

League
of American
Orchestras

Audience Diversification

CATALYST GUIDE

CATALYST GUIDE:

Audience Diversification

Theodore Wiprud with Dr. Karen Yair and Donna Walker-Kuhne

CONTENTS



[Foreword from Contributing Author Donna Walker-Kuhne](#)



[Strategies for Diversifying Audiences](#)

[Strategy 1: Internal Alignment](#)

[Strategy 2: Onstage Representation](#)

[Strategy 3: Meet Your Community Where It Is](#)

[Strategy 4: Mutual Partnering](#)

[Strategy 5: Messaging](#)

[Strategy 6: Build Relationships](#)

[Strategy 7: The Audience Experience](#)

[Strategy 8: The Third Space](#)



[Measuring Diversity](#)



[Overcoming Challenges](#)

[Limited Staff Capacity](#)

[Budgeting](#)

[Financial Resources](#)

[Conventions and Existing Systems](#)

[Cultural Barriers](#)

[Earning Trust](#)

[Getting In Sync](#)



[Case Studies](#)

[New Haven Symphony Orchestra: Celebrating Helen Hagan](#)

[Virginia Symphony Orchestra: CommUNITY](#)

[Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra: HapaSymphony](#)

[Johnstown Symphony Orchestra: Steel Mill Concerts](#)

[Charlotte Symphony Orchestra: Multiple Points of Entry](#)

[Jacksonville Symphony: Symphony in 60](#)



[The Road Ahead](#)



[Footnotes/References](#)



[About the Authors](#)



[Acknowledgements](#)



Foreword from Contributing Author

Donna Walker-Kuhne

I am deeply inspired by the initiatives, dedication, and creativity demonstrated by the League of American Orchestras as they advance the goal of building a culture of inclusion in the orchestral field. This report is an essential guide, supported by research, which shares data on the experience, exposure, and necessity of engaging diverse audiences. The field needs a roadmap of best practices that demonstrates a path towards successful and impactful strategies to build a culture of inclusion and belonging.

The roadmap includes the importance of uniting staff towards the shared goals of building a diverse and inclusive environment with a consistent and robust foundation of training and application of learnings to their work. The knowledge that diverse demographics respond to cultivation in different ways requires orchestras to be nimble, creative, and opportunistic. All staff and musicians should be trained consistently in creating a welcoming space, sensitivity to cultural differences, and building trust with the community. The combination of diverse staff, diverse approaches to marketing, and diverse programming are also key components that stimulate interest and sustained participation.

There is an emergence of valuable work being done towards creating an inclusive environment in the orchestral field. It is based on a respectful integration of thoughtful programming with target communities. Study these orchestras, talk with them, and find out their learnings and mistakes. The orchestral field needs to unite and share. I am inspired and hopeful that brave, collaborative working will result in orchestras across the country attracting new audiences that truly reflect the diverse communities they serve.

Donna Walker-Kuhne
Founder and President
Walker International Communications Group Inc.



Introduction

The makeup of attendees at our events shows starkly how we matter to our communities. The diversity of those who attend is a key measure — perhaps the ultimate measure — of our impact.

As orchestras face questions around the continued relevance of their work and its financial sustainability, many are recognizing the urgent need not only to broaden their base of audience and donors, but also to redefine their own understanding of the term “audience” to go beyond ticket-buyers and embrace the full spectrum of communities making up their home cities.

As demonstrated in this Catalyst Guide, individual orchestras have been making efforts to become more welcoming. However, the field as a whole is making limited progress when compared to other cultural organizations: the proportion of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) people purchasing orchestra tickets has barely increased since 2019 ^[1] despite equal levels of interest in classical music across all racial/ethnic groups. And, overall, almost 50% of Americans believe that symphony orchestras are “not welcoming to people like me.” ^[2]

Surmounting the impasse created by centuries of systemic exclusion presents challenges. But with strong leadership, internal alignment around inclusion, and investment in the future, orchestras now have a real opportunity to study and adapt promising practices and grow their community impact. Some League member orchestras are leading the way in this work. What approaches are proving successful in engaging with new and more diverse communities? What has their learning been so far? For this Guide, orchestras representing a range of sizes, locations, and communities shared their thoughts, experiences, challenges, and successes to help the whole field level up on audience diversification.

For youth orchestras, audience diversification and student diversification efforts are inextricably linked. Across the U.S., youth orchestras are working hard to provide equitable access to musical opportunity by providing an inclusive, welcoming experience for students and family members. While this Guide focuses on efforts seen among professional orchestras, the stories of community partnership, culturally responsive programming, and internal culture change are relevant to youth orchestras as well. Read more about the work of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras in this area in the League’s [Catalyst Snapshots](#) publication. ^[3]



Why Diversify Audiences?

Why diversify audiences? Simply put, “the mission of a nonprofit is to serve the public,” Jesse Needleman, Vice President of Marketing, Sales, and Communications at the Boston Symphony Orchestra, reminds us. “Society is changing,” says Dan Hart, President and Executive Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, “and we exist to serve the whole community, not just a slice.” In fact, this is why our donors benefit from the charitable deduction on their federal taxes.

“What does this orchestra look like in 20 years if our audience doesn’t look like two-thirds of the population?” asks Katie Bonner Russo, Marketing Director at the New Haven Symphony Orchestra.

Boston’s Needleman points out that “as America becomes more racially diverse, we’ll be serving a smaller share of population.” From this perspective, redesigning the experience we offer to be genuinely attractive to racially and generationally diverse groups makes sound business sense too.

So broadening our definition of audiences to embrace all the communities we serve fulfills both mission and business objectives. Our music already engages many more people than those who buy tickets through activities ranging from outdoor events and educational concerts to performances given in hospitals and other free ticket initiatives. Taking the initiative on audience diversification — with a long-term commitment across the organization, and a focus on building relationships rather than on transactions — can not only enhance orchestras’ relevance to their communities, but also build a sustainable foundation for long-term overall revenue growth.

Moreover, many funders are now investing in those arts organizations striving to broaden their audience bases. But “if you’re doing it to find grant funding it’s not going to work; it’s the other way around,” advises Elaine Carroll, CEO of the New Haven Symphony Orchestra. Orchestras need to demonstrate their efforts at relevance to the whole community. Such efforts are no longer an enticement to funders: they have become a baseline.

The Catalyst Guide [Making the Case for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Orchestras](#) details the mission, business, and creative case for EDI work.^[4]



Strategies for Diversifying Audiences

Strategy 1: Internal Alignment

Establishing an EDI [equity, diversity, and inclusion] committee or council where plans are developed collectively among department representatives, often including musicians, was one of the most frequently cited audience diversification strategies among the colleagues consulted for this Guide. “Music director, executive, education, community engagement — we tag-team EDI work across the organization,” says New Haven Symphony Orchestra’s Elaine Carroll.

“It’s easy in a big organization not to work together,” admits Karisa Antonio, Senior Director of Social Innovation and Learning at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. “We’re all just trying to get the job done. But trying to tie together our various neighborhood series requires the collaboration of all departments.” Her colleague in Artistic Planning, Jessica Ruiz, explains that “I always ask Karisa and Charles [Buchanan in Marketing] questions about specific works and artists, so we can tailor the works to a community.”

At the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, CEO Joe Loehnis ensures that the marketing and community engagement staff work closely together. He cites [a recent article by Simon Woods](#) advocating such a link.^[5] “Think about it,” says Loehnis. “You want to develop audience, and you’re not talking to your community engagement manager whose *job* is to go into communities to form relationships?”

Getting on the same page around diversification also requires a joint understanding of the imperative; this is why orchestras showing EDI results engage in ongoing EDI training. “The work comes from within the organization and then can engage the community,” says leading arts marketer Donna Walker-Kuhne. “All our EDIB [equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging] work has been presented to our staff during briefings and it has had an impact on how we understand our audience at large,” asserts Roberto Castro, Director of Guest Experience at the San Diego Symphony.

A unified, collaborative approach also depends on a clear directive from the top. Many interviewees value the impact their boards and executives have, keeping everyone’s eye on the prize over the long haul.

Read about the 12 actions any orchestra can take to make progress towards equity by strengthening its organizational practices in [Promising Practices: Actions Orchestras Can Take to Make Progress Toward Equity](#).^[6]



Strategies for Diversifying Audiences

Strategy 2: Onstage Representation

After establishing institutional alignment, the number one strategy colleagues across the U.S. name for drawing in new audiences is to feature compositions and artists from diverse demographic backgrounds onstage. “It’s essential to be authentic. You can’t target a community without anyone onstage representing that community,” says Terell Johnson, Executive Director of the Chicago Philharmonic. Elias Feghali, Associate Director of Audience Strategies and Analytics at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, concurs. “When potential new audiences don’t find someone relatable on the promotional material, their interest often wanes before they even start reading.”

While the classics are not going anywhere, there are too many new and authentic voices emerging not to program more broadly. Jessica Ruiz, Senior Director of Artistic Planning at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, observes that “we hear artists of color say they never believed they could do this until they saw someone who looked like them on stage. That must be true for audience members as well.” People feel more welcome when the concert reflects their identity and experience.

Engaging local talent can be especially powerful. The Hawai’i Symphony Orchestra discovered the young Hawaiian-born composer Michael Thomas Fumai, proceeded to program eight of his works on as many summer concerts, and then appointed him Director of Artistic Engagement and Composer in Residence. “The audience fell in love with him,” says former President and CEO David Moss. “[The broader audience] needs someone who ‘looks like me’ in a leadership position.” The orchestra’s integration with uniquely Hawaiian culture has yielded dividends. “We’ve seen growth in audience because of that commitment,” says Moss.

Faces of color in the orchestra itself are perhaps even more telling than composers performed and guest artists presented. As Donna Walker-Kuhne comments, when well-supported within the organization and set up for success, a newly hired or newly tenured musician of color can “hold the door open” to racially diverse audiences by symbolizing the orchestra’s integrity and its commitment towards its communities.



Detroit Symphony Orchestra Education Impact Event. Photo Courtesy of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra

The League’s **Inclusive Stages program** is a major national initiative to increase the racial diversity of musicians in American orchestras. ^[7]



Strategies for Diversifying Audiences

Strategy 3: Meet Your Community Where It Is

“Ask the constituency you’re interested in connecting with what they’re interested in, then do that,” to quote New Haven Symphony Orchestra’s Katie Bonner Russo. Different demographic segments look for different offerings and ways to feel welcome. For example, as Donna Walker-Kuhne notes, older audience members typically look for comfort and kindness, whereas younger audience members are often more interested in an experience that extends the story of the performance into the pre- and post-concert journey. But reaching any new audience segment requires authenticity, relationship-building, and an ongoing commitment.

“Once a month, every executive director should be out in the community,” asserts Walker-Kuhne. “Give awards, join judging panels for events. Build trust. Then an invitation to see a production is seen as reciprocal support [rather than as an ask].” Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra’s Joe Loehnis talks warmly about attending recitals of Super Strings, the orchestra’s collaboration with Big Brothers Big Sisters. “I sit with staff and parents listening to open string playing, and I see the tears and the pride. We have pizza and celebrate together. One of our partners, Big Brothers Big Sisters, consistently engages with us and supports our goals because we’ll do anything to support their initiatives.”

By showing up to support hospitals, churches, and neighborhood associations in communities they once ignored, orchestras gradually change public perceptions, and not just in those neighborhoods. “People are appreciating that the BPO contributes to quality of life,” says Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra’s Dan Hart. “There’s more pride in the orchestra since we went public about our EDI initiatives.”



Strategies for Diversifying Audiences

Strategy 4: Mutual Partnering

Research shows that, when it comes to retaining new audiences of color, diversity of representation is not enough. For existing audiences of color, programming undertaken with and for BIPOC communities is more important, and the process underpinning this work is at least as important as the resulting performance. ^[8]

A mutual partnership entails respect. “The community is already secure in what it experiences culturally,” notes Donna Walker-Kuhne. “People of color have their own music, their own cultural expression where they are fully acknowledged and respected. These communities do not need to be ‘saved’.”

Russell Kelban, Vice President for Marketing and Strategic Engagement at the Oregon Symphony, adds that “partnering appropriately means it’s mutually beneficial.” When promoting concerts with Indian artist Zakir Hussain in 2022, the Oregon Symphony talked with board members and members of the community who represent the same ethnicity. They researched the neighborhoods where significant numbers of South Asian people live and work, advertised in stores where this community shops, and explored companies with a high number of South Asian employees. As a result, the orchestra reached its goals for both audience diversification and revenue. “Engaging with the South Asian Community of Oregon is an important and ongoing relationship for the Oregon Symphony,” notes Kelban. “Our plan is to build that audience base and implement an outreach, via research and conversation, that helps us understand how the Oregon Symphony can satisfy the unique musical appetite of this community and celebrate its culture.”

Orchestras across the country are reaching new constituencies through a variety of strategic partnerships:

- The Johnstown Symphony Orchestra has worked with Johnstown Redevelopment Authority to make its steel mill concerts possible, and with the Johnstown Chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to build relationships in the Black community.
- The San Diego Symphony is partnering with KultureCity, a national agency promoting sensory accessibility and inclusion for those with invisible disabilities, to train staff and ultimately become a sensory-friendly certified venue.
- The Virginia Symphony Orchestra offers discounted concert tickets and community chamber concerts to the African American church congregations in its [Harmony Project](#), while presenting Gospel celebrations and pops concerts like a tribute to Whitney Houston.
- The Detroit Symphony Orchestra has made a long-term commitment to its Detroit Neighborhood Initiative, with some 223 community partners that co-create and co-produce events with the orchestra.

The Catalyst Guide [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Artistic Planning](#) shares the stories of more orchestras centering communities in their artistic planning process. ^[9]



Strategies for Diversifying Audiences

Strategy 5: Messaging

Recent research from WolfBrown, in partnership with the League, indicates the importance to Black, Latinx, women, and younger audience members of effective communication about the orchestra's work in equity, diversity, and inclusion. And yet most current audience members report being unaware of their orchestra's work to build an inclusive experience for all audience members.^[8] Demonstrating EDI work in action, and communicating effectively about it, could significantly help to build audience (and donor) engagement.

Careful messaging can also help to address specific misperceptions about pricing, dress codes, transportation, and access. "Research showed that people of color thought our prices were higher than they were," says David Snead, President and CEO of Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, "so we address that perception in mailers."

In terms of how the message is conveyed, "we leverage today's technology to create a data-driven approach to marketing," says Tori Fusinaz, VP and Chief Marketing Officer of the Jacksonville Symphony. The symphony's marketing strategy, focused on audience diversification, is showing results through target-digital and CTV (streaming device) campaigns that seek to reach patrons beyond the symphony's current audience. "Last season we had as much as 15% of the house filled with first-time ticket buyers," says Fusinaz. "That means we're doing something right, but that's just the beginning."

Like many others, Fusinaz also advocates cultivating social media influencers within target communities. "Influencers on social media platforms bring younger audiences," she says, which tend to be more diverse.^[10] Katie Bonner Russo of New Haven Symphony Orchestra concurs: "a network of others recommending you is more effective" than tooting your own horn. Identifying influencers, and someone who can make an introduction, takes some work. Donna Walker-Kuhne recommends that marketing teams network strategically in order to identify influencers and then "court them like your highest-level donors, with swag and meet-and-greets."



Strategies for Diversifying Audiences

Strategy 6: Build Relationships

Marketing officers regularly refer to the “patron journey” that takes a prospect and moves them from initial sale to subscription. The journey may look different for new audience segments and may aim for engagement over ticket revenue or contributions.

Once a first ticket has been purchased, Tori Fusinaz’s team at the Jacksonville Symphony activates an automated journey that helps introduce the new patron to the symphony without bombarding them with marketing offers. “We try to get to know them and give them reasons to come back. We show them that they are important to us.” As Donna Walker-Kuhne notes, you don’t start a friendship by selling something: if the focus is on building a relationship, it’s going to be a long-term investment. The revenue will come later.

“We’re looking for a connective experience, versus the passivity of an audience receiving an experience,” explains Detroit Symphony Orchestra’s Karisa Antonio. For her and others, such experiences are rooted in patient, long-term relationship building with communities and the organizations that work in them. At partner venues, community leaders emcee or welcome audiences, and partner organizations share information about their work from the stage and in the lobby. Performances feature local artists and members of the community. The DSO’s staff personally greets attendees on arrival and departure, answering questions and passing out surveys. There are even children’s surveys complete with crayons, reflection ideas, and smiley faces to circle to reflect how they feel, as well as response boards with sticky notes asking questions about people’s personal musical experiences, both in general and at the concert, using prompts like “music makes me feel...”



Strategies for Diversifying Audiences

Strategy 7: The Audience Experience

Donna Walker-Kuhne asks “How can you make your venue warm and inviting? It comes from the heart, from the work you’re presenting, from how you’re training your staff. Make things fun for people coming in and be creative: your venue should be a playground.” In that spirit, some orchestras now have staff positions devoted to audience experience. Roberto Castro became Director of Guest Experience of the San Diego Symphony after years of work optimizing audience experience at venues like SoFi Stadium. “We want to welcome all guests and make sure they have a safe, fun, virtuoso-level experience at our venue,” he says. “Our orchestra is definitely trying to be more welcoming,” overcoming stereotypes like what people think they should wear to the symphony.

Research has found that attendees feeling unwelcome at concerts are twice as likely to be BIPOC than White. And the most often reported sources of discomfort are other audience members and front-of-house staff.^[8]

Clearly, ongoing EDI training is critical for front-of-house staff and volunteers. “What is our service culture? Our mission statement? What are our values? We talk about this at every briefing,” says San Diego’s Roberto Castro. Jacksonville Symphony’s Tori Fusinaz agrees that “Everyone should feel welcome, engaged, and comfortable when they visit the Symphony.” This can be challenging for orchestras that do not control their main venues or their front-of-house staff, but, according to Fusinaz, “it’s well worth the effort and investment.” Even when an orchestra does not directly control its venue operations, it must work in partnership with its suppliers to advocate for and instigate a training program that benefits all parties.

Existing audiences can be enlisted in welcoming new guests through pre-concert messaging. “We’re counting on you to help us welcome new friends joining us at tonight’s concert” is the message suggested by Donna Walker-Kuhne. Every concert at the San Diego Symphony is preceded by a slide show welcoming new guests and referring them to the “Orchestra 101” information in the program book. The Virginia Symphony Orchestra’s pre-concert slides highlight African American Fellows in the orchestra. As a result, “people are excited to see the Fellows onstage,” says Nikki Thorpe, Director of Diversity and Engagement.

Recent findings from the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London about simple steps that orchestras can take to become more appealing to a wider audience are likely to apply in the United States as well. The RPO’s study found that across audience segments, shorter concerts, more matinee performances, conductors speaking to the audience, and being encouraged to keep phones on during a performance were just some of the things people said would motivate their attendance. Younger attendees were particularly keen to be able to photograph, record, and react



Strategies for Diversifying Audiences

on social media in real time. ^[10]

Storytelling can be important, too, particularly when explaining the relevance of new repertoire. For Jessica Ruiz, Senior Director of Artistic Planning at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, “new music is new music — unless you tell the story, no one will know.” She stresses a focus on storytelling in both programming and presenting unfamiliar works, to put them on equal footing with well-known works and composers. At the New Haven Symphony Orchestra, Music Director Alasdair Neale’s remarks from the stage challenge audiences to understand why overlooked works like those of Margaret Bonds and Florence Price are not in the canon of American music. “The music’s fabulous, and he makes it exciting to everyone, including long-time, traditional subscribers,” says CEO Elaine Carroll.

Visual storytelling through video projection is also becoming more common, as orchestras apply lessons from the success of movies in concert. Works like Julia Wolfe’s *Fire in My Mouth* (premiered by the New York Philharmonic in 2019) incorporate absorbing video and staging. The Charlotte Symphony Orchestra has received Knight Foundation support to create “immersive experiences” akin to the touring Van Gogh installations that have been popular the last few years.

Looking for inspiration from other art forms, Donna Walker-Kuhne highlights the efforts of theatres such as St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, NY, which typically enhances its productions with themed pre- and post-performance entertainment, food and drink pairings, and lobby décor. Such efforts appeal broadly to new and younger audiences that are likely to be more racially diverse than older audiences. In that vein, the Chicago Philharmonic has after parties sponsored by a brewery, with guest artists in attendance. Says Executive Director Terell Johnson, “our concerts are full.”



Strategies for Diversifying Audiences

Strategy 8: The Third Space

The concept of the “third space,” a communal space apart from work and the home, has taken hold as a way of making orchestra halls more inviting to new and especially younger audiences. New and renovated hall lobbies, like Disney Hall in Los Angeles and David Geffen Hall in New York, have become destinations in themselves — friendly, comfortable places where people can socialize, work or simply hang out, enjoying livestreamed music from the hall.

Some orchestras are producing in alternative spaces, recognizing that their main venues can seem forbidding to new audiences. Tori Fusinaz at the Jacksonville Symphony says that events in small venues often engage new attendees better, especially for orchestras that do not control their main venues or their front-of-house staff.



Measuring Diversity

“We’re succeeding if our audience looks like Chicago,” says Terell Johnson of the Chicago Philharmonic. With this overall goal in mind, it is important to track ongoing engagement, not just transactions: even without a ticket sale, curiosity can be inferred from segmented email click-through analytics and social media follows.

Metrics also need to allow for the long-term nature of the work, by demonstrating incremental progress. As Donna Walker-Kuhne says, in-depth audience diversification efforts need at least three years of operation before their impact can be fully assessed.

“Relationships have meaning and value,” says Katie Bonner Russo at the New Haven Symphony Orchestra. “Understanding change in this work does not come from doing a head count of people of color with concert tickets.” At the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Karisa Antonio believes they are “building a foundation where we will have data in time. Relationship-based work is time consuming.”

Demographic analysis of post-concert satisfaction ratings data is also important, although segmentation by demographic group is challenging. Both the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and Oregon Symphony request demographic information in post-concert surveys for every concert. Response rates are low, but Detroit’s Senior Director of Marketing & Audience Development Charles Buchanan says that they cross-check demographic results against their buyer list, which has been coded for demographic information through a data append,^[11] and find that their survey results are indeed representative.

Many people who are not comfortable filling out a form may share ideas in a conversation. Partner organizations can deliver information by asking their members and sharing the results. And at the San Diego Symphony, Roberto Castro notes that “complaint emails have gone down dramatically. The feedback is difficult to measure quantitatively, but we see [the impact] more if our hall staff and volunteers are happy and come back. They make the guests feel the same way.”

Transaction data remains important, nonetheless. Ticket sales success may be greater at some concerts than others. Organizations will get more value out of measuring ticket buyer diversity for the season as a whole (rather than for a single performance), accepting that audience demographics will fluctuate in response to scheduling, programming, marketing, and other factors.

A surrogate marker that many colleagues cite is youth: in general, young demographics skew more diverse with regard to race and ethnicity.^[9] Single-ticket purchases can also be indicative, especially for concerts marketed through communications targeted to specific groups — presumably, the targeting has been effective. Zip codes on ticket orders can also indicate audience demographics.



Overcoming Challenges

Is it extra work to engage new audiences creatively and authentically? Joe Loehnis, CEO of the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, rejects the framing of the question. “This is the work,” he insists. “If you’re not doing this, what are you doing? If you’re a board with fiduciary responsibility, a staff with a business to run, or a musician with a charge to entertain and inspire, and you’re not rooting everything you do in the growth of the audience, and doing things differently for a different outcome, what are you actually doing? We can’t think of this as extra work. It’s a complete reimagining.” He uses a flywheel as an analogy. “The first turn is hard, but then it gets moving, and soon it’s the new paradigm.”

Below are the most common challenges your orchestra might encounter when engaging in this work and ways to overcome them.

Limited Staff Capacity

Limited staff capacity is the challenge most often cited by colleagues. Listening — rather than assuming what communities seek — and building relationships takes time and patience. Ideally, a larger budget orchestra might hire a dedicated person, with expertise in cultivating relationships and celebrating diversity, who can build trust in the community. A smaller budget orchestra might work with an experienced board member to fulfill a similar role.

Budgeting

Successful budgets are built to enable innovation and change, striking a balance between urgent, short-term needs and a commitment to longer-term growth. Allocating a budget for audience development should be seen as an investment, as events targeting new communities may be perceived to lose money initially. However, looking at the season as a whole, with some events selling well to balance others, enables an orchestra to show long-term commitment to new partnerships and audience segments.

Financial Resources

Developing and operationalizing strategies for realigning the orchestra experience with communities’ needs inevitably brings new expenses. Audience development and diversification need a dedicated budget line. Many foundations and donors support audience diversification; if an orchestra’s efforts show authentic commitment, money will follow mission. Donna Walker-Kuhne says, “Contributed income needs to pick up the slack. Donations from foundations and individuals are down, but there’s an untapped pool of civic-minded donors.”



Overcoming Challenges

Conventions and Existing Systems

Orchestras have only just begun to experiment with fresh ways of presenting live music, with innovations in how buildings operate, how audiences interact with performance, how music is contextualized, how lobbies are activated, and how food and drink are served. Realigning the traditional concert experience with the needs of diverse new audiences means challenging established conventions and systems to realize the potential for a creatively vibrant and sustainable future.

Reinventing the audience experience and making new audience members feel welcome may feel like extra work, but it is actually the new normal, a shift in the culture of our orchestral workplace. It begins with increasing diversity of representation on the stage and continues with welcoming messages and relaxed expectations for things like applause and phone use. Ongoing training for front-of-house staff and volunteers is essential.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers and negative previous experiences may make people reluctant to try the orchestra experience. Uncovering these barriers through research and relationship building — alongside all the ways in which the orchestra can create value within specific communities — should influence the evolution of the orchestra's offer and the way it is communicated. It is a matter of orchestra staff understanding and responding to the values and preferences of new audiences as much as it is helping diverse audiences to feel comfortable with the protocol of the event.

Earning Trust

Past practices like one-shot events have left a bad impression in some communities. Showing up and supporting community organizations helps build trust and partnership over time, eventually fostering loyalty. Sincerity, authenticity, transparency — and apology and thanks when people point out how they have felt dismissed — all go a long way. “Remember, we need them,” says Donna Walker-Kuhne. “They already have many cultural experiences, and we are encouraging them to add one more.”

Getting In Sync

Board and executive leadership need to drive diversification efforts and give them time to succeed. This is why board and leadership participation in EDI training is so important. When principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion are ingrained in every aspect of an orchestra's work, departments work toward shared goals.



Case Studies

The following accounts of inspired risk-taking and promising initial results illustrate many of the ideas described in this Guide.

New Haven Symphony Orchestra: Celebrating Helen Hagan

Composer, pianist, and teacher Helen Hagan premiered her Piano Concerto with the New Haven Symphony Orchestra in 1912. In that same year, she became the first Black woman to graduate from Yale when she received a degree from the Yale School of Music. Hagan grew up in New Haven; she began her studies at Yale School of Music while she was still in high school. She enjoyed an international solo performing career, but after her death in 1964 she was largely forgotten.

In May 2023, the New Haven Symphony Orchestra revived Hagan’s concerto with pianist Michelle Cahn on an all-African American program also featuring music of Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, and Quinn Mason. In the weeks leading up to the concert, the symphony co-produced three community events to build interest within the Black community: at a public library branch; at the church Hagan attended with her family growing up; and at a florist shop with music, food, and conversation. Partners included the NAACP of New Haven and Alpha Kappa Alpha, Hagan’s sorority.

“Were those community events leverage to get people to the concert?” reflects Katie Bonner Russo, NHSO Marketing Director. “We had to get over that. These were community-led events. The one at [the florist] BLOOM was the most joyous event of my career.”

A festival with so much commitment from the orchestra and from partners “translated into a shift in our audience,” says CEO Elaine Carroll. “The classical music industry is unaccustomed to seeing so many Black faces, so a series of events like this may look to some people like overcompensation when it’s not.” It’s just overdue.



New Haven Symphony Orchestra musicians perform music by Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, and Helen E. Hagan in May 2023 at BLOOM, a florist and community gathering space in New Haven, CT. Photo courtesy of the New Haven Symphony Orchestra.

Read more about the EDI work of three of the orchestras featured in this Guide — [the Detroit Symphony Orchestra](#), [the Handel and Haydn Society](#), and [the New Haven Symphony Orchestra](#) in the League’s Catalyst Snapshots publication.^[3]



Case Studies

Virginia Symphony Orchestra: CommUNITY

The Virginia Symphony Orchestra has established a popular tradition in its CommUNITY Play-In and Sing-Along, an “annual event that embraces our community’s cultural richness and diversity, uniting people of all ages, faiths, and backgrounds through participation in music, dance, and spoken word.” It is held at Norfolk State University, a historically Black institution. People of any skill level are invited to play and sing alongside the Virginia Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. Music is provided, and the three required rehearsals encourage serious commitment.

The September 2023 edition included performances by a Navy band, a military academy, the Norfolk State Chorus, and Teens With A Purpose (a national youth empowerment organization). Speakers included the mayor of Norfolk, a rabbi, an imam, a minister, a naval officer, and Music Director Eric Jacobsen. Repertory stretched from a reorchestration of Mozart’s Symphony No. 40 incorporating local rap artists, to Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*, *Lift Every Voice*, and *Wonderful World*. [Television coverage](#) shows how enthusiastic and authentic this celebration of multiple traditions is.

Director of Diversity and Engagement Nikki Thorpe works with her colleagues in Artistic Planning to recruit participants and determine repertory. She also makes sure that the VSO’s social channels highlight monthly cultural celebrations like Black History Month and Women’s History Month. “Every year we build on different cultural observances,” she says. This season they are collaborating with the Chamber for Hispanic Progress on a concert for the Latino community. Any chance that such efforts might seem tokenizing is offset, she says, by the diversity of the VSO’s year-round programming. There is an ongoing commitment. And, crucially, “we work with people that own it to celebrate with them, not try to lead it ourselves.”



Case Studies

Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra: HapaSymphony

In Hawaiian, *hapa* means half. HapaSymphony is a new subscription series at the Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra that melds icons of Hawaiian music with orchestral repertory. And it has brought about that rare thing, a growing subscription base, as well as corporate sponsorship. Hawaiian Airlines now uses HSO recordings for inflight music.

HapaSymphony foregrounds popular Hawaiian artists, including drag performers. "There is a culture of gender fluidity in Hawai'i," says HSO's former President and CEO David Moss. *Mahu* is a term for a third gender with spiritual and social roles. When Lady Laritza Labouche, a Juilliard-trained drag pianist, performed a Mozart concerto on a Hapa concert, Moss recounts being relieved when "even my board chair liked it, remarking that 'there is no sacrifice of excellence.'" This October's HapaSymphony concert features "Hawai'i-born divas performing everything from operatic favorites to mele to Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto," with the return of Labouche and the Gay Men's Chorus of Honolulu.

HapaSymphony is only the most visible aspect of the Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra becoming more Pacific-oriented as an institution. Coming soon: new orchestra attire from Hawaiian designers Nake'u Awai and Amos Kotomori.



Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra performs the Sheraton Starlight Series at the Waikiki Shell. Photo courtesy of the Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra.



Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra performs the Sheraton Starlight Series at the Waikiki Shell. Photo courtesy of the Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra.



Case Studies

Johnstown Symphony Orchestra: Steel Mill Concerts

In 1992, Bethlehem Steel closed its operations in Johnstown, sending the economy of a major steel-producing city into a tailspin. Twenty-five years later, Johnstown Symphony Orchestra Music Director James Blachly conceived a plan to implement the board’s mission to “bring the symphony to the city” by performing downtown at an abandoned steel mill and, in doing so, connecting the symphony with its roots in the steel mills themselves. They gained the partnership of the Johnstown Redevelopment Authority, which gave them access to the 40,000-square-foot Cambria Iron Works Machine Shop. In that cleaned up space, they produced a [full-orchestra concert](#) with music of Copland, Barber, and Schubert (the ‘Unfinished’), as well as Bernstein’s suite from the labor drama *On the Waterfront*. During the Bernstein suite, a film of workers in that very space, made in 1992 just before it closed, played on the windows behind the orchestra and on screens to the sides. From across the 250 up-front seats reserved free for former steel workers and their families came gasps of recognition of family members and friends.

All 1,500 seats in the mill were taken, with some steel workers traveling great distances to attend, thanks to coverage in a union magazine. It so happened that Katie Couric was in town filming a segment of a series *America Inside Out*, and so footage of the concert found its way onto national television.

In ensuing years, the JSO played in two other mills and then moved on to an iconic hockey rink where the film *Slapshot* was made. It’s all part of JSO’s determination to bring music to all of the four-county-region they serve. But this is not to exclude other diversity efforts, including engaging the Black community. In 1923, the mayor of Johnstown actually banished African American and Mexican American families from the city following the murders of four police officers. One hundred years later, there remains a long way to go to heal such a wrong. Over the past six years, the JSO has developed a close working relationship with the local chapter of the NAACP and Christ Centered Community Church to produce concerts with a racially diverse audience and co-create events that bridge cultural divides that have existed for generations. In 2021, Blachly was honored with a commendation from the NAACP.



The Johnstown Symphony Orchestra performs “Queen from Trib,” a 2019 concert of the music of Queen at JWF Industries. Photo by Thomas Schuster.



An image from the Johnstown Symphony Orchestra’s Mill Concert Series. Photo courtesy of the Johnstown Symphony Orchestra.



Case Studies

Charlotte Symphony Orchestra: Multiple Points of Entry

For the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, producing more concert series means appealing to more potential audiences. In addition to a Classical Series and a Pops Series, CSO offers a Movie Series and a Family Series, and its Create Your Own offer draws on all of the above. There are also On Tap concerts at neighborhood breweries, an outdoor Summer Pops Series, and one-off concerts with featured artists such as, most recently, Nashville singer-songwriter Cody Fry. “It’s a young, growing city,” says President and CEO David Fisk. “We want to show up in cool, ‘happening’ places where people are.”

CSO also thinks of its community and educational programming as a point of entry to new listeners. Performances in hospitals, places of worship, community centers, and organizations like Roof Above, serving Charlotte’s unhoused population, include free or low-cost invitations to traditional concerts. CSO’s three youth orchestras, with 70% of participants people of color, and its Project Harmony after-school program, are yet more points of entry.

Looking ahead, the CSO has partnered with the City of Charlotte Economic Development Department to commission a mobile stage, a convertible trailer accommodating up to 30 musicians. “We want to provide access to the arts and cultural activity in every neighborhood,” says CSO President and CEO David Fisk, calling it a form of “creative placemaking.” Charlotte’s mobile stage is modeled in part on the Richmond Symphony’s Big Tent, a \$250,000 mobile stage partly funded by a grant from the League of American Orchestras Futures Fund program that Fisk pioneered when he led that institution.

Over the last two years, the CSO has seen real growth in the percentage of African American, Hispanic, and Asian ticket buyers, increasing from 11% to 16%. Millennial purchasers have increased from 22% to 26%, and Gen Z purchasers from 1% to 3.5%. The many points of entry seem to be making their mark.



Resident Conductor Christopher James Lees conducts a concert at a brewery, part of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra’s On Tap series. Photo by Brian Treffeisen.



The Charlotte Symphony performs for residents at a Healing Hands concert. Photo courtesy of the Charlotte Symphony.



Case Studies

Jacksonville Symphony: Symphony in 60

Among the Jacksonville Symphony's many series offerings is [Symphony in 60](#), a one-hour concert preceded by a casual cocktail hour and featuring introductions to each work from the podium with multi-media visuals. These engaging concerts typically feature works that are shorter than those in the symphony's Classical Series. Priced much lower than other concerts, the series appeals both to younger first-timer attendees and to regular attendees who want a new way of experiencing and learning about the music. It's also an ideal focus for social media influencers.

The Jacksonville Symphony has also created a presenting Jazz Series anchored by a local big band — the Jacksonville Jazz Collective (JJC) — as well as national artists like Terence Blanchard. The series is curated by Principal Tuba James Jenkins, who is also Director of the JJC.

Stay up-to-date by visiting the League's [Audience Diversification web page](#), featuring the latest and most relevant research and resources for orchestras.^[12]



The Road Ahead

The dozens of interviews behind this report show the orchestra field's tremendous creativity and commitment to diversifying audiences across multiple demographics. The League will continue to produce webinars, Conference sessions, constituency meetings, and online resources to help guide and celebrate this important work. Authentic relationships are growing through patient partnership building and we are excited to see the progress in future studies. The more our audiences come to look like our neighbors, the more we will matter to our communities.



Footnotes/References

1. Orchestra Patron Data Update September 2023, TRG Arts/League of American Orchestras, <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/resources-data-and-research/covid-19-data-partnerships/trg-arts/>
2. Have Cultural Entities Grown More Welcoming? Here's What the Public Thinks, Insights EXPERIENCE, <https://www.colleendilen.com/2022/02/02/have-cultural-entities-become-more-welcoming-heres-what-the-public-thinks-data/>
3. Catalyst Snapshots: EDI Case Studies from American Orchestras, League of American Orchestras, <https://americanorchestras.org/catalyst-snapshots-edi-case-studies-from-american-orchestras/>
4. Making the Case for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Orchestras, League of American Orchestras, <https://americanorchestras.org/making-the-case-for-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-orchestras/>
5. Forward Thinking: Forward Together, Simon Woods, Symphony, <https://symphony.org/features/forward-together/>
6. Promising Practices: Actions Orchestras Can Take to Make Progress Towards Equity, League of American Orchestras, <https://americanorchestras.org/promising-practices-actions-orchestras-can-take-to-make-progress-toward-equity/>
7. Inclusive Stages, League of American Orchestras, <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/artistic-programs/inclusive-stages/>
8. IDEA Study of Audience Attitudes Towards Inclusion, Equity, and Diversity, WolfBrown, <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/resources-data-and-research/covid-19-data-partnerships/wolfbrown-covid-19-audience-outlook-monitor/>
9. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Artistic Planning, League of American Orchestras, <https://americanorchestras.org/equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-artistic-planning/>
10. Orchestra Audiences Call for Modernising Changes to Draw More People to the Concert Hall This Season, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, <https://www.rpo.co.uk/news-and-press/813-orchestral-audiences-call-for-modernising-changes-to-draw-more-people-to-the-concert-hall-this-season>
11. What is a Data Append?, NAICS Association, <https://www.naics.com/ufaq/what-is-a-data-append>
12. Audience Diversification Research and Resources, League of American Orchestras, <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/audience-engagement/audience-diversification-resources/>



About the Authors

Theodore Wiprud is a composer and a consultant in the arts and education, and was the longtime Vice President, Education, at the New York Philharmonic. He has been active in multiple EDI initiatives, including the launch of [The Catalyst Fund](#) in 2019.

Dr. Karen Yair is Vice President, Research and Resources, at the League of American Orchestras.

Donna Walker-Kuhne is an award-winning thought leader, writer and strategist for community engagement, audience development and social justice. She is President of Walker International Communications Group, a 30-year-old boutique marketing and audience development consulting agency. She was formerly Director of Marketing for both The Public Theater and Dance Theater of Harlem. She was also Vice President of Marketing and Vice President of Community Engagement at New Jersey Performing Arts Center. She provides consulting services to numerous arts organizations throughout the world and has generated over \$22 million in earned income. She is also Senior Advisor, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion at New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Currently her portfolio includes social justice initiatives and Equity Diversity Inclusion workshops. She is a lecturer and keynote presenter for international arts conferences in Bloemfontein, South Africa, Croatia, and Australian Arts Conferences. She is an adjunct professor at New York University and Columbia University. She is the recipient of over 50 awards including the 2022 Margot Adams Signature Award, 2021 SGI-USA Distinguished Pioneer Award and the 2019 League of Professional Theatre Women Rachel Crothers Leadership Award. Her first book, [Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to Arts, Culture and Community](#), was published in 2005 and her second book, *Champions for the Arts: Lessons and Successful Strategies for Engaging Diverse Audiences* will be published in April 2024. She has a weekly blog, [Arts and Culture Connections](#), that explores cultural efforts to expand diverse audiences. She is also a Board member for Newark Arts Council, Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, Signature Theater (NY), HARLEM WEEK, and The Harlem Arts Alliance.



Acknowledgements

The Catalyst Fund Incubator, Catalyst Guides, and Catalyst Snapshots are made possible by the Mellon Foundation with additional support from the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation.

Additional support for this Catalyst Guide is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.



Thank you to the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Handel and Haydn Society, Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra, Jacksonville Symphony, Johnstown Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, New Haven Symphony Orchestra, Oregon Symphony, San Diego Symphony, Virginia Symphony Orchestra, and Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, whose learnings in equity, diversity, and inclusion work inform this Guide.

Lead Author: **Theodore Wiprud**

Contributing Authors: **Dr. Karen Yair and Donna Walker-Kuhne**

Reviewers: **Simon Woods and Andrew Anzel Ph.D**

Content Developer and Producer: **Dr. Karen Yair**

Creative Director: **Rachel Rossos Gallant**

Editor: **Rachel Rossos Gallant**

Designer: **Mark Ho-Kane**

Web Layout: **Joanna Bettelheim**

Interviewees: **Alex Speir, Charles Buchanan, Dan Hart, Dave Moss, David Fisk, David Snead, Deirdre Roddin, Diana Ortiz, Elaine Carroll, Elias Feghali, James Blachly, Jesse Needleman, Jessica Ruiz, Joe Loehnis, Karisa Antonio, Katie Bonner Russo, Marianne Rice, Nikki Thorpe, Robert Castro, Russell Kelban, Terell Johnson, Tony Nickle, Tori Fusinaz.**

© 2024 League of American Orchestras

Published on January 4, 2024.

A Catalyst Guide by the League of American Orchestras. 520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, New York, NY 10018 americanorchestras.org