

Tuning Up for Diversity



Musicians in discussion at the National Alliance for Audition Support audition intensive workshop this June.

The **National Alliance for Audition Support** works to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion at American orchestras by expanding the numbers of emerging Black and Latinx musicians. A partnership of the Sphinx Organization, the New World Symphony, and the League of American Orchestras, the Alliance offers support to Black and Latinx musicians to develop audition skills, increase participation in auditions, and increase their representation in professional orchestras. This June, NAAS presented its inaugural audition intensive, a three-day seminar with training, mock auditions, and performance-psychology sessions for musicians at the New World Symphony's home in Miami Beach. The eighteen participants were selected from the Sphinx Orchestral Partners Auditions in Detroit in early 2018.

Here, four musicians who participated in the audition intensive share first-person narratives of the NAAS workshops, describe their lived experiences as musicians of color, and discuss their visions of how they see the orchestra field moving ahead.

Yan Izquierdo Violin

How did you find about the National Alliance for Audition Support? What attracted you to its programs?



I was fortunate to be recommended to the National Alliance for Audition Support program by Ahmad Mayes, the director of education and community engagement at the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. I was recently selected as one of this year's winners of the CSO/CCM Diversity Fellowship, a joint program between the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. The fellowship allows students from underrepresented groups in American symphony orchestras to perform in the Cincinnati Symphony while pursuing graduate studies at CCM. The mission of NAAS is very much in line with the fellowship, so it was a perfect match.

What do you feel this program can accomplish to bring more Black and Latinx musicians into classical music?

This program is already raising aware-

ness on the issue of underrepresentation of Black and Latinx musicians in American symphony orchestras, which is an important first step. The musical and mental training that NAAS provides can help musicians of color perform better in auditions and increase their chances of winning positions. The ultimate goal is that their increased presence in symphony orchestras will inspire others to follow in their path.

What was the most valuable aspect of this program for you?

Receiving detailed, actionable feedback from professionals after a mock audition was the most valuable aspect of the program for me. Audition panels almost never give feedback after unsuccessful auditions, so musicians don't get a clear picture of what went wrong. Objective self-assessment is critical to improving performance in future auditions.

Some musicians of color have reported feeling isolated or even unwelcome as the only Black or Latinx musician in an orchestra. Is this something that you have encountered? How would you describe the experience of being part of a group of Black and Latinx musicians in the NAAS program, or in other ensembles?

About the National Alliance for Audition Support

The National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS) is a national initiative to increase diversity in American orchestras. It does so by offering Black and Latinx musicians a customized combination of mentoring, audition preparation, financial support, and audition previews. 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 serves as thought leaders, guides, and advisors for the Alliance. NAAS is supported by a four-year grant of \$1.8 million from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as well as contributions from orchestras across the U.S. Learn more at www.auditionalliance.org.



As part of the National Alliance for Audition Support's workshop at the New World Symphony in Miami Beach this June, a participant experiences the screened audition that is a regular feature for professional musicians seeking positions at orchestras.



Sigge Bachmann

Participants learned to cope with distractions—provided by a video of a noisily crying child—at the National Alliance for Audition Support’s summer 2018 audition intensive.

Honestly, I haven’t. I’ve always felt included and welcomed by all my colleagues in conservatories and professional orchestras. However, some of my Black and Latinx colleagues have told me stories of being made to feel unwelcome in orchestras or in conservatories. Being in the NAAS program was an inspiring experience, both musically and personally. All of the participants’ shared love of music and common cultural backgrounds gave us an immediate bond.

Following the audition intensive at New World Symphony, do you feel more prepared for auditions—technically, psychologically, otherwise?

Absolutely. The guest artists imparted extremely useful instruction and gave valuable insight into the process of auditioning for professional orchestras, including what audition panels look for in successful candidates. The mental preparation workshop given by Dr. Noa Kageyama was eye-opening and addressed an issue that is often neglected in conservatories.

What event or experience was a real stand-out?

Taking lessons from teachers of other instruments was interesting and valuable, because instead of focusing on technical minutiae specific to the instrument, they focused on broader musical concepts.

What do you think would encourage young people of color to pursue a career in orchestras? How could the classical-music field—in early

exposure, musical training, and as a profession—be more welcoming?

Affordable access at an early age is critical to expanding the inclusion of young musicians of color in the classical music world. I was fortunate to receive free, high-quality government-subsidized music training from an early age in Spain. There, every child is entitled to enrollment in private lessons, solfège, music theory, ear training, choir, piano lessons, orchestra, and chamber music. There are many won-

Affordable access at an early age is critical to expanding the inclusion of young musicians of color in the classical music world.

—Yan Izquierdo

derful privately funded programs of this nature in the United States, however their scope is much more limited. If the United States had federally funded programs like in Spain, more students of color would reach top-tier conservatories, and in turn join major professional orchestras.

Yan Izquierdo, violin

Orchestra Experience: Chamber Orchestra of New York (NYC; 2014–present); Symphony in C (Camden, NJ; 2008–13); Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas (NYC; 2007–08); Aspen Festival Or-

chestra (Aspen, CO; 2006); substitute with Charleston Symphony Orchestra (Charleston, SC; 2005–06)

Education: Bachelor of Arts, Music Performance, College of Charleston (Charleston, SC; 2006); workshop at the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics at Stanford University (Summer 2016)



Carmen Johnson-Pájaro
Violin

How did you find about the National Alliance for Audition Support? What attracted you to its programs?



I found out about the NAAS programs through my affiliation with the

Sphinx Organization, specifically through my participation in the Sphinx Orchestral Partners Audition this past February.

Put simply, I was attracted to this program because it was an opportunity to learn, and a free opportunity at that! It’s rare to come across fully funded programs that offer participants what NAAS provides: a complete perspective of the orchestral musician’s audition process, musical and otherwise. This program seems to fill an educational void for many young professionals who no longer have the support of an institution. As a recent conser-

vatory graduate, the chance to expand my skillset for my craft is never an opportunity I want to pass up.

What do you feel this program can accomplish to bring more Black and Latinx musicians into classical music?

I imagine that this program, and others like it, might have a butterfly effect—rigorous training programs for Black and Latinx musicians lead to their winning jobs, transforming our orchestras into more accurate reflections of our communities, ultimately inspiring a new generation of young Black and Latinx musicians.

What was the most valuable aspect of this program for you?

That's actually a pretty tough question for me. I got so much out of the program, not only musically, but also through personal connections with the other participants. If I have to pick, I'd say the most valuable aspects of this program were the sessions discussing performance anxiety with Noa Kageyama, and my private lesson with [Dallas Symphony Orchestra Concertmaster] Alex Kerr. Performance anxiety is a difficult obstacle for most musicians to overcome. In fact, I can't think of a single colleague who hasn't struggled with it at some point or another. I can't overstate the value of learning strategies to manage performance anxiety and being able to speak one on one with a specialist in that field. And of course, I had a fantastic lesson with Alex Kerr, who won every audition he ever took! This is certainly an aspect of the program that would've been too costly to undertake myself, so I'm very grateful to have gotten such keen insight into my playing from that opportunity.

Following the audition intensive at New World Symphony, do you feel more prepared for auditions—technically, psychologically, otherwise?

I definitely feel that I'm better able to prepare for auditions, and I think I'm able to approach the audition experience in a more holistic way after the audition intensive. I had great private lessons that exposed key areas of work going forward with my playing. The performance anxiety sessions with Noa Kageyama were invaluable and gave me many ideas for mental preparation and practice going into an audition. Lastly, I can't say enough how valuable it is to have the support system

of Black and Latinx musicians provided by opportunities like this.

Some musicians of color have reported feeling isolated or even unwelcome as the only Black or Latinx musician in an orchestra. Is this something that you have encountered? How would you describe the experience of being part of a group of Black and Latinx musicians in the NAAS program, or in other ensembles?

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—Carmen Johnson-Pájaro

I've definitely felt isolated in ensembles where I've been one of few or the only minority musician. For me, the sense of isolation partly comes from feeling like "the other" or the token Black/Latinx musician. That's not to say people deliberately make me feel this way, but negative thoughts can easily creep in when you realize you're in the minority. There was a time when this feeling of "otherness" made me wonder, "Am I here because I deserve it, or because there is a diversity quota to meet?" and, "Are my peers thinking the same thing?" For impressionable young musicians, this type of thinking can be very damaging to the psyche! In the end, it's an exercise in self-affirmation and I'm happy to say I was able to kick those thoughts. It's difficult to put these experiences and feelings into words, and of course there are many more complexities and reasons for feelings of isolation, but I hope this sheds a bit of light on what one's experience might be.

Being part of a group of Black and Latinx musicians has been one of the most heartwarming experiences of my life. I grew up in Alabama, where confronting our country's history was, and still is, trau-

matizing and inevitable. I performed many times at the 16th Street Baptist Church, where four young Black girls were killed by a KKK bombing in the '60s. I regularly passed Kelly Ingram Park, where police and firemen infamously released dogs and sprayed firehoses on student protesters fighting for civil rights. And just down the street, along the Birmingham Civil Rights Heritage Trail, was my high school. From an early age, I had a deep understanding of the injustices and horrors Black people endured. I never cease to be amazed by what my people have overcome. It's humbling and inspiring beyond words to be in a room full of talented, accomplished musicians of color, succeeding in a field with an overt history of exclusion.

Carmen Johnson-Pájaro, violin

Orchestra Experience: Harvard Baroque Chamber Orchestra (Cambridge, MA; 2017–present); New England Conservatory Philharmonia (Boston, MA; 2016–present); substitute with Boston Philharmonic Orchestra (Boston, MA; 2017); Chautauqua Festival Orchestra (Chautauqua, NY; 2017); Eastman Philharmonia Chamber Orchestra and Eastman Philharmonia (Rochester, NY; 2012–16); Eastman School Symphony Orchestra, principal second violin and concertmaster (2013)

Education: Master of Music in Violin Performance, New England Conservatory (Boston, MA; anticipated 2018); Bachelor of Music in Violin Performance, Eastman School of Music (Rochester, NY; 2016)

Meredith Riley Violin

How did you find about the National Alliance for Audition Support? What attracted you to its programs?

I found out about NAAS through my connection with the Sphinx Organization. I was interested in applying for the program because I believe in their mission of increasing minority representation in the classical music industry. Until NAAS, Sphinx has been the pioneer organization to focus on acknowledging and immersing



the talented musicians who either compete in the Sphinx Competition, or play in the Sphinx Symphony Orchestra, into the country's finest orchestras. I was particularly interested in applying for this program because of the financial bundle it offered—this is the first audition preparation seminar offered that took care of travel and accommodations. From instruments, auditions, lessons, and concerts, I believe that many people have a very skewed perception of the actual cost and investment in being a classical musician.

What do you feel this program can accomplish as far as bringing more Black and Latinx musicians into classical music?

Programs like NAAS are unique because they are generously sponsored by organizations (or individuals) that believe in the cause, and understand the individual investment and/or deficit a musician is willing to risk to *potentially* win a job. By offering more rigorous programs like this, it gives a person like me an opportunity to learn (I am not in school anymore) and to do so without being out \$1,000 or more.

What was the most valuable aspect of this program for you?

The visual presentation of any sort of ensemble, company, or business should reflect the diversity of the population. You tend to attract what you promote. That being said, to inspire today's young people of color, it is imperative to have more minority participation within orchestras.

—Meredith Riley

Musicians are never done learning, and therefore, it is essential to immerse yourself in a musical community or setting with other musicians to work with and learn from. The same goes for teachers! Having completed my graduate degree two years ago, I can tell you that the most exciting thing for me was having the luxury of going back into lessons with such brilliant pedagogues. It was the most invigorating feeling. Unlike many other

professions, there is no “boss” to tell you whether you are doing it right or wrong once you leave school or private lessons. When you leave many other schools of study, you may go into a field where someone can help you learn the ropes, or learn right from wrong: “Do this, not that.” Musicians do not get the luxury of having a coach five days a week to steer them in the right direction or tell them if this career choice will work out for them, or if they are wasting their time. That is why an opportunity for a seminar like this is vital for those who may not be able to afford to take lessons once their schooling/scholarships run out. The cost of education is high. The investment in a musical career and musical education can be even higher because it didn't start in college. It started long before then. The time commitment is long. And the payout is uncertain.

Following the audition intensive at New World Symphony, do you feel more prepared for auditions—technically, psychologically, otherwise?

I think that this audition intensive is a financial gift to its recipients, among

Bass players at this summer's audition intensive at the National Alliance for Audition Support.



all of its other benefits. Because of the generous support for this program, I am able to feel more technically and psychologically prepared for auditions. I bet attending this seminar (if finances were not covered) would have cost close to \$1,500. Some people are blissfully unaware of the financial burden when pursuing a musical career. I've heard people ask or tell me to "get my teacher to call" or "you know someone that could help you there, right?" to which I generally smile and politely say, "Unfortunately, no. It just doesn't work that way." The classical music industry is anything but phone calls to former colleagues and a guaranteed "instant in." Sure, someone can call and advocate for an individual, or recommend someone they think would be great for a gig, but much like any other business, that is a reference. Ultimately, the musician still has to show up and prove their worth. With as few jobs as there are in this industry, I know I wouldn't want to hire someone based on word of mouth only.

What event or experience was a real stand-out?

The most stand-out experience at this seminar was where we got to work on mental preparedness for an audition. Besides self-help books on taming the mind, or sports psychology books, the list of tips and tricks to stay calm before and during an audition is limited. For me, it was really beneficial to be able to have someone work with us individually, and as a group, to understand how to get grounded before a ten-minute audition that can change your life. After all, you invest several hundred dollars in each audition, so it is important to recognize that the mental preparation and control is equally as important as the actual preparation for an audition. You ask any professional musician, and I bet they will tell you they felt ready for the audition when they traveled for it, but just couldn't tame the nerves.

What do you think would encourage young people of color to pursue a career in orchestras? How could the classical-music field—in early exposure, musical training, and as a profession—be more welcoming?

I strongly believe that visual presentation of any sort of ensemble, company, business, etc., should reflect the diversity of the population. You tend to attract what you promote. That being said, I feel that

in order to inspire today's young people of color, it is imperative to have more minority participation within the orchestras. I believe that this integration should be more than just the cover photo of an orchestra or a page in the program that displays that there are people of color in the ensemble. I also believe that this could be achieved by increasing attention to the education and outreach departments to make sure that they are reaching the kids and students who don't normally have access to this specific genre of music.

Meredith Riley, violin

Orchestra Experience: Erie Philharmonic Orchestra (Erie, PA; 2013–present; acting principal second violin, 2015–present); Canton Symphony Orchestra (Canton, OH; 2014–present); substitute with Cayuga Chamber Orchestra (Ithaca, NY; 2013–present); Sphinx Virtuosi Tour (2016); substitute with Austin Lyric Opera (Austin, TX; 2013); substitute with Austin Symphony Orchestra (Austin, TX; 2012–13)

Education: Advanced Music Studies Certificate, Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh, PA; 2013–16); Bachelor of Music in Violin Performance, University of Texas (Austin, TX; 2013), candidate for Artist Diploma (2012–13)

Kamyron Williams Cello

How did you find about the National Alliance for Audition Support? What attracted you to its programs?



I was a participant in the 2018 Sphinx Orchestral Partner Auditions in Detroit. Taking part in that audition experience and receiving feedback from a panel representing eighteen major orchestras was a big step forward for me in pursuing the career path of a professional orchestral musician. As soon as the NAAS program was established in April 2018, I

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Thank you for all of your support!



Siggi Bachmann

String players get in tune at the audition intensive at the National Alliance for Audition Support this June.

knew I had to immediately take advantage of this unique opportunity.

What do you feel this program can accomplish to bring more Black and Latinx musicians into classical music?

Through the NAAS program I believe we will not only accomplish the ultimate goal of increasing job placement for musicians of color in American orchestras, but also create a change in the “white stereotype” of classical music. Art and diversity are undoubtedly interchangeable; they both exist in all cultures, they challenge us to see others and ourselves in new ways; they provoke, inspire, teach, create something new, and bring down barriers.

What was the most valuable aspect of this program for you?

The most valuable aspect for me was the mock audition, with the critical-comment feedback from the audition panel, followed by our individual private lessons with the faculty. Rarely do you ever receive direct feedback from the panel about your audition. Though there is always something to improve on, those few details or nuances can make the difference between you advancing or winning an audition.

Some musicians of color have reported feeling isolated or even unwelcome as the only Black or Latinx musician in an orchestra. Is this something that you have encountered? How would you describe the experience of being part of a group of Black and Latinx

musicians in the NAAS program, or in other ensembles?

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—Kamyon Williams

Yes, when I began cello in middle school it didn't take long for me to recognize that there were few other people who look like me playing classical music. When I was younger I kind of just accepted it as the “norm.” Since then I've really picked up on it—it is usually the first thing that comes to mind when walking into a rehearsal or even attending a concert. I try to find ways to encourage other people to get involved and find ways for Black and Latinx musicians to be exposed to the music.

Following the audition intensive at New World Symphony, do you feel more prepared for auditions—technically, psychologically, otherwise?

Yes! I feel more confident in the process of preparing for professional audi-

tions. It's like preparing for a final exam or test: you've gone class to class, done your homework and readings, and then the teacher offers a last exam review session so you can address those problems or concerns that can make a difference between the final grade of a B or an A.

What event or experience was a real stand-out?

This collaboration between the Sphinx Organization, League of American Orchestras, and New World Symphony, plus the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for creating NAAS! Being at the New World Symphony Center in Miami Beach and for them to host the NAAS for the week, having access to the campus's state-of-the-art performance facilities, practice and ensemble rooms, and the readily available resources and staff. Having individual lessons with multiple faculty from major orchestras and working with performance psychologist Noa Kageyama. I could really envision myself as a future fellow of the New World Symphony.

What do you think would encourage young people of color to pursue a career in orchestras? How could the classical-music field—in early exposure, musical training, and as a profession—be more welcoming?

Role models—seeing other musicians of color in professional orchestras. For early exposure in the classical-music field and musical training, I personally believe you have to know the community beyond the surface level and be open to new ideas or methods and adapt to reflect your community and orchestras' vision as a whole.

Kamyon Williams, cello

Orchestra Experience: University of Michigan Philharmonic Orchestra (Ann Arbor, MI; 2016–17); Indiana University Orchestra (Bloomington, IN; 2013–16); Indiana University Philharmonic Orchestra (2012–15); substitute with Evansville Philharmonic Orchestra, Owensboro Symphony Orchestra, Columbus Symphony Orchestra, Terre Haute Symphony Orchestra, Richmond Symphony Orchestra, Adrian Symphony

Education: Master of Music, University of Michigan School of Music, Theater and Dance (Ann Arbor, MI; 2018); Bachelor of Music, Indiana University, Jacobs School of Music (Bloomington, IN; 2016) [S](#)