

# Tuning Up for Diversity



Afa S. Dworkin, president and artistic director of the Sphinx Organization

**The new National Alliance for Audition Support aims to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion at American orchestras by expanding the numbers of emerging Black and Latinx musicians.**

by Susan Elliott



Howard Herring, president of the New World Symphony

New World Symphony

Three leading classical-music organizations have joined forces to launch a new initiative to increase diversity at American orchestras. The new National Alliance for Audition Support represents a collective effort by the Sphinx Organization, New World Symphony, and the League of American Orchestras, and will offer mentoring, audition preparation, financial support, and audition preview showcases for Black and Latinx musicians. Supported by a four-year, \$1.8 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, with additional financial and programmatic contributions from U.S. orchestras, the Alliance was announced this spring and is already underway, with eighteen Black and Latinx musicians participating in optimal performance training, mock auditions, and feedback sessions in Miami.

The National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS) addresses a persistent imbalance in representation at American orchestras. While the percentages of musicians of Asian descent and women instrumentalists in American orchestras have risen markedly in recent decades, the percent of African American musicians has moved only from 1.4 percent to 1.8 percent over 40 years. Between 1995 and 2014, the percentage of Latinx musicians rose from 1.6 percent to 2.4 percent. NAAS represents the first field-wide program offering comprehensive and customized audition support. It is part of a surge of activity in this area, with numerous new programs also announced by individual orchestras and conservatories.

In December 2015, the League of American Orchestras and the Mellon Foundation convened a two-day meeting to un-



Doug Coombe

The 2017 Diversity Forum (above), held at that year's League of American Orchestras' National Conference, was the League's third convening of leaders from the field to address priorities including a national diversity audition fund, national musician mentorship and audition training, field-wide board and staff diversity, and music education pathways. Pictured at the Forum (left to right): Lee Koonce, president and artistic director of the Gateways Music Festival; Dalouge Smith, president and CEO, San Diego Youth Symphony; violinist Melissa White, 2001 Sphinx Competition winner and founding member of the Harlem Quartet; and Anne Parsons, Detroit Symphony Orchestra President and CEO.

derstand the barriers to diversity in classical music—and determine ways forward. Fifty people attended the event, among them musicians, administrators, representatives of community music schools, conservatories, and community-engagement experts. “People were really eager to make change happen,” says League President and CEO Jesse Rosen.

Subsequent diversity forums convened by the League built on that initial convening and kept the momentum going, while ongoing task forces focused on specific aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at orchestras. In recent years, the League has made DEI a central part of

its agenda, not only at the meetings and events it hosts for specific constituencies, but at its National Conference, an annual, industry-wide gathering. The League's 2016 Conference, in Baltimore, with its theme of “The Richness of Difference,” addressed diversity in numerous sessions and events. The closing forum considered actions orchestras might take, individually and collectively, to be more responsive to and reflective of the diversity of America today. And the 2017 and 2018 Conferences continued and expanded the concentration on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The design of NAAS also benefitted from multiple convenings by New World

Symphony and Sphinx at which student and professional Black and Latinx musicians, industry leaders, administrators, and other stakeholders discussed solutions to the underrepresentation of Black and Latinx musicians in orchestras. A second gathering included representation from all sectors of the orchestra field including Black and Latinx professional musicians; the event focused on designing a national instrumental mentoring and audition training initiative. At Sphinx Connect in February 2017 and at Sphinx Connect in February 2018 the concept of the Alliance was presented and was also the subject of discussion and feedback from musicians of color.

Last year, Rosen and Matthew Van-Besien, president and CEO of the New York Philharmonic at the time, and Lee Koonce, president and artistic director of the Gateways Music Festival, which supports classical musicians of African descent, canvassed the field to gauge their interest and willingness to invest in programs to increase diversity. Says Rosen, “They all said ‘Yes, absolutely; we’d like to be stakeholders, not just funders.’”



Nanette Bachway

Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras

The National Alliance for Audition Support aims to increase diversity at American orchestras by offering mentoring, audition preparation, financial support, and audition preview showcases for Black and Latinx Musicians. The NAAS is made up of The Sphinx Organization, the lead program and fiscal administrator for the Alliance; the New World Symphony, America's Orchestral Academy; and the League of American Orchestras, representing 700 orchestras. A group of Black and Latinx professional musicians will be advisors for the Alliance. The NAAS is supported by a four-year grant of \$1.8M from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as well as contributions from orchestras across the U.S. The Alliance is grateful to the American Federation of Musicians, the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, and the Regional Orchestra Players Association for their participation and support.

For more on the National Alliance for Audition Support, visit [www.americanorchestras.org/NAAS](http://www.americanorchestras.org/NAAS).



The National Alliance for Audition Support had its genesis, in part, in a two-day meeting (above) convened by the League of American Orchestras and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in December of 2015 to address the barriers to diversity in orchestras. The 50 attendees included musicians, administrators, representatives of community music schools, conservatories, and community-engagement experts. Seated left to right: Sandra Bailey, principal bassoon, Chicago Sinfonietta, second bassoon, Arkansas Symphony Orchestra; Adedeji Ogunfolu, associate principal horn, San Antonio Symphony; Alexander Laing, principal clarinet, Phoenix Symphony; and bassoonist Garrett McQueen, second bassoon, Knoxville Symphony Orchestra.

The result of all these conversations is the National Alliance for Audition Support. It aims to increase the number of Black and Latinx musicians at orchestras, and it does that by preparing and nurturing them so that when they audition for orchestra jobs, they are fully prepared—not just technically, but psychologically. The key ingredients to achieving that goal: training, and the money to pay for it; and travel, and the money to pay for it.

Afa S. Dworkin, president and artistic director of Sphinx, the Detroit-based nonprofit that works to achieve diversity in the arts, explains that the content of NAAS's programming is "musician-centric," determined with input from an advisory board of minority musicians, including members of the Los Angeles and New York philharmonics, the Seattle Symphony, and others. Sphinx also distributed a detailed questionnaire (still in circulation, with about 300 responses at press time) to musicians of color currently in or aspiring to be in a professional orchestra. Says Dworkin, "We asked them,

"What are the obstacles from your standpoint; what resources are missing; what can we do to overcome them?"

The responses consistently pointed to the audition process. "Musicians don't always know about openings, so working to create a centralized information system will be helpful," says Dworkin. "In preparation for auditions, coachings can be critical, but getting to the right coach and having those resources is where we hope to step in. Plus, it may take ten or fifteen auditions on average to land a gig. That can be both expensive and tiresome: we hope to support the process and create a different reality."

Another issue, and the one that may be the hardest nut to crack: "There are assumed biases and climate challenges," says Dworkin. "Black and Latinx musicians don't necessarily want to be part of an orchestra where they are the only person of color or perhaps one of two." In a diversity study published by the League last year, "Forty Years of Fellowships: A Study of Orchestras' Efforts to Include Afri-

can American and Latino Musicians," 21 alumni of orchestral minority fellowship programs were surveyed. Many reported that, while the technical experience had been invaluable, they sometimes felt alone, isolated, and unwelcome.

Changing that climate is not going to be easy. "We have some humility around this work," says Rosen. "Active discrimination in orchestras and the phenomenon of Black and Latinx musicians never even considering an orchestra career because of a culture that feels exclusionary—those issues are part of our own legacy and history. Our own data tells us that there's been virtually no change over decades. I feel we need to be very aware of how powerful our past is and how complicated these issues are in making orchestras more receptive to and supportive of different people."

Which brings up the question of buy-in. Orchestras have said they want to be



John Kieser, executive vice president and provost of the New World Symphony

"stakeholders, not just funders," but what does that mean? "Orchestras have a wealth of knowledge and experience to bring to this program, because they're continuously auditioning," says Rosen. "They also realize that, as a community, it's time to step up." Plus, orchestras hold the keys to the success of NAAS, because their own musicians will be serving as mentors and teachers to NAAS participants.

Currently, the League is surveying its



Cellist Joy Payton-Stevens performs at the Sphinx Competition with the Sphinx Symphony Orchestra, an all-Black-and-Latino orchestra of top professionals from around the country. The Sphinx Organization is one of three partners, with the League of American Orchestras and New World Symphony, in the new National Alliance for Audition Support.

members to determine the level of musician interest in being mentors or otherwise participating. Sphinx already has a large list of professional orchestral players who want to be involved. About 25 percent are musicians of color. “It’s a great mix,” reports Dworkin. “And the great thing about this program is that all coaches, mentors, advisors, audition expenses will be paid—we’re no longer relying only on people’s good will.”

Perhaps the most intriguing idea behind NAAS is that each participant will be treated individually. “They may get matched with a mentor,” explains Rosen, “or they may get audition coaching, or they may get financial support for travel and other developmental opportunities.” Or they may get all of the above. “The idea is to make their path customized.” This is the same philosophy on which the New World Symphony fellowship program is based, says New World Symphony Executive Vice President and Provost John Kieser, and is a contributing factor to the success of its alumni.

Sphinx will serve as administrator and matchmaker, finding the right coach and the right mentor for each participant, setting up review committees for auditions, overseeing the finances, and maintaining a centralized, up-to-date audition index. For auditions with unsuccessful outcomes, NAAS players will often be able to get feedback from their screeners. “It’s about supporting them,” says Dworkin, “rather than making them fend for themselves.”

### Already Underway

Organizers anticipate that up to 50 musicians will go through NAAS over a two-year period. Eighteen Black and Latinx musicians were chosen to participate in the first event in June 2018, an audition

intensive at the New World Symphony. They were selected from among the participants at the second annual Sphinx Organization Partnership Auditions (SOPA) in Detroit in February 2018. It’s an event at which a number of Black and Latinx musicians serious about pursuing a professional career undergo formal auditions and receive feedback from fifteen to twenty orchestra representatives and musicians, including New World Symphony Dean of Admissions Thomas Hadley. A number of participants have received invites from orchestras to do some contract work, as well as fellowship opportunities. “It serves the [Sphinx] musicians,” says Dworkin, “but it also gives the people on the feedback committee access to a pool of musicians of



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color who they can potentially employ for contract work.” Sphinx has long served as a pipeline to orchestras. “Everything after this year will be a competitive application process open to everyone, with Sphinx as the portal,” says Rosen. NAAS is designed for a range of musicians, from recent conservatory graduates to early-career professionals already playing with orchestras. “We wanted to get things going right away,” explains Rosen, “so this first program is populated by people already known to Sphinx.”

Also during this 2018 pilot year, participants head to Miami Beach for an audition intensive from June 6 to 8 at the New World Symphony, the highly selective (1,300 applicants for 25 slots) training orchestra. “It will be essentially the same workshop we do for our New World Symphony Fellows,” explains the New World Symphony’s Kieser. “The workshop includes mock auditions, feedback from faculty, lessons, coaching with musicians and a performance psychologist, seminars, and more.” New World Symphony, which prepares graduates of music programs for


leadership roles in professional orchestras and ensembles, was co-founded 30 years ago by conductor Michael Tilson Thomas; Howard Herring is the organization’s president and CEO.

For NAAS, New World Symphony is charged with providing the programmatic content. In addition to mock auditions—both live and via its advanced Internet set-up, enabling professionals from all over the country to participate—and intensive feedback, it will augment its online offerings to include more Black and Latinx instructors, performances, and interviews.

New World Symphony historically has three to five musicians of color in its orchestra, and has twelve this year—better than the national average, “but still not good enough,” says Kieser. “We’re trying to diversify our fellowship.” To that end, the orchestra academy already works with such conservatories as Manhattan School of Music, the Curtis Institute of Music, USC Thornton School of Music, and the Cleveland Institute of Music to help identify potential Fellows of color. It will use those contacts to help recruit NAAS participants as well, says Kieser.

NAAS is only in its infancy, and there are still many variables. All three organizations are open to feedback as things move ahead. “We are going to survey coaches, participants, everybody involved, to see how we’re doing,” says Kieser. “It’s a work in progress.” An advisory board, says Rosen, will “periodically plug into the work, so that if we need to course-correct, they can help us with that.”

“We’ll be tweaking it every year,” echoes Dworkin, who points out that the application period for Year 2 will be open this June. “We may learn that the audition intensive is not the best use of our resources, or that people need more private coaching, or we need to double down on psychological preparedness,” she says. “By the end of the first year, we’ll know where the gaping holes are. Hopefully by the end of the fourth year we will start to see a difference, a real climate change.”

“I am optimistic and encouraged,” says Rosen, “but I am also respectful of how challenging the work is.” 

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