

Stepping Up



Kellen Gray conducts the Chicago Sinfonietta, May 2018. Gray was a recent participant in the Sinfonietta's Project Inclusion Conducting Freeman Fellowship program and the Sinfonietta's assistant conductor in 2017-18.

How can the classical music field build podium diversity? The Chicago Sinfonietta is one orchestra that is focusing on exactly that challenge with its Project Inclusion Conducting Freeman Fellowship program.

by Nancy Malitz

KELLEN GRAY DIDN'T THINK OF himself as a future orchestra conductor when he first arrived in Savannah, Georgia, at age 25. The African-American violinist felt burned out as a freelancer and needed a break, so he went to work as a beekeeper for an international honey producer.

It was complex work, which Gray came

to think of as akin to conducting. He saw a beehive as similar to an orchestra: Both comprise intricate parts that must work together to fulfill a mission. "A hive can manage itself, but my job was to make its life easier," Gray explains. He liked the idea of playing a similar role in the symphonic ecosystem, as opposed to becoming an individual in the violin ranks. The reve-

Roderick Cox is a previous participant in the Chicago Sinfonietta's Project Inclusion Conducting Freeman Fellowship program. In photo, he conducts the Nashville Symphony at the 2016 Bruno Walter Conducting Preview, the League of American Orchestras' showcase that provides up-and-coming young maestros with exposure and mentoring.



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lation stunned him. “When I realized that with conducting I could get to perform, and connect, and serve the community, and still study music theory and history, it hit like a ton of bricks,” he says. “It’s what I wanted to do.”

Now in his early thirties, Gray recently beat out more than 85 candidates to become assistant conductor of the Charleston Symphony Orchestra, beginning with the current season. He credits the Chicago Sinfonietta’s Project Inclusion Conducting Freeman Fellowship with helping him get there. “There are a million barriers to entry for a young black conductor without the background and years of pedigree training that some other conductors can point to,” Gray says. “But in two years they managed to teach me everything I had missed out on, including a lot of the traditional education that a conservatory student gets—plus a few things no conservatory can teach you, particularly as it pertains to black and Latinx conductors and the internal insecurities one has. There is no lack of talent in these communities, but the opportunities and particularly the training are real challenges, along with learning to get your own mind out of the way. They cultivated us from the inside and pushed back hard with the idea that what makes us different can be what makes us special.”

The late Paul Freeman was an African American conductor and Fulbright

Scholar who in 1987 founded the Chicago Sinfonietta, a professional orchestra with the mission of “modeling and promoting, diversity, inclusion, and both racial and cultural equity in the arts through the universal language of symphonic music.” As part of that mission, Freeman created fellowships for African-American, Latinx, and other talented but under-represented instrumentalists. The Sinfonietta’s conducting program—launched in 2014 and now overseen by Mei-Ann Chen, the or-

chestra’s Taiwanese American music director—is not alone, as several arts organizations today are working to shrink a widely acknowledged diversity gap when it comes to African American and Latinx representation in the classical music field.

In 2018, three groups—the Sphinx Organization, the New World Symphony, and the League of American Orchestras—partnered to create the National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS), a field-wide initiative with the long-term goal of increasing diversity among musicians in American orchestras. Supported by a four-year, \$1.8 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, along with additional financial and programmatic contributions from America’s orchestras, NAAS offers a customized array of support to Black and Latinx musicians to enhance their audition skills, increase their participation in auditions, and increase their representation in orchestras. Sphinx’s other work in the diversity arena includes an annual competition and conference, scholarships, and multiple ensembles for young black and Latinx musicians.

Public discussion of the topic is on the increase—at the League’s National Conference last June, conductor Jeri Lynne Johnson, founder and artistic director of the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, moderated a conversation about what an inclusive and equitable American orchestral landscape might look like—and more

Kalena Bovell, a recent participant in the Chicago Sinfonietta’s Project Inclusion Conducting Freeman Fellowship program, conducts the Chicago Sinfonietta.





Kellen Gray, assistant conductor of the Charleston Symphony Orchestra, in performance with the orchestra.

orchestras are also forming initiatives of their own to increase musician diversity. Johnson continues to argue that the justification is not only moral or social, but also economic, especially in majority-minority cities. “If we are unable to attract those minority audiences, then we are leaving money on the table,” she says. “We do not silo diversity as a unique initiative separate from core operative values, mission, and function. The opportunity is that we are investing in things that will reward us down the line.”

Chicago Sinfonietta’s Conducting Freeman Fellowships are part of Project Inclusion, the organization’s mentorship program for emerging musicians, conductors, and administrators. The first program for instrumentalists was launched in 2008, followed by chamber music in 2010, conducting in 2014, and arts administration in 2015. For the conducting program, two fellows and two auditors are typically selected each year through competitive auditions, but the number and proportion of each class can vary, and sometimes auditors return the next season as fellows. The program brings participants to Chicago to work with Mei-Ann Chen and to be mentored by conductors, board leaders, and orchestra managers in the field. The training is done in five long weekends, spread throughout the season, rather like a weekend MBA, with the goal of mastering a variety of on-podium and

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off-podium skills that the Sinfonietta identifies as necessary for an orchestra leader to succeed in the 21st century. “The intense weekends of training are exhausting and exhilarating for all of us, but they definitely pay off,” Hirsch says. Hirsch notes that the six auditors “get almost everything in terms of training, but not quite as much stick work” as the conducting fellows. To date, there have been ten fellows and six auditors in the program, which includes no stipend, but it is tuition-free and includes most meals, ground transportation, air travel, and hotel housing through sponsors. (The numbers break down as six African American, five Latinx, and five of Asian ancestry.)

Mei-Ann Chen has modeled the Sinfonietta’s conducting fellowships using the same principles of diversity and inclusion established by her predecessor, Paul Freeman. “I was fortunate to get to know Maestro Freeman when I was invited to be a guest conductor in 2010,” says Chen. “The Chicago Sinfonietta is literally his dream come true, and his original vision of championing diversity and inclusion through innovative programming has been the driving force and legacy of this orchestra. Utilizing his vision as the groundwork, it made perfect sense to expand his program to include conductors as a way to honor him.”

When it comes to conducting, there aren’t many such programs out there. The Chicago Sinfonietta’s program is somewhat analogous to the Dallas Opera’s Linda and Mitch Hart Institute for Women Conductors or Marin Alsop’s Taki Concordia Conducting Fellowship program founded in 2002, of which Johnson and Chen are alumnae. Both programs target women conductors, who are also underrepresented in the classical music field.

Beyond the Podium

Chen believes that the responsibilities of a modern conductor include aspects beyond the stick. “I myself was a very lucky beneficiary of some great programs in this country, from the Conducting Fellowship sponsored by the League of American Orchestras, to the Taki Fellowship for women founded by conductor Marin Alsop, and the conducting programs at the Aspen Music Festival, where I was mentored and taught about those various elements.” The Freeman Conducting Fellowship essentially combined aspects of all the programs that benefitted her, Chen says. Project Inclusion participants are typically in their early thirties, about the age when Chen herself got some crucial early breaks. “I simply wouldn’t be where I am without so many angels on my musical journey,” she says. The program was launched with the knowledge that, unlike concerts, it would include no possibility of ticket income—as the Sinfonietta’s CEO Jim Hirsch put it, a “zero income” venture, impossible without funding partners such as the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Joyce Foundation. “Our idea was that we would identify two to four early-

career conductors of promise and bring them for a year or two of unbelievably intensive weekend sessions, about five weekends a season, and we would load them with things to do from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., with a focus on 'off-podium' issues," Hirsch says.

Many critical real-world skills a conductor needs to lead an orchestra go beyond what is taught at music schools. Hirsch's list includes learning to talk easily and persuasively with donors, understanding what board stewardship means, how



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fund-raising works, the marketing impact of programming, effective use of social media, developing leadership skills, and becoming savvy about connecting with people, whether you have one minute in an elevator, three minutes at intermission, or a long chat over lunch.

Hirsch says that every Freeman Fellow has secured a conducting position



The Chicago Sinfonietta's Conducting Freeman Fellowship program brings participants to Chicago to work with Music Director Mei-Ann Chen (above) and to be mentored by other conductors, board leaders, and orchestra managers in the field.

somewhere in the United States. He cites Macon-born Roderick Cox, who recently completed his term as associate conductor at the Minnesota Orchestra under Osmo Vänskä; Michigan-born Sameer Patel is associate conductor at the San Diego Symphony under Music Director Designate Rafael Payare; and Colombian-born American Alejandro Gómez Guillén is associate conductor with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. (Patel and Cox were among participants in 2013 and 2016 editions of the League of American Orchestras' Bruno Walter Conducting Preview, a program that showcases talented conductors poised for music directorships and major staff conducting positions of American orchestras.) Gray, the sometime beekeeper, joined the program in 2016, at the age of 28, after returning to his Georgia alma mater, Valdosta State University, for some conducting training. He was about a year and a half into grad school when he got a call for pick-up work at Florida's New World Symphony, which needed to lay down a recording of a composer's new work for strings. John Kieser, the New World's executive vice president, spotted Gray at work with musicians, liked what he saw, and pointed him the Chicago Sinfonietta's way.

Different Paths and Lessons Learned

Kalena Bovell, who is Panamanian-American, was named a Freeman Fellow in 2015. She admits that her story is atypical for a professional musician. "My parents came to the U.S. from Panama in the early '70s, determined to achieve the American dream for their kids, which meant, above all, a good education, clothes on their backs, and food on the table," she says. "I started playing violin in middle school at 11, and I loved it. I played all the time. I was really serious. But my parents did not know about music education, and I didn't take my first private lesson until I was 18. When I got to college, I heard all the people around me, some who had been training since they were four, and I realized I was not actually that good on the violin."

Technical proficiency aside, Bovell was fortunate to attend a conducting class at Chapman University in California where her fundamental musical talent was spotted. She was told she could in fact be really good at conducting. "At that point, I started believing, and that's when my life began to change," she said. "It started with having the mindset of knowing that this is what I wanted to do, plus a persistent

personality that wasn't going to stop until I made it happen."

Ultimately, Bovell received advanced degrees in conducting from the University of Hartford's Hartt School of Music. And because of her success in the Sinfonietta's Freeman Fellowship program the first year, she was invited to return as assistant conductor for the Sinfonietta's 2016-17 season, making her professional conducting debut in the MLK Tribute concert with Chen at Chicago's Symphony Center. "You could feel that energy of the audience seeing people who look just like them," says Bovell. "I walked out of the auditorium completely changed."

Bovell won her latest job—music director of the Civic Orchestra of New Haven—pretty much on the fly. "I like to take conductor auditions, because each one is a great learning experience," she says, reflecting the methodical persistence and positive mindset that Project Inclusion works so hard to develop. "I had just come off an audition for the Virginia Symphony when somebody told me about the New Haven job. I already had a resume and video samples, so I said sure. On the day of the audition I was covering at the Saint Louis Symphony, up at 4 in the morning for a super-long travel day, but I thought, you know what, just go in there and have fun. Honestly, it was one of the best audition experiences I have had."

Alejandro Gómez Guillén, who is 32, has a family history very different from Bovell's—he comes from many genera-



A program such as the Chicago Sinfonietta's Project Inclusion Conducting Freeman Fellowship "would have been profoundly helpful when I was coming along," says veteran conductor Thomas Wilkins.

tions of musicians. Yet the Colombia-born conductor was drawn to the Sinfonietta's Project Inclusion program for its extensive leadership training. "I thought it was too good to be true," he says. "Mei-Ann is a whirlwind. That is who she is, and it is inspiring to be next to her whole team, learning and absorbing. They truly believe in what they are doing. The Sinfonietta organization is thinking beyond the box to provide a lot of the things that a conductor cannot learn in an academic environment by virtue of its design. So for me it is almost like a post-doc. I had good teachers in music, but in terms of being part of a really successful organization—involved in the everyday effort and not just preparing for a concert, but preparing all the other aspects—that is what I needed to learn."

For Guillén, the list of lessons was far-reaching. He mentions participating in a lunch meeting during which Hirsch described to a donor what the program does; moving timpani backstage; and delving into "what it means to be the face to the community in a concert at Millennium Park, where people may not know how diverse the Sinfonietta really is," Guillén says. "I feel like this orchestra has immersed us in the real world. It has helped to give me personally a big confidence boost. It also impressed me that I have to do something more for the organizations that I am involved in, to express more passion."

Career Impact

Veteran American conductor Thomas Wilkins—who is music director of the Omaha Symphony Orchestra, principal conductor of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, and family and youth concerts conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra—believes that "this kind of 'opportunity creation' will always be a good thing, especially as it relates to the nuts and bolts of the business. It would have been profoundly helpful when I was coming along." He emphasizes that, to broaden the impact, these kinds of "relating to stakeholders experiences" should be part of the assistant conductor job at all orchestras, and included in graduate-level training.

A younger, more diverse generation of conductors will also inevitably have its impact on the mainstream. Guillén is part of a quasi-conductorless chamber group in Denver called the Sphere Ensemble, whose "signature thing," according to Guillén, is that they do not only masterpieces of the classical string repertoire, "but also high-quality covers," ranging from The Beatles to Prince to Regina Spektor. Wilkins sympathizes with Guillén's approach to widening the repertoire, especially if equity, diversity, and inclusion are part of an ensemble's mission. In fact, Wilkins suggests that new presentation styles are a natural consequence. "I think there is a reason we still listen to Beethoven and Haydn and Schubert," he says, "and part of that reason is that some music has properties to withstand the test of time. But I do worry sometimes about how this great canon is delivered, about the manner in which it is put on. If we don't break down the human barriers, part of that fault is on us."

Roderick Cox, a 2014 Freeman Fellow during the program's inaugural year, has flashed the innovative spirit since winning the 2018 Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award, which comes with a \$30,000 prize and career-transforming implications. He did some genre-busting at a December 2018 Los Angeles Philharmonic concert, leading American composer Christopher Cerrone's brand-new work, *The Insects Become Magnetic*, during a Fluxus-inspired week of often anarchical whimsy. "It involved brass players playing harmonics and blowing air through their instruments," says Cox, "and string players doing fast tremolos to create the illusion of insects in

Alejandro Gómez Guillén conducts the Chicago Sinfonietta. Guillén is a recent alumnus of the Sinfonietta's Project Inclusion Conducting Freeman Fellowship program.






Conductor Jeri Lynne Johnson (right), founder of the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, moderates a conversation about orchestra diversity at the League of American Orchestras' 2018 National Conference in Chicago with flutist Demarre McGill (left) and clarinetist Anthony McGill (center).

Dean Riehl

the air, with zipping vibraphone effects. It was an atmospheric piece, but it also had structure and was easy to follow. It was very well received with a standing ovation, which kind of surprised us, to see a new piece celebrated to that extent.”

Cox's scheduled debut at the Houston Grand Opera, leading Bizet's *The Pearl*

Fishers, comes up in early 2019. So for this early graduate of the Freeman Fellowship program, things have certainly taken off. Cox is looking forward, as any conductor would, to having an orchestra of his own. But for now, the 31-year-old is pursuing next steps abroad: “The United States is a big country, so it takes a while for things to

circulate and for names to move through. And the U.S. is a bit conservative in terms of having music directors or principal conductors in their mid-to-early thirties.” For the time being, Cox has established his base in Berlin with European management. “It’s a fantastic city with a plethora of things to do,” he says, “and one of the best orchestras in the world down the street, and a chance to have lunch with the concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic,” he says. “I’m just learning to enjoy the process.” 

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