are the kinds of relationship-building that go beyond simply attracting people of color to the artform or a particular organization to maintaining and developing them long-term.

DWORKIN: I have been a bit more encouraged this year by hearing members of orchestras who are allies but not neces-

sarily musicians of color talk about how they want to help their orchestra get there. There's more of that spirit of activism and a desire to do something differently. We're coming to terms with the fact that if we're not asking ourselves for different results, we cannot follow the same methodology—it's just not logically possible. How do we instill a sense of accountability?

JOHNSON: Democracy is everybody's responsibility. There are many different ways of accountability. I don't know that there's any one point in a system that we can point to and say, this is where we should be accountable. I think all people who believe in this work and want to undertake this work and see change—it is up to all of us. That doesn't mean we're all responsible for all the change, but we are responsible for ourselves and for our roles in this process to whatever extent we feel comfortable and compelled to engage in the process. Everyone can do something.

When we talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, the inclusion part of orchestral culture is critically important. We should empower people at every level of the organization, whether it's orchestra musicians, librarians—who are also musicians—in the orchestra to feel empowered to engage this work and to feel that they have something to contribute. Inclusion isn't just inclusion from the standpoint of visual diversity and representation, it is including everyone and encouraging them to join in this process of change.

JENNIFER ARNOLD: There are two very different conversations that we're having. The first conversation is about the actual audition process in its current form. I think that if you did a fair, fully blind audition—meaning invite people, stop leaving people out, don't pre-advance anyone, and have the screen up for three rounds—I believe an orchestra could actually be more diverse right there, without changing too much of the process. If that comes from an honest place, if orchestras are honest about how musicians are hired and eliminate certain things, you will see a more diverse orchestra without even changing some of the things that people are talking about in this industry.

It's important that musicians are honest about how they got their job, and maybe that was the way we used to do it because that's the way our teachers did it. But we're in 2021, we want a different type of orchestra that includes everyone, and those policies won't work anymore. Fully blind auditions with screens up, pre-advancement removed, and an open audition will help tremendously.

That said, in 2021 and moving forward, the job requirements and qualifications are different for orchestra musicians. Reevaluating the whole process and the job—I'm all for that. The bare minimum at this point is that the screen should be up, and we should remove pre-advancements. Pre-advancements are in all the contracts. I'm going through contracts right now for all kinds of orchestras, from the small-budget to the largest-budget orchestras,

**Diversity is a fact. The sooner that orchestras begin to deal with the fact of diversity, that will help shape mindsets about what they do. —Jeri Lynne Johnson**

and there's always a way to get in an orchestra without even auditioning. That's a problem.

DWORKIN: Many professional musicians of color in American orchestras have shared that having a fully blind audition from the very beginning to the very end, and giving everyone who wishes to audition an opportunity, will improve things right off the bat. We should also change our mindset. It's long overdue for us to begin envisioning ourselves as more diverse organizations. Relative to the job description of an orchestral musician today, what do you think about the possibility of establishing a committee of professionals who assess the fitness of a musician that goes beyond their ability to play an excerpt? As in, their ability to serve as a strong ambassador for the mission of that orchestra, their ability to relate to the community which it serves or in which it resides, their communication

skills, their talents as a teaching artist. All qualities and skillsets would be assessed in addition to one's ability to play three minutes of *Don Juan* excerpt. Those would be considered when trying to ascertain somebody's readiness to join an orchestra. Do you see it as sensible, realistic?

ARNOLD: That's great. However, my biggest issue would be that if you see the person, biases come in. Particularly if it's an interview process before the screen comes down, which it would be. I've been interviewed for finals, and the questions that were asked—some were inappropriate. "How old are you?" and "Where do you see yourself in five years?" Those questions shouldn't be asked.

My own experience makes me think about that. Whatever method we use to keep auditions as blind as possible would be great, and once a job is offered, then maybe the ability to speak in front of an audience, work with young people, play new works, are rolled into the tenure process. Or maybe there's a question about "please list your experience with community engagements" that won't take away from the blind process. I don't want inherent bias affecting the outcome.

MELISSA WHITE: I have been thinking about who learns about auditions and when invitations are given out, because auditions are maybe not so widely advertised. Who is getting invitations to audition, who are they coming from? When we think of diversifying what an orchestra looks like, we should also think of diversifying who we are getting the word out to. When auditions come up and an orchestra is thinking of who they want to reach, where are they going to reach people? Conservatories oftentimes have wonderful musicians, but so do universities with music programs. A lot of times, smaller schools aren't told about auditions. Students and young musicians don't necessarily know where to look or who they should be talking to about these opportunities. When word gets out on auditions, it's important to diversify where that announcement is made and who it gets to.

As musicians, we talk a lot about em-



bracing our individuality. Once musicians join an orchestra, of course it's important that the individuality is the orchestra. But the orchestra is made up of individuals, and musicians oftentimes are multifaceted in what we excel in. What if orchestras started to embrace that and allow musicians to show their fullness in whatever that may be? Once auditions are done and perhaps on the tenure track, asking musicians what skillset they add to this body becomes part of the conversation. It's exciting—perhaps someone wants to see this orchestra because a certain musician is in it and the musician excels at improving, so that's worked in. Even if it's not in a concert, but in some way allowing musicians to continue growing in their multifaceted personalities and letting that shine through.

DWORKIN: It's an opportunity for orchestras to consider musicians joining their ranks as individual artists who add something artistically and culturally to the collective. Understanding and caring about that seems like it would be a natural thing. Particularly for today's generation of artists, millennials and onward, an individual musician may become a point of attraction that encourages them to consider a pathway into an orchestra—if they know that's valued.

ARNOLD: A couple of major concertmaster auditions are coming up. Individualism and what a musician is in the 21st century have been on my mind. I was thinking about auditions and repertoire, still having violas play Bartók, Hindemith, and Walton at auditions. You could have Mozart concerti or solo Bach in a round, of course, but why not also let musicians decide what they're going to play for their audition, maybe for their solo piece, for one round. If someone picks a solo piece by Jessie Montgomery or Valerie Coleman, you'll see who is inclusive. Some of the orchestras that are talking about auditions right now are not changing repertoire to show what they want to be, who they want musicians to be, and what the organization is about for the future. If you want more diverse people to come to your audition—beside recruiting, which

I think is the number one thing—people are not going to show up if your orchestra is not publicly putting it out there that it's inclusive.

DWORKIN: Let's talk about repertoire. For the past decade, I have spent time as part of the Sphinx Organization encouraging and cajoling and shaming orchestras into diversifying what is put on stage, and encouraging folks to simply open up and make themselves interested in an incredible volume of works by living and historical Black and Brown composers. There's no lack of excellent literature. Statistics from the League of American

**If you did a fair, fully blind audition—stop leaving people out, don't pre-advance anyone, and have the screen up for three rounds—I believe an orchestra could be more diverse right there. —Jennifer Arnold**

Orchestras a few years ago tell us that less than 1 percent of all literature performed by American orchestras as part of main subscription series is by people of color. That's hardly a milestone. We have been seeing encouraging season announcements, and it's terrific that some of these deserving works are beginning to be programmed. How do we encourage orchestras to embrace that, recognize the wealth that's here already and the beauty and excellence inherent to these works by Black and Brown composers, and make it a consistent practice to have the repertoire be reflective of the rich diversity in our communities?

ARNOLD: A lot of people have been reaching out to ask for my list of BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] composers and artists. I refer them to [musicbyblackcomposers.org](https://musicbyblackcomposers.org), [composerdiversity.com](https://composerdiversity.com), or [boulangerinitiative.org](https://boulangerinitiative.org). People in the industry need to take time, just like I have, and sit, listen to music, get to know composers, get to know artists. At the last in-person SphinxConnect, I handed my card to composers. I said, "I'm Jen

Arnold, I'm at the Richmond Symphony, I'd like to know who you are." That's not a promise to commission anyone, it's just introducing myself. When we're talking about auditions and how to diversify everything, the whole industry needs to have a restart. We do things because we've always done them that way, and it's time to stop that. People in the programming industry need to put themselves out there instead of having people come to us.

There's also a conversation that people are uncomfortable having, about BIPOC composers versus women composers. Maybe orchestras are doing better incorporating women, but if all your women composers and all your women conductors are White, are you really diversifying your season?

JOHNSON: I would look at the issue of the brand of an orchestra writ large in the general public's mind. Your ability to program composers of any kind goes back to what your brand is. Is your brand "we are all about the past," or is your brand "we are all about the now"? Is your brand exclusion or is your brand belonging? To the extent that your brand strength as an organization is such that no matter what you put on your program, your audience is down for whatever you're doing, you can be as bold as you wish in your programming.

DWORKIN: Simply changing something for a season won't make a difference. However, redefining who we are to our community will. That takes initiative and risk taking, but we've seen how in a digital age, enforced by COVID, we've been flexible and agile. We've done things that we thought would never be possible in a digital space. Orchestras are reimagining themselves. We could and must do the same thing by reimagining ourselves from a cultural and a diversity standpoint.

WHITE: In this new virtual realm, we can change the concept of public relations and what orchestras send when they want to get the word out for an upcoming program or season. Love it or hate it, social media is out there. Why not use that for people to get to know the artist, what they're listening to, what they're watching

that inspires something they write if it's a composer. What were the transformative performances they gave or saw that sparked inspiration? What if a PR kit included more of that sort of information, so before you go you get a little bit of acquaintance? It doesn't have to be expensive; it can be accessible to anyone around the world. It's starting to make our world smaller with what we have at hand, and what we use anyway. Then it's not like people are coming to hear a stranger on a program.

LAING: I'm thinking about the constraint that Ibram X. Kendi's framework places on us around racism and antiracism, and the unavailability of the option of "not racist." We're looking at orchestras at the level of mindset and asking, are we racist or antiracist? If we were to say that we are aspiring to be antiracist as our mindset, what actions, behaviors, and indicators flow from that? Auditions, repertoire, where the hall is located, real estate, relationship to community, the indicators so you know that you're doing the work. There was a piece by Project Zero at Harvard called "The Qualities of Quality" about how you define excellence in the first place. That piece was about arts education, but the idea travels. Are you defining excellence in a way such that you could have an American orchestra that didn't include Black music and Black musicians and call it excellent?

BJ Fogg [behavioral scientist at Stanford University] has a model for behavior that says, "Behavior is what happens when motivation, ability, and a prompt all come together." What we've seen to the surprise of a lot of us is how the behavior of orchestras around programming has changed dramatically in the last eighteen months. Did we gain some new ability? I think that what we got was a prompt and some motivation that then allowed us to access the ability that we already had. With auditions, maybe we should spend our energy imagining what would need to change for different behavior in hiring—that's what we are really looking for.

ARNOLD: A conversation I have at the Richmond Symphony is that in every-

thing we do, we think about how something looks to the BIPOC community. If repertoire for your auditions is not diverse, that's a problem in 2021. Audition rep needs to be looked at, and I don't mean just the classical works, I mean style. More orchestras are playing different styles.

Let's add that into auditions. It's also programming. We had a virtual gala recently, and originally the repertoire for the virtual gala was all White male composers. And I was like, we just don't have programs of all White male composers, even for a short gala. I suggested something else, and

**2022 AZRIELI MUSIC PRIZES**

**CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE IN MUSIC COMPOSITION**

**THREE \$50,000 CASH PRIZES**

**GALA PREMIERE INTERNATIONAL CONCERTS COMMERCIAL RECORDING**

**APPLY TODAY!**  
**DEADLINE: MAY 2, 2021**

**AZRIELIFOUNDATION.ORG/AMP**

Fondation Azrieli Foundation

the orchestra was wonderful and recorded it. Every aspect has to be thought about, throughout the organization, asking in every single thing: what does this look like to people who don't feel included?

DWORKIN: It isn't just hiring a musician, or a handful, it's also hiring professionals and artistic leaders who bring new expertise and help shape what everything looks like. I can say from a personal standpoint through our Sphinx LEAD program that there are plenty of artistic thinkers, administrators, and planners who are ready to lead as we reshape and redefine ourselves. At every step, leadership, which starts from the board, really needs to make some decisions which may depart from traditions. If we're looking for different results, we have to do things differently, our methodology must change. For some orchestras it may mean asking, are we an antiracist collective that wants to define itself as actively eradicating particular kinds of behaviors? Other orchestras might ask, are we evolving and trying to define ourselves but find certain practices unacceptable, and want to change those, or maybe change one at a time?

Melissa, you have a portfolio career where you do everything from improvising to playing the "canon" classics to teaching to inspiring. You're also a cultural entrepreneur. Orchestral playing isn't part of that portfolio. What is the picture of an ideal orchestra, perhaps a year from now, that might attract to that potential line of work?

WHITE: Most of my work is not in the orchestral world, but I think back fondly on when I was playing with Orpheus [the conductorless NYC-based chamber orchestra] regularly, and I absolutely loved it. What I loved most was that it combined the chamber-music aspect of playing, which is so intimate and communicative in a spontaneous way, along with the idea that we as the musicians, from the front to the back in every section of the orchestra, are giving input to create this artistic expression and experience at the highest level of excellence. It can't work like that if you have a hundred-piece orchestra, but at the same time this idea that you have to listen across the sections

and not simply look up at one person, is something I am drawn to.

Music making should stay fresh like that. An orchestra that is able to keep the freshness and the identity of the individuals who make up the orchestra and actually thinking of diversity as an ever-evolving concept is interesting to me. That, and having the orchestra be nearly a world community. It's the personnel on stage, the music being performed, the conductors, the soloists, everybody behind the scenes who makes it all work, so that it is a living organism that's constantly thinking about how they can embrace change and take this organization into the future.

**When we think of diversifying what an orchestra looks like, we should also think of diversifying who we are getting the word out to.**  
—Melissa White

Orchestras have a bigger job than simply giving great concerts every weekend or four nights a week. I'd love to see an orchestra that really becomes a living organism that embodied that change, their community, and then globally what the arts are—which is daring to be bold, daring to be different, and being okay if it's not widely accepted. We have to take that as artists, and we're usually willing to put ourselves out there.

DWORKIN: Jeri, what will have changed a year from now that would make you think, this is in the right direction, this is positive, authentic, fundamental for the field?

JOHNSON: Black Pearl with a \$10 million budget [general laughter]. I say that jokingly, but also kind of seriously. Let's invest in models that demonstrate the change we want to see. We invest a lot in change we're hoping to make, which is an aspirational process. But let's also show what success looks like at the end of that process and invest in high-impact organizations. There are several nimble, agile, highly impactful organizations, and the

influx of money isn't just about the money, it's about bringing cachet and attention to these models that can then increase their impact by getting more people to notice them and their willingness to try new things.

ARNOLD: I hope in a year that people take a deep dive into their audition process. That's the number one thing for me, honestly. I really want people to think about it and make meaningful change—especially because there are so many auditions coming up. The time is now to address auditions. It'll be a huge mistake not to.

That's my first thought. My second thought is that I really believe that people in my job need to communicate better and start sharing repertoire lists. There are so many great commissions coming out, especially social justice-wise and by BIPOC composers. There are so many works being created and commissioned in the next five years, but no one is sharing them. We need to come together so that these works have repeat performances. In a year, I hope there's some sort of database where people can be like, "this sounds exactly right for my community, let me program this, let me reach out."

I envision orchestras that look very different. I hope they keep highlighting Black and Brown artists in the way that they have this year. I hope they keep the momentum. I hope they create opportunities for new artists to shine. And I hope people open their ears and learn and listen to new works. That's my thought for a year from now.

LAING: I would be excited for orchestras that are moving away from universality towards particularity. I would love to see orchestras examining their mindset as it relates to racism and antiracism, and deciding to commit themselves explicitly towards being antiracist orchestras. And committing to discernible, smart goals—not just aspirations—to hiring across the organization, including the musicians. Moving from universality to particularity, moving from racism to antiracism, and committing to some hard, discernible targets in service of those changes in mindset. **S**



# Your Legacy Matters



**Share the magic  
of orchestras  
with future  
generations**

Planned Giving enables individuals like you, who care deeply about the League of American Orchestras' mission of advancing the orchestral experience for all, to support the League's work beyond your lifetime.

*To learn more about the League's planned giving opportunities,  
please visit [americanorchestras.org/donate/plannedgiving](https://americanorchestras.org/donate/plannedgiving).*

**League**  
of American  
Orchestras