

Building Equitable Practices in Auditions and Tenure

2026 National Conference

SAM ANDREWS: So, just a quick overview of what we're going to go through today. We're going to do a brief overview of the Audition and Tenure Practices Survey, some of the key findings. We're going to have a little case study with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, who is one of our interviewees in the upcoming Catalyst Guide. And then we're going to have some table discussions.

The survey was developed in 2024 in partnership with the pilot Inclusive Stages coalition, individual musicians, and the American Federation of Musicians of the U.S. and Canada. Small revisions were made prior to the 2025 launch based on feedback that the pilot year participants provided to us, and then those confidential findings were shared with the participating orchestras and the Inclusive Stages coalition. Now, the findings are also going to be shared in the upcoming Catalyst Guides, and it's going to be part of what makes that so special.

In total, we had 142 orchestras participate in this survey. You can see the breakdown by budget group on the screen there. I'm not going to talk through all of those, but you can take a look for a second. So our primary takeaway from this survey and from all of that information is that there's a significant amount of work that we have to do to improve both the audition and the tenure processes. So looking at auditions, one of the first things is, are auditions really blind? While 92% of orchestras do use screens at some point during the audition process, only 53% of orchestras report consistent use of screens all the way through to the final round. So we saw that screen use decreases over time and becomes less consistently used in subsequent rounds. The first round had 98% of consistent use. That drops to 90% in intermediate rounds and kind of plummets to 53% in the final round. We learned that it's common for orchestras to pre-advance candidates past an initial round for a variety of reasons. Some of these are known, and some of them are a little bit newer.

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It's common for orchestras to pre-advance candidates when it involves a known auditionee or when auditionee's merit has been determined in other ways. That could include things like employment in peer orchestras. It's increasingly now being used to diversify orchestras' candidate pools by creating access for candidates from merit-based programs such as Sphinx Orchestral Partners Auditions. So 66% of responding orchestras do not have written criteria or guidelines for assessing auditionees. That's, again, another opportunity for us to improve what's happening in the audition process. And finally, only one reporting orchestra requires audition committee members to take training specifically tailored to the audition

process. Those are some of the key findings for auditions that we've pulled for this summary.

For tenure, only 29% of orchestras have created written criteria or guidelines for assessing tenure candidates. Only 42% of orchestras report that candidates are given the names of the individuals on their tenure committee prior to the start of the process. Some 48% of orchestras allow candidates to identify any individuals serving on the tenure committee who may have a conflict of interest, and very few orchestras incorporate written attributable feedback to candidates from musicians that are not serving on the tenure committee. I just want to note that written and attributable documentation, whether it's from committee members or other musicians, can really encourage the transparency of the process and really strengthen the integrity of the tenure process. That's something that we think is a really important thing to start to integrate into the tenure process.

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Only 23% of orchestras have a formal policy for candidates to respond to the feedback that they're given, and 26% have an appeals mechanism in place. And finally, only one orchestra requires individuals on the tenure committee to take an anti-bias training tailored specifically to the tenure process before joining the committee. So again, there's a lot of work that we can do to improve both the audition and tenure processes. And now I'm going to hand it off to John to talk about some of the great work that they're doing in Cincinnati.

[APPLAUSE]

JOHN CLAPP: We have microphones that are much too close together. Okay, so good morning. My name is John Clapp. I'm the Chief Orchestra and Production Officer at the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Over the past two years, Cincinnati Symphony has worked to implement an impactful set of improvements to our audition and tenure processes. While this work started several years ago earlier, with open dialogue between musicians and staff, the action plan actually started to take place in the spring of 2024 during the lead-up to our CBA negotiations.

So the first step in preparing for that was really to conduct audits of our processes and language and try to find the gaps in our system. Beginning with auditions, we utilize recommendations from the Sphinx organization to map out areas for improvement. What we did was create a matrix here, as we were getting ready to prepare to make these changes, and it starts with the National Alliance for Audition Support recommendation. We came up with a proposal, an action summary. We look at the two buckets. Is this going to be a CBA provision? Is it going to be something that's just policy? Or could it be both? And then, what would the resultant language be if we were going to go into negotiations?

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So this was a very critical piece before we did any of this work to really look at where we were. The Cincinnati Symphony is a very storied orchestra. It has been around for a long time, and actually, the tenure process in particular was critically underdeveloped. So we had a lot of work to do. After we did the survey and this audit, we decided that there were certain focus areas that jumped out to us that we needed to approach. So starting with auditions, we looked at audition screening. One of the recommendations was really how do you get rid of resume screening? Just determining somebody by only what's on the piece of paper, and never having heard them play. So we were working with our scheduling and the way we hold auditions to make sure we can hear as many people as possible. And then we immediately started to work with how would we do something virtual? How would we get more participation in auditions? And that's where actually our partner at Unison came into play and created a system that we've been beta testing for a year with them, where you can actually use an app on your phone to record a professional audition. And I speak from experience because I was one of the first beta testers. I pulled out my bassoon after five years and recorded on this crappy phone that you see in front of you. It has only one camera. This is not fancy. This is an [UNINTEL]. It does have a button because I hate swiping. So the button is great.

But I was able to, in my bedroom, pop this on a dresser and record a quality professional audition that could then be evaluated anonymously. And it's very interesting technology, and we're going to see where it takes us. But that was actually a key part, and introducing that to the musicians has gone very well. Another area we saw was trial weeks.

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This is very important. We've made some strides in eliminating most of our trial weeks. But more importantly was, we were looking ahead and saying, "We need to fix our tenure process first." So if everyone's comfortable with a great tenure process, the focus shifts to tenure, and you're less likely to feel like you even need a trial week. I think many of us can attest that trial weeks, while even if it's successful, can still create some bias that will go into the tenure process later, even in a successful one, because not everybody always agrees on how well someone is playing and how they're going to fit into your orchestra. Also remember, in an audition, it is very rare that every single member of that committee voted yes for that person to win the job. And if they immediately are now on their tenure committee, and they didn't vote yes, there could already be bias in the system. That's something I think we forget about. It's very rare that you get an absolute unanimous across

the system. Whether or not it's the music director's complete control of the decision or not, you still have people giving feedback in the process, and there may be bias there already.

I think one of the best advancements that we came up with, and we did borrow this from our friends in Detroit, was to put language in and look at our processes around pre-advancement. So we decided that we felt that we participate greatly in the SOPA auditions. We always send people and have many of our auditioners do the digital listening, but we also send people to the competition to judge every season. And we said, "That's a national competition in our mind. That's a national audition. Why not advance people from that round?" So if you are a first place, second place, or honorable mention, you are automatically advanced to the semifinals of any Cincinnati Symphony audition within two years of your award, which is great. And it's very much modeled—Detroit has this already. I think Pittsburgh has something similar now. Everyone should really have this. I think it's a great, easy thing and a great win to make sure that you actually get diverse candidates into hireable rounds, and not always starting from scratch.

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So rinse and repeat. We did the same thing with tenure, so very similar. And just to say, these charts here are only part of the recommendations. It just would have been redundant to keep showing the whole grid the whole time. This is just the way that we approached it. So we did the same thing, but now the Black Orchestra Network provided the recommendations. So we went through the same process and looked at all of what they were saying, where it was in our process, how we're going to approach it, CBA policy, and then eventually we did end up coming with quite a bit of language out of negotiation. I will also say that on both sides of the table, this was very well received. Everyone was very into this. We had a great time tweaking it and making it our own, and we feel very confident in this process, which now we're two years into implementation, and it is going quite well. So the focus areas here became—process was the first.

This is all about timeline, equity in your timeline, protecting against bias, and then do you have any support mechanisms in your process for the candidates? Do you have a new musician document that actually explains the expectations of the job? Do you have a job description? That's something we also now have for our musicians. This is all about process, and what I'll say about it is, while these things seem to connect—audition, recruitment, all this connects—it really starts with the tenure process. You need to start from the end and build an absolutely solid tenure process and work your way back to auditions, to recruitment, to job descriptions. Going the other way doesn't quite work because you don't know what the endgame is. The review system is probably the most important thing that

you can do to create an evaluative system that provides—that actually uses a rubric and has specific job-related criteria. I do have examples of this.

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We've been working on this in the Inclusive Stages tenure group, so I can share that later if people want to see what that actually looks like. But the other thing about this, I said working backward, all these documents then need to line up. So if you build a criteria set of evaluations, that needs to inform your probationary musician document. It needs to inform your job description. All these tie together. If you're going to do a mentoring system or an advocate system, they all have to agree through the process. So any documentations you make, they all have to be in alignment. And we unveiled quite a bit of this in our tenure working group. And it's very exciting, and we're going to have a great deliverable that's going to help people that want to come on this journey. No matter where you are in the process, you'll be able to identify what the issue or need is, pick the focus area, and then there will be actual examples of practice of how you could approach it. So that's going to be sort of the outcome of that group coming next year or so. Be on the lookout. Jessica Phillips from The Met is my partner in crime on that. We are pretty close to making this. It'll be a web-based program that you can actually go into and use as a resource.

The very last piece we identified was feedback. Very not clear in our orchestra on how the feedback is given, when it is given, who's allowed to give feedback. And I think the great thing that the Black Orchestral Network recommended was the power of collective feedback. So for the first time in our history, we have a way to do anonymous feedback from other members of the section, not just the members of the tenure committee. Now, why would that be important? Well, as I said, those tenure committee people may have come from the audition. They may also be somebody that sits on the committee that doesn't actually sit anywhere in the orchestra where the person plays. If it's a section violin, second, and they sit mostly at the back of the section, and the principal bass was on the committee, there's no way they have any actual constructive feedback of how the person plays, other than maybe visual and picking up on cues from what the music director is doing.

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So when we have a violin audition, we also get collective feedback, and honestly that only the personnel manager sees, and that is delivered in the committee meeting. And the way we do it in Cincinnati is actually we start with the collective feedback, and it kind of sets the table so that we hear about all these criteria, which by the way, anyone doing the survey has to fill out the criteria, just the same as the committee would do. So the level is set the entire time.

Here's a real example of something that happened, which I wish I had the criteria. So I got to Cincinnati. It was an early tenure meeting I was sitting in, and one player said, "The person we're looking at does not play in tune. I can never vote for them." Another person in the room says, "That's absolutely not true. I play chamber music with them, they're amazing, they always play in tune." It was an actual argument fight in front of my face, which I did not like.

If I had collective feedback that actually had a column that said: Intonation, here are the aspects of intonation, and had a rating. And it said: Nine out of the ten people that participated in that said, "Exceeds expectations or meets expectations in intonation," well then this doesn't agree, and it actually helps your music director have better information to make the best decision, instead of just going with the loudest person in the room, or one person's opinion if they think they have more authority than somebody else in the room. It's collective feedback, it's about how this person is developing in the process. And like I always say, our music director coined this phrase: "It is no longer a tenure process, this is a period of integration. It is a positive process." And Cristi is fantastic with that, and that's the way we look at it now in Cincinnati.

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It is not a way to eliminate somebody or to find cracks in what they do. We all know how hard it is to win a professional audition, myself included. That is an amazing accomplishment if you can do that. Now, how do we integrate you into what we do in our culture?

Lastly, I think something that's super important that we did that relates to this is we did institute a conflict of interest policy in our CBA. That's something we did not have. It refers to both the tenure and audition processes. And most conflict of interest policies people think of, well, this is about a familial relationship. They're married to somebody, or it's somebody in your family. You should recuse yourself. That's the first part of the policy. The way this is written, it actually talks about if the company were to discover that any part of the process was compromised, the integrity or the impartiality of it could be compromised, then the musician should recuse themselves. If they do not, the company has been empowered to remove that person from the committee if we have the information and proof that there is impartiality or bias.

A really ugly example, I won't say if it's real or not. Let's say you're in a section, and it has traditionally been all male players. The screen comes down, the person won, and it's a female player. Someone in that section comes to the person and says, "I know for a fact that this member who's going to be in this committee has said to me, 'Over my dead body will a woman ever play in this section.'" That person should not be on the tenure committee. That's awful.

But it easily could be if you didn't know that. And in many cases, people are afraid to speak up when they know there are conflicts of interest. Or, "I know this person had a relationship with this person in college," and maybe they should recuse themselves if that was a good relationship or it wasn't a good relationship. Maybe they shouldn't be on that tenure committee, either.

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So we made sure our council on both sides of the table was supportive of this policy and made sure that there was ability for the company to take action. And we do have, also approved by the local and council, an acknowledgement form. So before you serve on a tenure or audition committee, you actually do have to sign an acknowledgement form of the policy, which states the policy. That might seem like overkill, but I can tell you also as a former musician, some of my colleagues would say, "Oh, I didn't know that was in the CBA. I never read it." Just because it's in the book doesn't mean they actually read it.

And they can come up to you and say, "Well, I didn't know about it so it doesn't count." Or, "You can't do this. You can't refuse me because I didn't know about it." You signed the form, you acknowledged it, you accept the responsibility. It gives us the ability to remove you from the process if something were to come up. So that's a short summary of two long years of work that we've been doing. We're very proud of it.

There's my contact information. Anyone who wants to talk to me about this subject, I'm very passionate about it, as you can tell. Email me or call me anytime. I always love talking about audition and tenure practices from both sides of being a musician and now having to do this work. And I'm always happy to talk about it with anyone. So, thank you.

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