

League of American Orchestras



Catalyst Guide

The Power of Inclusion

By Theodore Wiprud and Dr. Karen Yair
with Pratichi Shah



Charlotte Symphony musicians, staff, and leadership visit the CSO's mobile stage, CSO Roadshow, during fabrication. Photo courtesy of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra.



“Challenging people to do their best, to create the best art or creatively navigate a shifting financial situation, to think strategically—that can be a positive thing and very collaborative.”

— Victoria Gau, Music Director, Capital City Symphony

COVER PHOTO:

ProMusica Chamber Orchestra musicians with composer Jon Batiste during a musical residency in Columbus, Ohio. Photo courtesy of ProMusica Chamber Orchestra.



A group of ProMusica Chamber Orchestra musicians pose with Music Director David Danzmayr and CEO Janet Chen at a typical post-concert social hangout. Photo courtesy of ProMusica Chamber Orchestra.

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Foreword from
Contributing Author

Pratichi Shah

Classical music has always been a collective art form. What we experience on stages depends on a collective working together—musicians, conductors, staff, volunteers, educators, boards, and audiences. Our orchestras thrive as ensembles of individuals, bound by shared purpose and passion.

The same is true of the organizational life behind the music. Research and study of organizations show that inclusive, positive cultures allow people to thrive.¹ An orchestra's investment in a cohesive approach towards inclusion across infrastructure and processes ensures that its values are not just spoken, but lived, and that authentic connection is created onstage and off.

This guide offers practical ways to weave those values into the fabric of an orchestra's daily life—into rehearsal rooms, board meetings, internal infrastructure, and community engagement. Its purpose is not to prescribe a single path, but to help orchestras align their intentions with their actions, so that what is heard on stage reflects what is lived behind the scenes. Building inclusive, positive cultures is an ongoing journey—one that requires consistent intention, ongoing awareness, and real collaboration. You will find here not only ideas, but pragmatic approaches that link vision to practice, strategy to daily interactions, and individual contributions to organizational growth. I hope this guide encourages you and your colleagues to imagine what is possible for your orchestra and to take concrete, meaningful steps toward a culture where everyone feels respected, supported, and connected. Because when we build such cultures, we don't just strengthen our organizations—we enrich the art form we all cherish.

Pratichi Shah

HR Strategist

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¹ "The Business Case for a High-Trust Culture," Great Place to Work Institute, 2021; Emma Seppälä & Kim Cameron, "Proof That Positive Work Cultures Are More Productive," Harvard Business Review, December 1, 2015.

Introduction

Inclusion is fundamental to a healthy organizational culture¹ and a key driver of long-term success. For many orchestras, building an inclusive culture is both a strategic imperative and an expression of core values. Inclusion directly supports better results, greater collaboration, and stronger retention, while also making the workplace more humane, equitable, and effective for everyone.

Inclusion manifests in a number of positive feelings among employees, which we define as follows:

- **Respect:** feeling accepted and being treated fairly and with dignity.
- **Safety:** feeling welcomed and comfortable sharing thoughts, ideas, and disagreement without fear of retribution.
- **Empowerment:** feeling a sense of purpose and agency to contribute towards achieving the organization's vision.
- **Connection:** feeling a sense of belonging, having meaningful interactions at work, and feeling aligned to the organization's values.
- **Support:** feeling equipped to get work done and achieve your potential, while having a healthy work-life balance.
- **Acknowledgement:** feeling seen and valued and being recognized as an individual making unique contributions to the organization.

For mission-driven organizations, inclusion is essential to delivering on our values: we cannot serve our communities effectively if we're not also fostering care, respect, and belonging among our own staff and musicians. Orchestras rely on people who are committed, motivated, and able to work well together under pressure. That's far more likely to happen when individuals feel valued, heard, and part of something larger than themselves.

In challenging times—when resources are stretched, pressure is high, and decisions must be made quickly—the value of inclusion only grows. A strong culture of inclusion helps ensure

that people remain connected, motivated, and able to work at their best, even in difficult circumstances, and that decisions benefit from varied perspectives. Efforts to promote inclusion are especially critical for people with a different background from those around them. Managing power dynamics, generational differences, and the flow of information through formal hierarchies are all important in ensuring every person in the organization feels included (especially when staff and musicians may have very different roles, experiences, and employment structures).

This Catalyst Guide draws on the aggregated findings of the League of American Orchestras' Inclusion Index², a project enabling orchestras to assess and benchmark their organizational cultures. A group of 60 orchestras of all budget sizes self-selected to participate in this project, distributing a survey designed by [Accordant Advisors](#) to their musicians and staff members. Anonymous responses from 1,936 musicians and 833 staff members became the basis for reports to each participating orchestra, as well as an overall report to the League.

This Guide presents key insights from this report and tells the stories of ten orchestras whose Inclusion Index scores ranked highly within their budget groups. Orchestras across the country, from big-budget to community orchestras, are represented here, sharing experience and advice that can help the whole field. The stories in these pages show that a workplace where all musicians and staff feel they belong and personally contribute to a worthy mission is a hallmark of a thriving orchestra that is equipped to meet today's challenges, whatever its budget size.

We intentionally focus on the experiences of musicians and staff, recognizing that both groups play critical roles in shaping organizational culture from within. Boards also have significant influence in setting the tone and priorities of an orchestra and their support is key to sustaining progress in the longer term.

¹Simon Woods, "Forward Thinking: Culture Matters," *Symphony*, July 19, 2024, <https://symphony.org/features/forward-thinking-culture-matters/>

²The Inclusion Index is a component of the League of American Orchestras' [Inclusive Stages](#) program, a major national initiative to increase the racial diversity of musicians in American orchestras. Inclusive Stages works through a national coalition of orchestras aligned around change and relies on data collection to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving state of the field.



Monthly Chipotle day at the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, where staff members gather to eat lunch together. Photo courtesy of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra.

10 Characteristics of Inclusive Orchestras

The Inclusion Index results show that many U.S. orchestras are making real progress in building more positive, inclusive organizational cultures.

At the same time, others have yet to establish the kind of inclusive environment that fully supports their goals. As in the broader arts and culture sector³, this work can be especially challenging for larger-budget organizations with larger staff teams.

Our research shows that those musicians and staff reporting an inclusive organizational culture typically work for orchestras with some of the following characteristics:

1 A STRONG SENSE OF INTERNAL COMMUNITY, WITH MUSICIANS, STAFF, AND BOARD ACTING AS ONE TOWARD THE MISSION

- a. **A commitment to inclusion and belonging** articulated in a strategic plan or values statement, holding the institution accountable
- b. **Board leadership support for a welcoming community**, and participation in the life of the orchestra
- c. **Alignment of internal and external identities**, rooting inclusive culture in an orchestra's role in its community
- d. **Gatherings of orchestra, staff, and board** in settings both business and social
- e. **Engagement and onboarding for new staff and musicians** to pass along the orchestra's workplace culture—especially for those whose backgrounds might make them feel different

2 SAFETY IN SHARING THOUGHTS, IDEAS, AND DISAGREEMENTS

- a. **Forums for dialogue about institutional issues**, both public and through private channels, enabling people to voice concerns in ways that are comfortable for them
- b. **Role modeling**, at every level of management and by the music director, the commitment to transparency and psychological safety

³ SMU DataArts (2025): [THE POWER OF INCLUSION Unlocking Workforce Well-Being in Arts and Culture](#)

3 CARE FOR MUSICIANS AND STAFF THAT MAKES EACH PERSON FEEL INDIVIDUALLY SEEN AND SUPPORTED

- a. **A history of caring**, which for some orchestras has meant maintaining employment and insurance straight through the pandemic
- b. **Leadership presence** at rehearsals, performances, community events, and throughout the office
- c. **Flexibility with work hours** to optimize satisfaction and retention among mission-driven staff
- d. **Contractual services** for training, discussion of institutional issues, and content of interest to musicians' personal and professional lives

4 COLLABORATION ACROSS FUNCTIONS

- a. **Working groups tackling big questions**, mixing musicians, staff, and board
- b. **Sharing the challenges and processes of musicians and various staff** through written channels and in-person activities

5 PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR STAFF AND MUSICIANS

- a. **Regular performance reviews for staff** that provide clear expectations and guide towards goals for personal growth
- b. **Financial support for staff members' professional development** and mentoring toward expanded roles
- c. **Flexibility for musicians with external performance opportunities**

6 RESPECT AND RECOGNITION FOR MUSICIANS AND STAFF

- a. **Celebration of special accomplishments**—and not only for department heads or section leaders—like solos, community work, or successful revenue generation
- b. **Events to recognize important anniversaries and retirements** for staff as well as orchestra
- c. **Respectful audition and tenure communications and procedures** built on clear communication and a supportive experience

7 ACCOUNTABILITY AT ALL LEVELS

- a. **Orientation or training for staff and for orchestra section leaders** that inculcates the orchestra's commitment to a welcoming, respectful culture, and makes training for organizational skills available
- b. **Dealing with interpersonal and workplace issues** quickly and with compassion, allowing all to be heard, and heading off larger problems

8 COMMUNICATION TO OVERCOME SILOS AND PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY

- a. **Regular written communications** that make staff and musicians aware of the *how* and the *why* as well as the *what*, along with news both good and not-so-good

9 EMPOWERMENT AND AGENCY FOR MUSICIANS AND STAFF

- a. **Opportunities for musicians to provide programing ideas**, create or participate in community initiatives, or see their input realized in other meaningful ways
- b. **Openness to staff input on how goals can be reached**, and how administrative tasks are carried out

10 PERSISTENCE IN ALL OF THESE PRACTICES, AND CONSISTENCY ACROSS STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND TOOLS, to allow a distinctive and self-sustaining culture and institutional pride to evolve

Arkansas Symphony Orchestra audience members celebrate at the Grand Opening of the new ASO Music Center, the orchestra's first permanent home. ASO prioritizes staff retention, maintaining a consistent team who raised the funding for this state-of-the-art building. Photo by Matthew Sewell.



“Where the rubber meets the road is whether your leaders are modeling certain behaviors. If you’re good at providing safety, communication, recognition—stuff rolls downhill. If you don’t have it, that’s a liability.”

— Hannah Lozon, Senior Director of Talent and Culture, Detroit Symphony Orchestra

Capsule Case Histories

For this Guide, we interviewed staff and musicians at ten orchestras that scored a high Inclusion Index. We wanted to know what practices led to staff and/or musicians giving strong ratings for the various characteristics of an inclusive culture listed above. Their stories—drawn from all budget sizes and regions of the country—provide helpful, practical ideas on how to improve any orchestra’s workplace culture.



Charlotte Symphony Orchestra staff and musicians enjoy an impromptu lunch together outside after a season "welcome" event. Photo courtesy of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra.

Charlotte Symphony Orchestra: Focus on a Welcoming Culture

The core values are right there on the website. Directly after the popular lead value of “highest artistic integrity” comes: “Welcoming: We foster a culture of warmth and belonging that draws the best from our employees and creates an inclusive space for our community; where everyone is accepted, valued, and treated with empathy, dignity, and respect.”

These are not just words at the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra (CSO). The current strategic plan details how communications and transparency will help unify staff and musicians as “one CSO.” The Organizational Culture Committee (including musicians, staff, and board) holds the orchestra accountable to its goals. A subcommittee, the Employee Engagement Group, plans social events and recruits employees to volunteer with community partner organizations to foster shared experiences and friendships.

Maribeth Baker is the CSO’s Human Resources Counselor. She says it is important to have multiple channels for receiving input and

feedback: some employees may be comfortable speaking up in a town hall setting, others less so. The CSO’s Innovation Hub is an internal online platform that invites new ideas of all kinds. Submissions can be anonymous or credited, and the Innovation Committee commits to considering every idea submitted. One Innovation Hub outcome: CSO now participates in the local Pride Parade.

Another channel for input is a periodic employee roundtable, led by Baker, notably with no leadership present, encouraging frank discussion. One request heard there was for more transparency around budgeting. As a result, the VP for Finance presented financial reports and took questions at an all-staff meeting.

Professional development is another aspect of caring for staff. CSO has a budget to support training and provides access to LinkedIn Learning to all managers. Baker suggests in particular that they explore courses on inclusion and belonging, which might come in the form of 20 micro-lessons.

The leadership team sometimes watches LinkedIn Learning videos as part of their meetings.

Baker feels that showing care for musicians can be more challenging than for staff because they are in a separate workspace and on a different schedule. Office Manager Amy Hine makes a point of bringing snacks and small gifts to musicians at rehearsals, and leaving notes in mailboxes. “The musicians are touched,” Baker says. “Even though we don’t share space every day, we’re intentional about making sure they feel part of the team. They’ve told us they feel noticed—and that means a lot.” The CSO’s weekly internal newsletter recognizes both staff and musicians with get-to-know-them features, revealing hobbies and interests. “We care enough to ask, and to share,” says Baker. “It’s a lot of little things.”

She credits Music Director Kwamé Ryan as “a phenomenal listener and communicator.” He focuses on musicians individually, and he shows

up. Ryan attended a training Baker provided the orchestra (at their request) on unconscious bias, and afterward, he acknowledged the ideas he took away to implement. Ryan also participates in the Innovation Committee meetings and is enthusiastic about hearing new ideas from musicians and staff alike, which has recently resulted in a performance called “Beethoven x Beyonce.”

“It’s important that we demonstrate our core values from the very beginning,” Baker says. A “buddy system” pairs up new staffers with veterans from different departments, to answer questions and help them find their way. Baker believes these efforts are especially helpful to new hires, ensuring they feel welcomed and supported from the start—particularly those whose backgrounds or experiences might be underrepresented—without singling them out for special treatment.

Staff and musicians march at the Charlotte Pride parade in 2024. The impetus to march in the parade came through the CSO’s Innovation Hub. Photo courtesy of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra.



Lansing Symphony Orchestra: Communication Starts at the Top

Elinore Morin, Assistant Principal Viola of the Lansing Symphony Orchestra (LSO), recalls that the orchestra unionized in 2004 “because management was not listening. Suggestions were falling on deaf ears.” The orchestra went through a series of executives before landing on Courtney Millbrook. “Courtney was a breath of fresh air. The board has turned over, too. Now everything is about communication. Because we have dialogue, we can say more—and Courtney does too.”

Fifteen years on, the LSO has evolved a notably welcoming culture for musicians. A forthcoming strategic plan has a section devoted to “artistic vibrancy,” which recognizes the importance of people feeling included, fostering retention. Millbrook also credits Finance and Operations Director Karen Dichoza for working closely with the musicians and ensuring their communication with management.

It starts with the audition process, which aims to be highly transparent and provide auditioning musicians with congenial warm-up space and a comfortable, low-stress experience. “We get compliments for the way musicians feel respected in the audition,” says Morin.

Morin calls Music Director Tim Muffitt highly collegial. “He lets us play,” she says, in contrast to

prior conductors so intent on nuance that musicians felt constrained. “And he knows everyone’s name,” she adds. “He makes a point of greeting new members of the orchestra individually during their first concert cycle.” That contributes to the positive feeling on stage.

When an important announcement comes out—for instance, Muffitt’s imminent retirement—Millbrook makes sure the musicians hear it first. And every musician has a head shot and bio on the LSO website. They are all seen.

Musicians have input on chamber music programming, and those contracted for fewer orchestra services get priority for chamber performances. Morin notes that the contemporary music series often entails unusual combinations of instruments, bringing musicians together with colleagues they might not usually work with.

Onstage dress code can be challenging for nonbinary musicians, so LSO has done away with traditional white tie and tails versus long gowns. But Morin notes that the shift to all-black outfits of one’s own design is as much generational as gender-based. The most important thing is a culture where people are comfortable asking about their options and expressing their preferences.

The Lansing Symphony Orchestra’s upcoming strategic framework recognizes the importance of making people feel included, to both retention and artistic vibrancy. Here, Assistant Principal Violist Elinore Morin embraces violist Linda Gregorian on the occasion of her retirement after more than 40 years of service. Photo courtesy of the Lansing Symphony Orchestra.



Detroit Symphony Orchestra staff are intentional about building relationships with each individual musician. Here, its musicians and board members work together at the orchestra's annual Day of Service, held at Keep Growing Detroit. Photo by Natalie Berger.



Detroit Symphony Orchestra: Inclusion Drives a Turnaround

In 2010, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) went out on strike over pay cuts proposed by management. The strike lasted six months, leaving many musicians bitter over concessions. Tensions were understandably high between staff and musicians. Then-CEO Anne Parsons and Board Chair Philip Fisher focused on rebuilding relationships, and staff turnover resulted in key positions being held by new hires.

General Manager Kathryn Ginsburg was among those hires. “There was a lot of hurt,” she recalls. “But it was an opportunity to build the culture we wanted.” After years of intentional work on inclusion and belonging, the DSO can now boast a notably healthy workplace. They have coined the term “one DSO.” “Our last four negotiations have finished early,” Ginsburg says. “We do it with mutual respect.”

“Building individual relationships with every musician onstage—that’s something I’ve prioritized,” continues Ginsburg. Conversations, both casual and work-related, foster a welcome atmosphere of psychological safety. “You have to be intentional about building relationships when times are good; then you’ll have that to fall back on for tough times.”

When the DSO tours, there’s ample time for casual interaction, for instance at hotel bars and restaurants, and that is a necessity for getting through tough patches together. “Things go wrong sometimes,” Ginsburg admits, “but we come back together, recognize that it was hard, and try to fix it.”

For a large organization like DSO, staffing is also part of the equation. Hannah Lozon, Senior Director of Talent and Culture, notes that the HR staff has increased from 1.25 full-time-equivalent positions (whose entire work was occupied with benefits administration and new employee paperwork processing) to four full-time employees. Lozon and her team now have time to listen and to support. All staff meet eight times per year, with Lozon leading de-siloing ice-breaker activities. Prompts might be to tell each other about a concert you’re looking forward to and why, or to find ten things that four of you have in common. Via Microsoft Teams, staff also share a “good word” every Friday—one thing that went well in one’s week. It’s a fun, easy way to share about each other’s work and personal lives in a hybrid environment.

The DSO will host its 3rd annual staff anniversary event this June, a 90-minute celebration with years-of-service pins, gifts for those celebrating

milestone years of service, and a feature on employees celebrating 10+ years at the DSO. This event has become a celebrated staple in the annual calendar and an easy way to express appreciation for the staff behind the scenes. “I was at a webinar recently where the research mentioned the fact that ‘the happiest places on earth celebrate often.’ The more we can build that into our culture, the more dividends it has for our workplace,” Lozon says.

DSO involves musicians in as many committees and task forces as possible, alongside board and staff. Among the DSO’s cross-sector working groups are the Equity Champions, advancing the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion—a group, notably, with no senior management, so that hard issues can be voiced freely. DEI learning sessions continue for musicians and staff. President and CEO Erik Rönmark has told the team that the DSO’s commitment to inclusion will continue despite changes in the national climate. That ongoing internal work, together with the scale and success of the outward-facing Detroit Strategy (an ambitious set of tailor-made partnerships across the city), keeps musicians and staff invested in the distinctive vision of the DSO to be “an inclusive and culturally relevant community where all people can experience their world through music.”

Lozon stresses the importance of leadership modeling the behaviors desired among staff and musicians. “If we’re good at providing safety, communication, recognition—that rolls downhill. If we don’t, that’s a liability.”

“Be intentional about building relationships when times are good—then you have that to fall back on for tough times.”

— Kathryn Ginsburg, General Manager, Detroit Symphony Orchestra



Arkansas Symphony Orchestra staff celebrating together at the end of a successful fundraiser. The ASO embodies a culture of work hard, play hard. Photo courtesy of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra.

Arkansas Symphony Orchestra: Retention Through Caring

“We strive to build a ‘culture of team,’” says Arkansas Symphony Orchestra (ASO) CEO Christina Littlejohn. ASO committees include members of the orchestra, board, and staff. “We enjoy a backstage champagne toast for everyone on opening night, a holiday party, an end-of-year party where people share their favorite moment of the concert season.”

But caring means more than socializing or even committee work. Littlejohn believes that a tone was set during the pandemic. “We paid all full-time musicians and professional staff salaries, no

furloughs,” she recalls. Even per service musicians, after being paid for contracted services, continued to receive small gifts from the symphony to let them know they were not forgotten. “Our message was all about keeping people employed,” Littlejohn explains. The care shown to musicians resonated with the community. Subscriptions saw a 97% retention rate, and a virtual gala exceeded goals even without the dancing and steak dinner.

The pandemic made an opening for the musicians’ own initiative to care for the community, a good

example of internal and external alignment around caring. “Bedtime with Bach” was a series of online solo and small-ensemble performances of lullaby-worthy repertoire, streamed live every night at 9:00pm, “meant to provide a soothing comfort during very stressful times.” (These are still available on [YouTube](#).)

Music Director Geoffrey Robson was associate conductor for years, then chosen for the top job by the musicians. He welcomes musicians’ views, and sometimes plays chamber music with them. As a result of musicians feeling heard, Littlejohn relates that visiting soloists often say the ASO stage feels happier than most.

Caring extends to staff as well. To begin with, Littlejohn values a variety of viewpoints, making staff feel safe about speaking up. “It helps you avoid the potholes,” she says. “Far more gets accomplished when people have their own voices.” She also prioritizes professional growth to retain good people. Annual reviews include self-evaluations asking where they want to

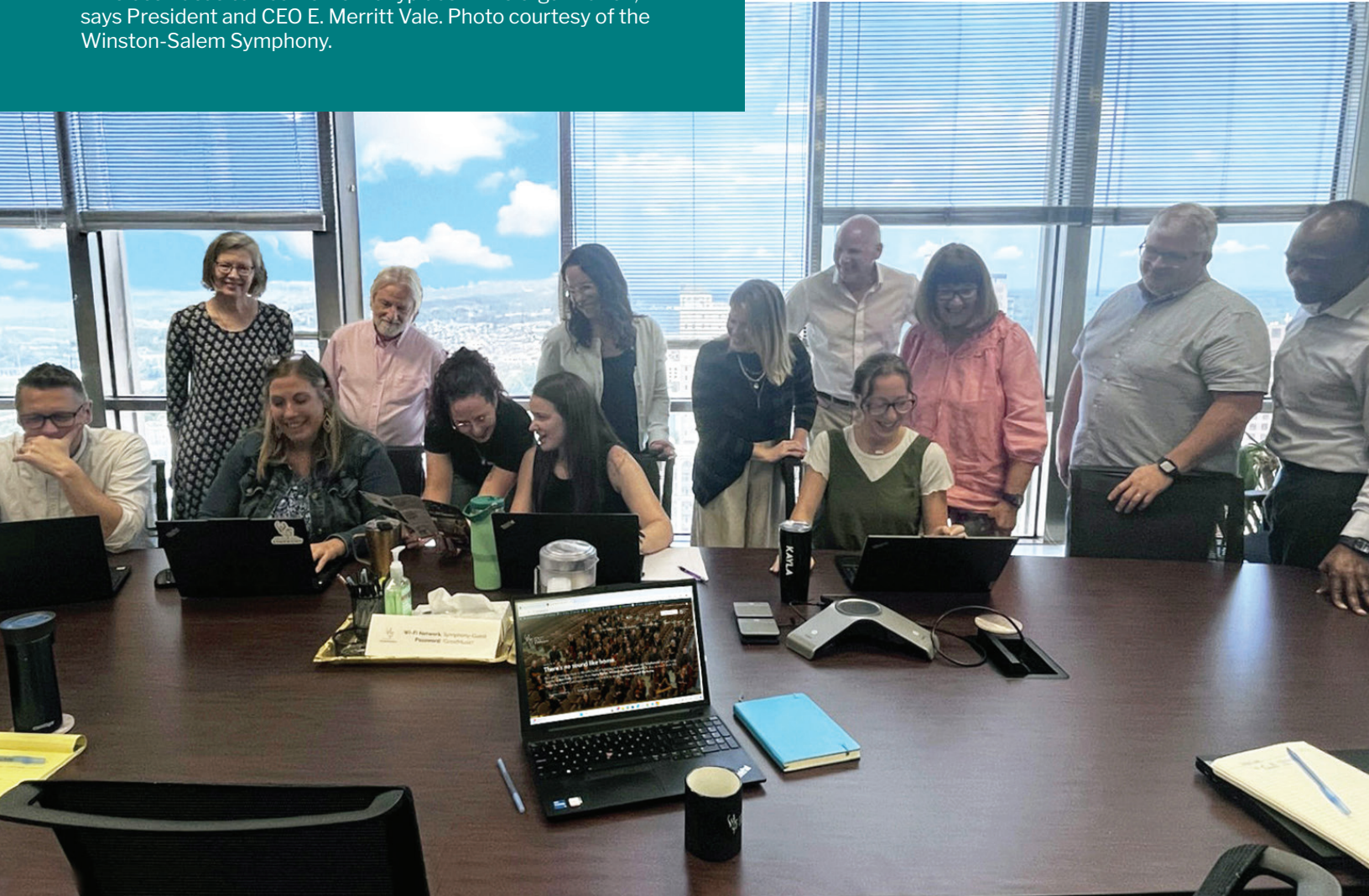
develop. Littlejohn sends team members to conferences, hires coaches for them, and grows their responsibilities as the staff members wish. For instance, David Renfro, now Chief Development Officer, began as orchestra personnel manager, then moved over to operations, and finally into fundraising. Littlejohn adds, “we wouldn’t have accomplished anything if we’d had too much turnover.” The average staff tenure is nine years.

“What gives our team energy is doing work they enjoy, working together, and seeing the success of their efforts. Plus, a day off here and there doesn’t hurt.” This team raised the funds, built, and opened the new ASO Music Center in September 2024. “There is no way in the world we would have raised the capital funds for our new first-of-its-kind music center, while growing our annual fund, during Covid,” says Littlejohn, “if we hadn’t been an organization that cared about its people.”



Audience members applaud enthusiastically at the new ASO Music Center. Photo by Matthew Sewell.

Winston-Salem Symphony staff in full collaborative mode. “The best ideas can come from anyplace in the organization,” says President and CEO E. Merritt Vale. Photo courtesy of the Winston-Salem Symphony.



Winston-Salem Symphony: De-Siloing through Open Dialogue

E. Merritt Vale, President and CEO of the Winston-Salem Symphony (“the Symphony”), often brings together staff from various departments and throws open hot topics: are things we have done for a long time still worthy? Are there other things we could invest in more productively? “I don’t stand on ceremony,” she says. “The best ideas can come from anyplace in the organization. We have a lot of respect here for that fact and we have no shortage of good ideas.” At the same time, she does not like surprises. “If there’s an elephant in the room, let’s address it up front.”

She credits this culture of open dialogue in part to the Symphony's past participation in the League's [The Catalyst Fund Incubator](#). "It created an opportunity to bring different members of the team and other institutional constituents into a process. We learned how cathartic it can be to ask the hard questions and talk about sensitive topics. We're now more willing and equipped to have that kind of conversation." Another result is that deliberate efforts are made to ensure all constituents have the same level of access and respect, no matter their identity or background. "Our differences are valuable," Vale stresses. "A broader cross-section of experience and opinion gives us a better chance of getting it right and of enhancing our relevance to the diverse community we serve. It always starts with earning and building trust. This requires time and sustained commitment."

Vale is also committed to fostering her staff's professional advancement. "Everyone is entitled to professional development," she says. "Mission-centric work is a demanding lifestyle. As non-profits, it is important that we invest in our teams to supplement compensation limitations." She feels that "the pandemic did us a favor in terms of expanding access to free and inexpensive professional development on all kinds of topics, much of it online." She cites webinars from the League, as well as from law firms and other professional groups like accounting firms and financial advisors. This reduces barriers of time and cost, and circumvents the vulnerability of professional development to cuts in travel budgets. In addition, staff gather at least once per month on a topic of learning or strategic dialogue, for instance about advocacy, or about how everyone can contribute to revenue generation. These gatherings occasionally also include board members.

At least four times per year, staff gather over lunch just to enjoy each other, and to receive thanks for all they do. The Symphony used to have a "staff member of the year" recognizing special achievements, but now Vale feels that since so much of what they do is team oriented, this is less productive. She adds "while we are quick to provide well-deserved individual recognition, our team embraces the notion that what we accomplish together is often more gratifying."

"It starts with the Golden Rule: if you treat other people the way you would like to be treated, it produces positive results."

— Merritt Vale, President and CEO, Winston-Salem Symphony



Virginia Symphony Orchestra Music Director Eric Jacobsen sets the tone for music making as a team. Here, he plays cello alongside orchestra Fellows Omari Imhotep Abdul-Alim, Zachary Small, Avery Robinson, and Emmanuel Losa. Photo courtesy of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra.

Virginia Symphony Orchestra:

In Service of the Orchestra

“The purpose of the staff is to make it so musicians can play at their best level, for the broadest audience.” Christy Havens draws this lesson from ten years at the Virginia Symphony Orchestra (VSO), first as a substitute bassoonist, then as Director of Education, and now as Chief Operating Officer. “We are in service of the orchestra. If we receive complaints, the staff shouldn’t feel accosted; they come to us to solve their problem. It’s about what they need to do their job the way they want to do it. No one cares more than they do.”

How does this caring mentality manifest?

“Everyone on Orchestra Committee has my personal cell number; they text me with ideas all the time,” Havens says. The musicians’ Artistic Advisory Committee is active and often sees its recommendations implemented. Havens publishes a monthly calendar with details about venues (VSO plays in 14 locales throughout eastern Virginia) and crucially, the *why* of each event. An annual Musicians Handbook is available in the orchestra’s online OPAS scheduling software.

“We have been making improvements in how we onboard musicians—it should be just as intentional as when we onboard staff,” Havens says, and this is particularly important for new section leaders. “How they lead their sections needs to be consonant with our culture.” It also helps that Music Director Eric Jacobsen is so in touch with this culture and models it himself. He sets the tone for music making as a team, and even plays chamber music with VSO musicians for certain events through the year.

Dr. Andrea Warren, President and CEO, has an open-door policy, welcoming staff to talk at any time. She also walks around the office to build relationships with everyone. She thinks of that as modeling inclusive behavior.

The VSO Fellowship Program aims to advance the goal of increased diversity among orchestra musicians nationwide. [Forty Years of Fellowships](#), a study published by the League in 2016, identified a lack of belonging as a key weakness of some past fellowship programs. To ensure that regular musicians would be welcoming to Fellows, the VSO turned to its string principals to design the program. To begin with, there is never just one Fellow: each year, four Fellows play over 100 services, both classics and educational programming. They are enrolled in a certificate course at Old Dominion University, including lessons with VSO musicians. Just as important, a small group of younger tenured players make a point of inviting the Fellows for social get-togethers. Fellows have reported feeling like a part of the team and the social scheme.

Nikki Thorpe, Director of Civic and Community Engagement, talks about being intentional about welcoming new staff and musicians, especially when they might be the only person of their background. When a new hire identified their pronouns as they/them, Thorpe sent out an all-office email along with an educational video explaining how to respect what people want to be called. “We acknowledged that it’s a learning curve for everyone,” she says. “It’s showing respect for everyone.”

Thorpe also works to help staff embrace the music and musicians at the center of the organization. In 2024, she started a lunch-and-learn for staff with less musical background, to learn musical terms and the ideas behind programming. By January, when the following season launched, staff from every department presented to each other the upcoming repertoire and what makes it exciting. “It builds inclusivity, gets everyone on the same page,” Thorpe says. “It gets us aligned on mission.”



ProMusica Chamber Orchestra musicians throw a surprise birthday party for CEO Janet Chen. Photo courtesy of ProMusica Chamber Orchestra.

ProMusica Chamber Orchestra: Caring for Musicians

The majority of musicians, both contracted and substitute players, at the ProMusica Chamber Orchestra in Columbus, OH come in from out of town for every concert cycle. For many years, they were all housed in a hotel. But as CEO Janet Chen explains, about ten years ago, efforts to build relationships with audience members led to a homestay program, with community members hosting individual musicians for the five days of services each month. Board members and subscribers were early participants, and as the practice has grown organically, now almost every traveling musician has a “home away from home” with a regular host. “We try to pair people who have a shared interest or lifestyle,” Chen says. “For example, some hosts are amateur musicians, so we will match guests who play the same instrument. What’s lovely is seeing reciprocal generosity

develop over the years—some hosts now drive their musician to or from the airport, and animal-loving musicians are known to walk their hosts’ dogs.”

Ellen Connors, Principal Bassoon, comes in from St. Louis. She says that “our hosts are some of our most active and enthusiastic supporters. When we stay with them, we see how hard they work for us and what the orchestra means to them.” Substitute Horn Matt Oliphant agrees. “I’ve felt very welcomed, shared meals, and met people’s kids and grandkids. My relationship with my host makes the trip to Columbus every month or so an easy choice.”

Of course, these homestays save the orchestra on accommodations. More important, they have led directly to growth in musician chair sponsorships. A decade ago, 65% of the orchestra was underwritten, and now every musician is sponsored.

“The formative chair sponsors would speak enthusiastically about their musician friendships,” Chen recalls, “and before we knew it, we had unsponsored musicians asking if they could help with finding an underwriter; and then we had a waitlist for donors who wanted to sponsor the next musician who would become available. It was a great problem to have!” Concertmaster Katherine McLin says “With our sponsors, we become part of their family, celebrating birthdays and weddings together and, on the other side of the spectrum, honoring our bond by playing at their funeral. We share a deep love of the organization and are invested, literally and figuratively, in its health and prosperity. This creates a unique community that I have yet to find in a performing arts organization elsewhere.”

Music Director David Danzmayr does his part in making musicians feel a sense of belonging. “He cares about the musicians—both contracted players and subs,” Chen says. After rehearsals he’ll go out with musicians for a bite, along with Chen herself. “It shows he’s there with them offstage as well as onstage.”

Chen says that the ProMusica community is like extended family to the musicians. Recently the orchestra hosted a book launch for Principal Cello Marc Moskovitz, who is also an accomplished author. Donors, audiences, and half the orchestra attended. “Being a chamber orchestra, more intimate in size, maybe it seems more natural,” Chen speculates.

ProMusica’s culture of caring for musicians is also reflected in staff hiring. The team is integral to ProMusica’s supportive culture, and values transparency and input from all voices. For example, Chen and Danzmayr share the state of the organization at an annual musician townhall gathering, and welcome ideas, questions, and feedback. Chen’s frequent “Janet Time” newsletter to the musicians, staff, and board shares exciting news, recognition of staff or a musician who has gone above and beyond, and sometimes less-good news like the loss of a funder or community challenges.

Chen says that “ProMusica puts our people first.” Musicians know they can come to Chen anytime. “After years of supporting authenticity and openness, it eventually becomes part of our DNA.”



ProMusica Chamber Orchestra has taken proactive steps to strengthen the relationships between board members and musicians. Here, founding board members are pictured with ensemble violinists. Photo courtesy of ProMusica Chamber Orchestra.



Support from the orchestra's administration and leadership gives Summermusik Principal Flute Annie Darlin Gordon the confidence needed to take artistic risks. Photo by Mark Lyons.

Summermusik: Motivating Musicians

"Programming has a big impact on our audience, and also on musicians and how they view us," says Summermusik Executive Director Evan Gidley, speaking of resident ensemble Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra (CCO). He believes that experiencing different music, and adjusting performance style, is both challenging and rewarding to musicians. It instills a sense of purpose.

Music Director Eckart Preu consistently validates musicians' input. He welcomes their programming ideas for ensemble concerts, their suggestions for orchestra repertoire, and their input during rehearsals.

"Summermusik is where I get to flex my creative musician muscles," says Principal Flute Annie Darlin Gordon. "I relish the opportunity to help curate an ensemble performance knowing that I will have musician colleagues capable of anything I ask of them, support from the orchestra's administration and leadership, and a loyal audience eagerly waiting to see what new, exciting thing we have to offer them."

Summermusik occupies the month of August, with full orchestra each Saturday evening and smaller ensemble concerts throughout the month. "August is fun, less serious," Gidley says, "so the atmosphere is more laid back. It's like a reunion. And the pressure of shows in quick succession forces people to work together." Contributing to the reunion vibe, CCO hosts a post-concert party at a nearby gallery for

musicians, staff, board, and patrons after each Saturday concert. "A majority of musicians choose to attend," says Gidley, "and some are often among the last to leave! It's a nice way for everyone to unwind during a stressful month."

The "We Are One" festival extends CCO programming into springtime, and this especially is where musicians get to explore music from other cultures. The festival's mission: "to amplify under-consulted voices by acknowledging historical and contemporary inequities and celebrating unique cultures through music, art, and dialogue." Themes have included "Hope," telling immigrant and refugee stories; "Empower," celebrating the Negro Spiritual; and "Water," exploring both Native American and Asian Indian cultures.

CCO's growing community engagement work is another source of motivation. Musicians play regularly at Ronald McDonald House, which provides comfort and support to families with children who are ill or injured. "We get great musician feedback on those."

While creative programming and musician input enhance their sense of belonging at the CCO, Gidley hastens to add that "everyone has a better experience if it's not just about the music. Personal relationships are extremely important. Personal relationships make the work we do feel less like work and more like fun."

Capital City Symphony: A Community of Choice

In 2005, the Georgetown Symphony Orchestra's Music Director Victoria Gau powerfully demonstrated her community orchestra's devotion to creating inclusive space both onstage and in the community. The orchestra became a founding partner of the Atlas Performing Arts Center, in northeast Washington, DC. At the same time, the orchestra was renamed Capital City Symphony to reflect its citywide mission to serve neighborhoods with less access to the performing arts. Atlas is located along the H Street corridor that was a center of Black commerce until its devastation in the riots that followed Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968. Atlas (named for an iconic movie theatre at its core) has been key to the revitalization of the neighborhood.

Gau enthuses about buy-in to the values of the organization among musicians (volunteers who pay dues on a sliding scale). Musicians can see the organization's values in its programming—in diverse repertoire, in free tickets for youth, in family shows. Gau describes it as “a community of choice, not of income. Many people who audition for us are idealistic young people.” These idealists are invited to help shape the orchestra's strategic plan in orchestra-wide town halls.

A telling sign of musicians' devotion to the orchestra is that it provides social bonds in the transience of Washington; musicians may leave for four years, but when they return to DC, they return to the orchestra. Contributing to that is an understanding of their needs. “Our artistic goal is a performance beyond what the musicians expect, and we don't get there by badgering people who have already worked 50 hours this week.”

In building a culture of discussion, freedom, and teamwork, Gau credits her longtime board chair Alex Swartsel, herself a consultant on employment matters. “She is an absolute dream for setting up an organizational culture where people want to be heard.” Two elected orchestra representatives serve on the board to keep lines of communication open. And Gau has a strong leadership partner in Executive Director Genevieve McGahey.

When interpersonal issues arise, Gau and McGahey stress dealing with it directly, and with empathy. “People are human,” McGahey reminds us, “and we believe in giving each other the benefit of the doubt.” Issues like workplace safety can be hard for a small nonprofit to deal with, she says, “but having inclusive principles at the core makes it so much easier to work and have a thriving arts organization.”



Music Director Victoria Gau leads a culture of discussion, freedom, and teamwork, in collaboration with board and executive leadership. Photo courtesy of Capital City Symphony.



Musicians have agency as programmers, and they also feel energized by the impact they have. Pictured here: Omaha Symphony Associate Principal Bass and Orchestra Committee Chairman Bobby Scharmann. Photo by Casey Wood.

Omaha Symphony: Musicians as Family

“It sounds like a cliché,” Bobby Scharmann admits, “but it’s true. We’re all a family. I have my orchestra mother, my orchestra sister.” Scharmann, now Associate Principal Bass, has been in the Omaha Symphony for 10 years, and chair of the Orchestra Committee for two, so he is in a position to know. How does an orchestra evolve such a positive vibe? Can auditions select for ‘Nebraska nice?’ “Well, we keep the screens up through the final round of auditions. I guess we’re just really fortunate.”

Yet Scharmann can point to factors both large and small that contribute to an orchestra where players feel welcome and heard. Inclusion training has had something to do with it. “That was really successful. We’re now more cognizant of the

language we use with others,” he says, reducing harassment and unintended micro-aggressions. Per service musicians were paid to attend alongside core players, so participation was high.

A change in concert dress code, away from male/female to option 1/option 2, proved to address needs as yet unknown. “At the time of the change, I was not aware of anyone who might take advantage of it, but later I was pleasantly surprised to see a handful of colleagues elect an option that differed from the previous dress code for their gender identity.”

Then there is Forte, the Omaha Symphony’s education and community program, where

musicians curate their own programs for schools and community venues based on parameters received from staff. Many members of the orchestra participate. Not only do musicians have agency as programmers, they also feel energized by the impact they have. Scharmann describes sensory-friendly concerts for children impacted by autism. “When you hear these kids squealing with joy, you know you’re doing something important.” Another program, in a high school, combined hip-hop with baroque music, complete with breakdancers. “When we bring this music to audiences not otherwise exposed, and they say it’s really cool, we’re sidestepping stereotypes about stuffy orchestras,” he says.

Scharmann also credits management with being good listeners, even when musician concerns may seem small. “Small changes can make a big difference for a few musicians to feel more comfortable doing their job,” he points out. The Omaha Symphony has been performing in new venues to reach new audiences, and there are always hurdles when away from the orchestra’s home base.

Brown-bag dinner talks between double rehearsals contribute to transparency and inclusion. Several times each season, musicians can offer ideas, concerns, and questions. One musician used a brown-bag dinner to give a presentation on financial literacy. “A lot of people got a lot out of that,” Scharmann says.

Orchestra Committee itself is quite active in promoting community among musicians. They keep musicians informed with their own emails, share personal stories on a private Facebook group, and even have a private marketplace to exchange goods. Orchestra Committee has six members, elected to two-year terms, including a “courtesy member,” who takes care to send flowers, cards, or similar to musicians experiencing hardship or a loss in the family. And on retirements, Orchestra Committee coordinates getting everyone to autograph a framed orchestra portrait, presented on stage at a musician’s final concert.

“I try to be pro-active about meeting new musicians,” Scharmann adds, so everyone feels they know at least one person at their very first rehearsal. While the practice is not formalized, Scharmann expects his successor to continue the tradition.

What ties together the small and large factors for belonging seems to be an attitude of inclusion, that sense of family. “Conflicts among players just don’t really happen here,” Scharmann says. “I feel like I could go to anyone if I need help.” It can be difficult to pinpoint the roots of a healthy work environment. “By and large, I think I can credit our positive culture quite simply to the people who make up our fantastic organization.”

“It’s putting the musicians first, a mindset that everything feeds into that; putting ego aside, not questioning people’s motivations.”

— Courtney Millbrook, Executive Director, Lansing Symphony Orchestra

The Case for Prioritizing Inclusive Culture—What the Study Tells Us

For the first time, the Inclusion Index results give us clear evidence of both the benefits of investing in orchestras' culture and the risks of neglecting it. At a time when inclusion work can be difficult to champion, these findings—together with the stories shared in this guide—offer a strong foundation for making the case for continued investment in organizational culture.



Arkansas Symphony Orchestra musicians, staff, and board members work together on a shared vision for the future. Photo by David Renfro.

Five Evidence-Based Points to Strengthen Internal Case-Making:

1 INCLUSIVE CULTURES DRIVE SATISFACTION AND INNOVATION

When musicians and staff experience their orchestra as inclusive—a place where they are trusted, respected, and feel they belong—they are far more likely to:

- Report high job satisfaction, look forward to work, and recommend their orchestra as a good place to work.
- Contribute to artistic excellence and innovative programming by sharing ideas, taking risks, and collaborating creatively.
- Sustain energy and purpose through challenging times, supported by a strong emotional connection to their work.

2 LACK OF INCLUSION CAUSES MEASURABLE HARM

In orchestras that have not built an inclusive culture, musicians and staff who do not perceive their workplace as inclusive are more likely to:

- Report high levels of stress and emotional strain.
- Experience diminished trust in leadership.
- Show lower engagement than their peers.

In these environments, organizational commitment erodes and morale declines, especially in difficult times.

3 RECURRING BARRIERS UNDERMINE PROGRESS

Three damaging patterns appear repeatedly in orchestras that struggle with inclusion:

- **Disconnected Leadership.** Lack of alignment on vision and inconsistent communication weaken trust and reduce engagement.
- **Breakdowns in Accountability.** Ineffective or unclear processes for reporting misconduct or addressing inappropriate behavior erode confidence in fairness and integrity.
- **Persistent Equity Gaps.** Disparities in pay, recognition, and advancement—particularly for those from underrepresented backgrounds—undermine inclusion and reinforce perceptions of inaccessibility.

4 INCLUSION GAPS EMERGE WHEN PEOPLE FEEL LIKE “THE ONLY ONE”

Musicians and staff who describe themselves as having a different background from those around them are:

- Less likely to feel safe and respected at work.
- Less likely to feel supported or empowered by leadership.
- More likely to feel disconnected from the organization’s vision and values.

Ensuring belonging, recognizing contributions, and treating every individual with respect are essential strategies—especially in times when full engagement is most needed.

5 KEY CONDITIONS ENABLE INCLUSION AND BELONGING

Three organizational conditions consistently foster healthy workplace culture and a sense of belonging:

- **Respect and Safety.** Mutual respect and psychological safety are critical. When musicians feel safe and valued—particularly by the Music Director—they are more willing to take artistic risks and share creative vulnerability. Staff who feel safe engage more easily in open dialogue, in learning, and in sharing diverse perspectives that strengthen decision-making.
- **Leadership Engagement.** Job satisfaction and mission connection are strongest when leaders reflect organizational values and recognize staff contributions. For musicians and staff alike, feeling seen and supported by leadership drives inclusion and alignment.
- **Symbolic Leadership.** Perceptions of the Music Director and executive team carry powerful symbolic weight. When leaders are visible in the office and backstage, and seen as open, respectful, and inclusive, they strengthen morale, cultural cohesion, and organizational performance.

“We just need to remember it’s about the bigger cause. The minute it becomes about the boss is the minute it all goes to heck.”

— Christina Littlejohn, CEO, Arkansas Symphony Orchestra



Orchestras with high Inclusion Index scores demonstrate sustained energy and purpose along with more creative collaboration. Pictured: the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra performs in front of community supporters for the first time in their new permanent home. Photo by Matthew Sewell.

Conclusion

In today's challenging operating environment, a strong culture of inclusion helps sustain morale, reinforce alignment with shared goals, and foster teams that are more resilient, adaptable, and better equipped to navigate change.

The ten orchestras sharing their experience here demonstrate the results that can flow from a focus on inclusive culture. Often, they describe small courtesies, welcoming interactions, habits and behaviors that become embedded in the organization's culture. There are many specific ideas that can be adapted to other orchestras; but equally, they show us how important a positive, welcoming attitude is.

The people who work in orchestras—musicians and staff alike—are drawn to this work by the music. The Inclusion Index results affirm that musicians and staff care about their work and have a very strong sense of purpose: they are proud to achieve to their highest potential on and off stage and are inspired to contribute to their communities. We all deserve each other's respect, care, and support in making a rewarding workplace where our mission and values come to life. Truly, inclusion and belonging are in the very nature of the art we create.

About the Authors

Theodore Wiprud is a composer and a consultant in arts and education, and was the longtime Vice President, Education at the New York Philharmonic. He has been active in multiple equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives, including the launch of The Catalyst Fund in 2019.

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Audience members at an Arkansas Symphony concert.
Photo by Kelly Hicks.





Audience members at an Arkansas Symphony concert.
Photo by Kelly Hicks.

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Summermusik donors, musicians, and guest artists following a Jethro Tull-themed performance. Photo by Mark Lyons.

“You have to want it. If it’s not in your spirit or heart to be inclusive, you can’t force it.”

— Dr. Andrea Warren, former President and CEO, Virginia Symphony Orchestra



League of American Orchestras

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