

# Changing the Face of Volunteerism

Volunteer groups at orchestras are seeking younger and more diverse volunteers to better reflect today's society and to connect their message and mission with their communities.

By Rita Pyrillis



This season, orchestras around the country will be performing more works by women and composers of color than ever before, signaling the growing push for diversity in the arts. From expanding their musical offerings to recruiting musicians from underrepresented groups to hiring diversity officers, orchestras are seeking to create organizations that reflect the cities in which they're based.

But one segment of the orchestra world is struggling to catch up: volunteer organizations. The days of the "Ladies

Auxiliary" are long over, when the wives of prominent men hosted fundraisers attended by the wealthy, and mostly White, elite. One measure of America's changing social mores: in 1980, the League of American Orchestras' Women's Council, which brings together volunteers from orchestras nationwide, was rebranded as the gender-neutral Volunteer Council. Today, volunteer groups are seeking to attract younger and more diverse members that reflect today's realities.

"In the past these organizations were by invitation only,"

says Janet Cabot, a member of the Madison Symphony Orchestra League and the League of American Orchestras' Volunteer Council. The League's Volunteer Council comprises members of volunteer

and Los Angeles Philharmonic, among others, have been making strides in the areas of gender and racial and ethnic diversity among their composers, musicians, and staff, but recruiting diverse

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associations affiliated with orchestras nationwide and provides support and professional development for volunteers at orchestras throughout the country. "The Madison League was formed in 1956 and back then most women didn't work outside of home," says Cabot. "The volunteers were the wives of prominent business leaders. It was a way to tap into pots of money. Over time that started to change. It stopped being invitation only and men were included. The next challenge is getting younger and more diverse members who love classical music."

"Many symphony volunteer organizations are interested in incorporating equity, diversity, and inclusion," says Julie Meredith, president of the Volunteer Council and former president of the Utah Symphony Guild. "Each year the Volunteer Council hosts a series of informal 'Strategic Conversations' for current and incoming presidents to have open discussions and learn from what other organizations are doing. Our Fall

volunteers has proven difficult. One reason is that orchestras continue to be overwhelmingly White, making it hard to attract volunteers from underrepresented communities, according to Barbara Lake, a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Affiliates, which are volunteer committees that are grouped by neighborhood, and of the League of American Orchestras' Volunteer Council.

"We have a problem recruiting volunteer members because they don't see diversity in the orchestra," she says. "We haven't addressed the problem directly. The LA Phil Affiliate Committees are a very large volunteer group of 900 volunteers and 17 committees, each with a different purpose and in a different geographic location. I'm president of the Southwest Heights Philharmonic Committee, which is primarily African American."

Lake said that the Southwest Heights volunteers have been closely involved with the LA Philharmonic's

## Community members are more willing to donate their time and money when they see themselves reflected in their orchestras.

2021 participants requested a session on how to attract a diverse membership. We learned that to attract diverse members, organizations must be intentional in their strategies and look at what diversity is in their community in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. There needs to be a commitment from top leadership and that commitment must be brought to the attention of the community."

Organizations like the Philadelphia Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra,

Youth Orchestra Los Angeles (YOLA), which recently moved into a new Frank Gehry-designed home in the southwest Los Angeles neighborhood of Inglewood. YOLA, which offers after-school musical training to high schoolers in areas lacking in arts education, was founded in 2007 under the aegis of LA Phil Music and Artistic Director Gustavo Dudamel.

Along with other initiatives, Affiliate Committee members operate the LA Philharmonic's Symphonies for Schools program, which provides a free concert

# LEAGUE VOLUNTEER COUNCIL

The Volunteer Council of the League of American Orchestras is made up of community leaders who have demonstrated outstanding support for their orchestras and are committed to the League's goals. Council members represent volunteer associations affiliated with orchestras from coast to coast and across the entire spectrum of budget tiers. Their leadership provides representation, support, and professional development to volunteer delegates throughout the country via quarterly publications (*Volunteer Notes*), a volunteer project database, strategic conversations for presidents and presidents-elect (a series of Zoom meetings on topics pertinent to their roles and responsibilities), awards recognizing outstanding programs and initiatives by volunteer groups, and programming at the League's annual National Conference. The Council is committed to the ongoing education of its members to meet the current and future needs of volunteer associations in support of their orchestras.

Learn more at <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/volunteering/league-volunteer-council/>.



In November of 2019, the West Suburban Friends volunteer group of Chicago Sinfonietta held a fundraiser and the Sinfonietta gave a concert celebrating Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights. Sharon Hatchett, second from right in photo with other West Suburban Friends, reports that members of the area's Indian community stated this was the first time they knew of that a symphony orchestra focused on the festival.



"People of color will donate more to organizations that reflect their communities and that they have a relationship with," says Sharon Hatchett, former president of the Southside Friends of the Chicago Sinfonietta and current member of the League's Board of Directors.



Doris Parent, vice president of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access strategies (IDEAS) at the Philadelphia Orchestra, sees volunteers as brand ambassadors who carry the message and mission of the orchestra into their communities.



Janet Cabot, a member of the Madison Symphony Orchestra League and the League's Volunteer Council who is seen here at a December 2021 Madison Symphony event, says, "In the past [volunteer] organizations were by invitation only. Over time that started to change. The next challenge is getting younger and more diverse members who love classical music."



and field trips to elementary and high school students, and Toyota's Symphonies for Youth, aimed at children ages 5 to 11. "Those are the big events for the volunteers," Lake says. "We get the kids off of the buses, make sure they're seated, offer tours to the Hollywood Bowl, and we also operate the Music Mobile, where kids can play and touch instruments."

### Volunteers as Stakeholders

Volunteers play a variety of roles in the governance and operation of an orchestra, from selling tickets to organizing fundraisers to community engagement and more. And all of them are vital to the success of the organization, according to Doris Parent, vice president of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access strategies (IDEAS) at the Philadelphia Orchestra. She sees them as brand ambassadors who carry the message and mission of the orchestra into their communities.

"Volunteers are a key stakeholder group," Parent says. "They spearhead their own events alongside the orchestras and work closely with them. They do a lot to build awareness. Here they organize our opening night. In 2020 they produced a very creative digital event that incorporated diversity and inclusion and developed sponsorship packages that incorporated free community tickets for students." The online event featured performances by soprano Angel Blue, who is Black, and Chinese pianist Lang Lang as well as an orchestra performance of *Seven O'Clock Shout* by composer Valerie Coleman, who is Black.

The Philadelphia Orchestra formalized its commitment to diversity last year when it promoted Parent to its executive ranks after she spent more than a year assessing its diversity practices as part of the orchestra's IDEAS initiative. She joined the orchestra in 2011 as senior director of corporate and foundation relations.

When it comes to attracting volunteers, Parent says the

first step is to examine existing membership by polling volunteers about diversity and asking for ideas on how to improve. The next step is taking a look at recruiting methods and looking for sometimes ignored barriers to membership, such as the cost, convenience of scheduled meetings and gatherings, and other practices.

According to an informal survey of 12 Volunteer Council member organizations conducted in the spring, 92 percent had dues ranging from \$25 to \$100 and 38 percent required or recommended buying concert tickets. (Read the survey at <https://americanorchestras.org/re-energizing-membership/>.) Other findings include:

- 23 percent required attendance to at least one fundraiser
- 23 percent required attendance to at least one meeting
- 31 percent required participation in event planning
- 15 percent required invitation from a member to join

Among goals of the survey, Parent says, was finding out "Where are you always recruiting from? Is it always word of mouth? Don't get hung up on only race and ethnicity. Look at gender, age, all different backgrounds. What are your application rules? Do you ask people attend 20 orchestra performanc-

es? Maybe don't be so prescriptive on the numbers. Allow for differences." For example, younger people might prefer a cocktail hour to an afternoon tea, or a virtual meeting to a face-to-face meeting.

"As volunteer organizations emerge from the pandemic, diversity is even more critical," says Julie Meredith. "It has been shown that diverse teams are more likely to radically innovate and anticipate

shifts. Those organizations that embrace equity, diversity, and inclusion typically outperform those that do not in terms of creativity and overall effectiveness. The Volunteer Council is

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Barbara Lake, a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Affiliate Committees and the League's Volunteer Council, says that orchestras and their volunteer organizations must better represent diverse communities.



Mary Palmer, a past president of the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra board of directors who began helping the orchestra develop a diversity strategic plan five years ago, says that community involvement is the key to greater diversity: "That's where it begins."



"Organizations that embrace equity, diversity, and inclusion typically outperform those that do not in terms of creativity and overall effectiveness," says Julie Meredith, president of the Volunteer Council at the League of American Orchestras.



Mary Palmer, in first row at far right, was among the board members and friends of the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra who toured the new Steinmetz Hall at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts before its opening in January. The Orlando Philharmonic will give its first full concert in the hall this March.

committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion and stands ready to assist volunteer organizations across the country.”

### Developing a Diversity Strategic Plan

The effort to recruit more diverse volunteers comes at a critical time for orchestras as they seek to connect with new communities and bring in new patrons. With ever-present worries about potential audience decline, there is now an additional concern that the pandemic could accelerate that trend, shuttering concert halls and forcing the cancellation of in-person fundraising events.

The League’s Volunteer Council signaled its commitment to diverse voices with its newest class of leaders. Three Black women were elected to the Council this year, thanks in large part to the efforts of member Sharon Hatchett, who has been pushing for greater awareness of the need for diversity in the Volunteer Council. Hatchett, who joined the Council in 2016, is its first Black member. She joined the League’s board of directors in February of 2021.

“It’s still an educational journey for everyone,” Hatchett says. “When I was chair of member recruitment at the Volunteer Council, I tried to educate our committee on diversity and provide ideas on ways to be intentional about recruiting diverse volunteers. We coordinated with the League on getting a list of orchestras around the country and their volunteer groups. We looked at geography, diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, and age to take into account the changing demographics of the country. One of my objectives was to provide educational information to the volunteers so they can be a voice to help their orchestras on this journey.”

Hatchett understands that community members are more willing to donate their time and money when they see them-

selves reflected in their cities’ orchestras. She previously served as president of Southside Friends of the Chicago Sinfonietta, which has championed diversity and inclusion since it was founded in 1987. More than 35 percent of the Sinfonietta is staffed by musicians of color, and over 45 percent of those are women, according to the organization. “People of color will donate more to organizations that reflect their communities and that they have a relationship with,” she points out. “There is value in exploring ways to create those relationships. Volunteers can help our orchestras with diversity efforts. We are the boots on the ground in our communities.”

Mary Palmer, past president of the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra board of directors and a music educator, began helping the central Florida-based orchestra develop a diversity strategic plan five years ago. She formed an advisory group of 35 board members and community leaders to help increase diversity on the board and among musicians, staff and volunteers.

Community involvement is the key to greater diversity, according to Palmer. This summer the orchestra performed a series of chamber concerts called Summer Serenades that offered a volunteer-run brunch before the performance. Concert tickets were \$35, and the brunch was an additional \$25. “The volunteers organized the food and decorated the room and made people feel welcome,” she said. “It wasn’t a fundraiser. It was an event to get people involved and interested in the orchestra. Anyone could come. We sold some season tickets and we generated interest. That’s where it begins.” **S**

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