

Opening Session: Gold Baton Awarded to the Sphinx Organization

League of American Orchestras National Conference

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Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, Baltimore, MD

JONATHON HEYWARD: There are moments in the life of an institution when it does more than fulfill its mission. It changes the direction of a field. The Sphinx Organization is one of those institutions. When Aaron Dworkin founded Sphinx in 1997, it began with a simple but transformative idea. That the extraordinary talent present in our communities should be fully reflected on our concert stages, in our conservatories, and throughout cultural institutions. At the time, that vision challenged assumptions that we may have come to accept as inevitable. Sphinx refused to accept them.

What began as a competition for young Black and Latino string players became something much larger. A movement that expanded opportunity, broadened pathways to leadership, and helped redefine who belongs in classical music. Today, under the leadership of Afa Dworkin, Sphinx continues to advance that vision through education, artist development, performing ensembles, and arts leadership initiatives that reach across the country throughout our field.

Its accomplishments are remarkable. More than 1,600 alumni have participated in its programs. More than \$20 million has been invested in artists and leaders. Hundreds of partnerships have strengthened the institutions and expanded opportunities. Through initiatives such as the National Alliance for Audition Support and many other collaborations, Sphinx has helped create lasting change across our profession.

But the true measure of Sphinx cannot be found in numbers alone. Its impact can be seen in the artist who now step onto stages where they might once have felt unwelcome. It can be seen in the leaders helping to shape the future of our institutions. It can be seen in the students who look at an orchestra and recognize that there is a place for them within it.

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Sphinx has not simply opened doors. It has helped our field reimagine who gets to walk through them. And in doing so, it has challenged all of us to think more expansively about excellence, opportunity and the future of classical music.

For that leadership, for that vision and for that profound impact it has had on our field and our communities, it is my great honor on behalf of the League of American Orchestra and all of our colleagues gathered here today to present the 2026 Gold Baton Award to the Sphinx Organization. Please join me in welcoming its founder, Aaron Dworkin, and its president and artistic director, Afa Dworkin, to accept the award.

[APPLAUSE]

[00:03:48.6]

AFA DWORKIN: Thank you, Jonathon. Thank you for that very kind introduction and for the music you make right here in Baltimore that transforms audiences and epitomizes what our field can be. I know that Aaron loved having you on his Arts Engines show, where you spoke so beautifully about our art form, and we love standing beside you right now. Simon, thank you to you and to the League of American Orchestras and to every member orchestra in this room. Aaron and I accept the Gold Baton Award not just on behalf of the Sphinx Organization, but on behalf of every young musician who was ever told that the concert stage was not built for them. I have the honor of serving on the League's board, so I have seen this organization from the inside. I understand the challenges that arise and the wisdom and complexity involved in choosing inclusion during this unique season in our nation's history. Yet I have watched this field choose it anyway.

Through the National Alliance for Audition support, with the League and the New World Symphony, we have awarded more than 3,000 grants, totaling \$2 million, and helped place nearly 220 musicians in American orchestras. [APPLAUSE] In addition, when Sphinx was founded nearly 30 years ago, less than 1% of all of the works performed by all American orchestras were by any composer of color. In 2023, that number was 18%, or for my math friends, that's an over 1,700% increase. And in 2024, the most performed live American composer by all orchestras was Jessie Montgomery, a Sphinx alumna who was awarded her first orchestral commission from us more than 15 seasons ago.

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Each of these numbers is a story, a debut, a child in the audience seeing herself on our stages for the very first time. And we do this work together. More than 100 orchestras across this country, partnering with Sphinx season after season in the easy years and the more difficult ones.

AARON DWORKIN: Thirteen years ago, on the stage of Carnegie Hall, I called upon this field. I quoted Leonard Bernstein, who wrote back in 1947 about the absence of Black members in American orchestras, and said he felt impelled to do something about it. And I asked when

the rest of us would share that same commitment to Black and brown musicians and composers. Today, I am standing here with Afa, kind of holding the Gold Baton. It's very heavy. I had to set it down. The same honor once carried by Bernstein himself. And by Isaac Stern, who stopped me in an alley behind a concert hall during the inaugural Sphinx competition, and said, quote, "I had no idea this talent was out here," unquote.

The talent was always there. You can see it in our kids and so many around the country. What changed is that our field took action and engaged in partnership with organizations like Sphinx on a consistent, intentional, and authentic basis. These are uncommon times for—certain words can't be used. I'll say "the values that we all share."

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The shifting sands of public sentiment are real. You feel them, we feel them. And Sphinx is leaning all the more into its mission dedicated to this work alongside, everyone who seeks the same North Star for our art form.

[APPLAUSE]

This music is more important for a democratic society than any single season we may happen to be standing in. So today, as 30 years of Sphinx's work resonates through this field, we accept this award with gratitude. Gratitude to the League, to Simon, to Jonathon, and to every orchestra and every individual musician who continues to answer the call and to fulfill the ideal that our concert stages should reflect the rich mosaic that is the American story, as our nation marks 250 years striving to be a more perfect union. Thank you. Thank you all so much. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]