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Making the Case for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion In Orchestras:

A Guide from the League of American Orchestras

Introduction

“Diversity is not our problem, it’s our promise. It’s our promise because it leads to unparalleled heights of creativity, expression, and excellence. It’s our promise because it leads to higher performing and more sustainable institutions. And it’s our promise because it allows us to live by our democratic ideals of fairness and equality.”

The Honorable Elijah Cummings,
speaking at the League of American
Orchestras 2016 National Conference

This guide is intended to help the orchestra field take action to become more inclusive and welcoming of all people and all differences. It is offered amid America’s current reckoning with 400 years of oppression against Black people, underscored by the recent police killings and the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black and Brown Americans. It follows the League’s [Statement on Racial Discrimination](#) issued in August 2020. The League will offer further resources to support orchestras on their journeys toward antiracism and equity, including the upcoming re-launch of the EDI Resource Center.

Orchestras have a long history of discrimination¹, and data on their recent past reveals no change in representation of Black musicians in orchestras for 25 years, hovering at 1.8 percent.² Board and staff representation is similarly static and well below that of nonprofit peers. This is despite various programs intended to increase onstage racial representation³ and the oft-espoused desire of orchestras to reflect their communities. Today, a continuation of the status quo poses a serious threat to orchestras, as stakeholders demand that nonprofits supported by federal tax policy fully reflect their communities.

Overview of This Guide

The guide that follows is intended to support orchestras in reframing their thoughts about equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and antiracism, initially focusing on the “why” more than the “how.” The League recognizes the importance of specific guidance as orchestras contemplate this work. However, for EDI and antiracism work to be effective, it must begin with and be sustained by intense and vulnerable dialogue about larger systems and principles. The endpoint of EDI and antiracism work is not just the creation of programs or greater representation—though these have an important role to play—but changing the cultures, beliefs, and behaviors that can lead to enduring progress.

This resource can be used as a tool and reference for those who are advancing EDI and antiracism in their orchestras. We hope that it will help make the case for the vital importance of this work and answer common questions that arise. It is meant to be a living document, recognizing the layers and complexity inherent to this topic and its ever-evolving language and terminology. To be effective, EDI and antiracism work requires patience, practice, and continuing education.

A shared understanding of terms is essential for effective conversations. Many glossaries are available, and [Racial Equity Tools](#) provides one that is comprehensive and easy to use.

This framework is intended to be a foundation for orchestras’ individual journeys toward equity and antiracism, inspiring reflection, shared understanding, and authentic action.

Why Do EDI and Antiracism Matter to Orchestras?

They matter because they are:

Enriching to **THE MUSICAL PERFORMANCES** that are at the heart of the orchestral experience

- Music is a universal feature of the human experience. The act of making music is an expression of our humanity, which is located more in our commonalities than our differences.
- Increasing the diversity of conductors and artists on stage brings a richness of perspectives, broader repertoire choices, and new ways to program, all of which will inspire a broader audience base and increase our relevance to communities.
- A growing roster of highly qualified musicians of color is poised to gain positions within orchestras, facilitated by the success of programs like the [National Alliance for Audition Support](#), which the League launched

in collaboration with The Sphinx Organization and the New World Symphony. By overcoming systemic barriers to inclusion, orchestras have access to an expanded talent pool of extraordinary musicians who are primed to be community leaders, teachers, and vibrant communicators about the artform.

- There is a large body of knowledge pointing to the fact that diverse teams are more creative and more productive (referenced elsewhere in this document). Why would the same not apply on stage? Diversity can only enrich the texture and quality of musical collaboration.
- At the turn of the last century, orchestras developed distinctive aesthetics influenced by the cultural experiences of the communities of immigrants who entered their ranks. Imagine the opportunity for today's orchestras to be distinct by reflecting the rich societal mix of modern American society.

Essential to the long-term **SUSTAINABILITY** of orchestral performance and the viability of the institutions that support it

- According to the Brookings Institution, current census population projections underscore that racial minority groups “will be the source of all the growth in the nation’s youth and working-age population, most of the growth in its voters, and much of the growth in its consumers tax base.”⁴ Orchestras have an opportunity to adapt and create programs that appeal to the full range of people who will be driving economic growth in a country that will be minority White by 2045.
- Diverse orchestral organizations will have the expertise and the networks that will be required to expand the circle of support from policymakers, donors, volunteers, and audience members as the demographics of the country change.

- As the customer base for orchestras expands, so too can the donor pipeline. White people are overrepresented in philanthropy based on their percentage of the population. While this might lead to assumptions that White people give more money to charities, studies indicate that nonprofits are not effectively engaging non-White communities, with Black and non-White Hispanic donors reporting that they are solicited less frequently, but would give more if asked more.⁵
- Orchestras are under intense scrutiny from philanthropic foundations and government entities, both locally and nationally. Absent an intentional commitment to becoming antiracist organizations—a journey that most foundations have already undertaken—more and more orchestras will see funding reduced or eliminated as resources are re-allocated to smaller, community-based groups who embrace EDI as part of their core missions.

Why Do EDI and Antiracism Matter to Orchestras? *(continued)*

Vital in **ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TALENT** to all dimensions of orchestras: musicians, staff, boards, volunteers, and artistic leadership

- A recent survey by McKinsey & Company found that 39% of all respondents reported that they have turned down or decided not to pursue a job because of a perceived lack of inclusion at an organization. LGBTQ+ and racial- or ethnic-minority respondents were more likely than others to report choosing not to pursue a job for this reason.⁶
- A 2009 analysis of 506 companies found that the ones with more racial and/or gender diversity were more profitable.⁷
- Younger generational cohorts, especially Millennials and Gen Z, attach great value to working in organizations whose missions and values they can relate to. Companies that value diverse ideas are far more likely to engage and retain these cohorts of employees.⁸
- Diverse boards of directors tend to hire diverse leaders, and diverse teams have a much higher likelihood of creating diverse artistic content that reflects and inspires the broadest possible audience.

Central to the **CULTURE OF INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION** that orchestras need to adapt to the changing environment

- Highly diverse and inclusive organizations report a 26% increase in team collaboration and an 18% increase in team commitment.⁹
- The more included employees feel, the more innovative they report being in their jobs, and the more they go above and beyond the “call of duty” to help other team members to meet organizational objectives.¹⁰
- Companies with greater numbers of women are more likely to introduce a higher number of innovations.¹¹
- According to *Forbes*, inclusive teams make better decisions up to 87% of the time. Teams that follow an inclusive process make decisions twice as fast, with half of the meetings. Decisions made and executed by diverse teams delivered 60% better results.¹²
- Diverse teams are more likely to reexamine facts and remain objective. They may also encourage greater scrutiny of each member’s actions, keeping their joint cognitive resources sharp. By breaking up workplace homogeneity, employees become more aware of their own potential biases and avoid entrenched ways of thinking that can blind them to crucial information and lead them to poor decision-making.¹³
- Gender-diverse companies are 21% more likely to experience above-average profitability and 27% more likely to create longer-term value than those that are not gender-diverse.¹⁴

Why Do EDI and Antiracism Matter to Orchestras? *(continued)*

Imperative for meaningful, authentic, and **RELEVANT RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITIES**

Orchestras with demonstrated EDI commitments and actions:

- Are more credible partners with underrepresented people and communities and are more likely to develop effective programs rooted in those communities' needs, preferences, and assets.
- Have greater capacity to listen and recognize their own biases and assumptions in conversations with the community, which is essential in moving relationships from transactional to relational.
- Are better able to demonstrate humility, being aware and appreciative of the music and artists in the communities where they reside, building programs “with” communities rather than merely “for” them.

Foundational to upholding the principles of equality and fairness inherent in **CREATING A MORE JUST SOCIETY**

- Equality and fairness are principles to which we should adhere—and many probably assume that orchestras already operate with these principles in play. But we tend to rely on the networks of people we know to find the talent we need, and as a field, we cling firmly to the doctrine of meritocracy, which asserts that the most qualified will always rise to the top. These assumptions cloud the harsh reality that the playing field is uneven, our networks are limited, and society is riddled with systems of oppression. They also fail to take into account the bias that plays out in competitive situations. This is demonstrated in the oft-cited study, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal?”¹⁵ in which resumé were randomly assigned African American- or White-sounding names. Traditionally White-sounding names received 50 percent more callbacks for interviews.
- Whether in short interactions like interviews or extended ones like tenure processes, these biases are part of our reality. The racial gap is uniform across occupation, industry, and employer size. To get closer to fairness and equity, orchestras must understand the limits of their current practices and actively develop practices that will result in more inclusive workplaces.

“If our ancestors and our history have taught us anything, it’s that in the face of unimaginable struggle comes a symphony of superhuman connectivity and response. Our better selves rise and stretch across the chasm not because we have to, but because it is in fact what saves each of us—not only one by one—but collectively.”

Angelique Power,
President of the Field Foundation

Answering Common Questions

This section is intended to provide orchestra staff, musicians, volunteers, and board members who are leading EDI and antiracism work with constructive ways to answer common questions. While this list is not complete, it represents questions that are frequently heard. As language and terms around EDI and antiracism work continue to evolve, we recommend [Racial Equity Tools' glossary](#) as a grounding guide.

QUESTION

Why are EDI and antiracism important at our orchestra?

A: The pursuit of racial equity is essential for orchestras to fulfill their greatest creative potential and become relevant to the communities they serve. The orchestra field's history of racial discrimination has contributed to the loss of valuable contributions by generations of Black people, the disenfranchisement of fellow Americans, and the redirection of many career trajectories, resulting in fewer people engaging with the musical culture we all share and love. This ultimately diminishes the vibrancy of the artform and undermines the orchestral experience for everyone.

As orchestras have been led by predominantly White leaders, it is hardly surprising that our systems reinforce the power and advantage of Whiteness and have tended to support a majority of White artists. In addition, American orchestras exist within a society rife with discriminatory practices that unfairly impact various groups of people. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that orchestras and their communities are both impacted by and tend to perpetuate these practices.

Making EDI and antiracism work a consistent priority allows orchestras to be socially relevant participants in the community. In doing so, they join with many public and private sectors of society in pursuing EDI, including 1,200 corporate CEOs and presidents united through [CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion](#), representing 85 industries and 13 million employees.

Answering Common Questions *(continued)*

QUESTION

Why do we need to talk about racism and antiracism? My orchestra isn't racist.

A: Saying that a particular orchestra is not racist denies the broader social context in which all of us live. Systems of racism are not only about conscious or intentional harm or our individual intentions. They are about membership in a dominant racial group, and the advantage gained as a result. As individuals and as organizations, we must actively disrupt systems of racism at individual, group, and societal levels.

We often frame racism as acts of hate and harm done intentionally, which can undoubtedly be the case. However, it's crucial that we understand and acknowledge racism as subtle and systemic — and about participation in a system that has been structured to benefit some people at the expense of others. Such benefits are not necessarily received intentionally, but they can accrue to those who are perceived to be on the “winning side” of power and advantage.

An individual orchestra or orchestra community member may neither believe that race is a fundamental determinant of human capacity nor that inherent superiority or inferiority is based on racial difference. However, it is undeniable that the orchestra field has a history of participation in racist systems and structures, aspects of which are perpetuated to this day. If our intent is equity for all, we should understand how and why our industry may be viewed as racist.

Read more about this history in a Summer 2020 [*Symphony* magazine article by Dr. Aaron Flagg](#).

Perhaps most importantly, we know that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals continue to face daily racial discrimination in the orchestra field. The following are selected interviews with Black classical musicians in the field for listening and learning:

[*Interview with Titus Underwood*](#), Principal Oboe of the Nashville Symphony Orchestra

[*Black Artists on How to Change Classical Music*](#), New York Times, July 16, 2020, Interviews by Zachary Wolfe and Joshua Barone

[*Learning to Listen: A Roundtable Discussion on the Nuances of the Black Experience in Classical Music and Beyond*](#)

[*Musicians on How to Bring Racial Equity to Auditions*](#)

Answering Common Questions *(continued)*

QUESTION

If we program unfamiliar music by Black composers, won't we lose audience members?

A: Orchestras work hard to produce compelling seasons that balance the familiar and unfamiliar, the accessible and the challenging, and the well-known and emerging. Music by less-familiar White composers is programmed without hesitation. Yet a wealth of music by Black composers of past and present rarely makes its way to our stages, denying audiences opportunities that would deepen their experience of music and enrich their lives. Orchestras today pride themselves on their commitment to diversifying programming, but artistic leaders can make different decisions in risk-taking that choose to expand our musical universe.

The League offers an online EDI resource center that includes a section with links to specific databases for [Repertoire by Underrepresented Composers](#).

Further, the push for diversification of programming suggests the need for broader input than any one or two individuals can provide. There is a strong case for introducing more voices and perspectives to the programming conversation (including and beyond the music director and artistic administrator). Since artistic decisions are often made by predominately White leaders, expanding the conversation has the power to change decision-making in meaningful and exciting ways.

QUESTION

At a time when our survival is at stake and resources are limited, how can we afford to engage in this work?

A: Times of crisis can also be dynamic moments of change for the better. When everything is up for discussion, ideas can be accelerated that are not possible during times of “normal business.” For too long, orchestras have talked about racism and the urgent need to address diversity, but progress has been slow and incremental at best. As we emerge from the pandemic, orchestras—and indeed the country—have a generational opportunity to put themselves back together in ways that are more complete, more inclusive, and more representative of the communities they serve. Authentic and sustained EDI and antiracism work at this moment will:

- Allow orchestras to address the broadest possible market in a time of financial challenges
- Demonstrate inclusive thinking and practices to individual donors, foundation leaders, and government funders
- Meet public expectations that this work is essential and immediate in every sector
- Create an environment for attraction and retention of the highest talent across board, staff, volunteers, and musicians
- Deepen artistry and performance in a time of great emotional need for audiences

Answering Common Questions *(continued)*

QUESTION

We make no judgments about race as connected to artistic quality. Won't a focus on EDI and antiracism compromise the artistic quality of our orchestra?

This question suggests that a focus on diversification means the lowering of audition standards. This is not true. The focus is not on changing audition standards but, instead, acknowledging structural barriers to engaging Black and Brown professional musicians' talent and finding ways to mitigate them. This includes how auditions are populated via recruitment and the creation and modeling of inclusive and antiracist cultures.

In the words of Yo-Yo Ma, "Talent doesn't pick demographics." Framing EDI and antiracism efforts around artistic quality can unintentionally imply that increasing diversity means decreasing artistic quality. It can imply that Black and Brown musicians, composers, and guest artists are less talented than White musicians, composers, and guest artists—a belief that is fundamentally untrue and racist. Different does not mean deficient. Our industry's status quo discourages many professional artists of color from applying and allows us to wrongly assume we have attracted all the available talent.

QUESTION

My community doesn't have many Black people in it. How are EDI and antiracism work relevant for us?

EDI work is not just for and about Black people; it is a way to embrace the ideal of a society where no one feels like the "other" as we move ever farther away from homogeneity to becoming a "majority minority" country.

Anti-Black racism is a specific form of oppression that has been constant and perpetual in the history of the United States. By understanding and disrupting it as a system, we begin to understand and disrupt all other systems of oppression. This work develops sensitivity and care for

all human beings to benefit people of all underrepresented identities.

Regardless of the community, more and more people are asking for and demanding authentic attention around EDI and antiracism within their organizations. Choosing to understand racism and become antiracist and more inclusive is vital to an orchestra's health and relevancy. By articulating your values, defining vision around EDI and antiracism, and building alliances, you gain support from those who share in these principles.

Answering Common Questions *(continued)*

QUESTION

Our orchestra is already diverse, and our blind auditions give everyone the same chance. Isn't that enough?

A: Many decades of blind auditions have dramatically changed the gender balance of American orchestras for the better. Yet through this period, almost no change has occurred in orchestras' racial makeup. It is common in most orchestras for the screen to come down in the finals stage of auditions, creating conditions for bias to enter the process—and in the few orchestras where the screen never comes down, bias can still persist. Additionally, it is typical for candidates already in the system to be given preferential treatment by direct invitations to final rounds of auditions. Saying that blind auditions are “enough” assumes that pre-professional musicians have equal access to the journey that leads them to the audition. It neglects to address the systems that prevent musicians from getting there in the first place, such as mentoring opportunities based on teacher preference or institutional bias, a lack of financial resources to access specialized training and fund travel to auditions, and long-standing traditions rooted in racism and White supremacy.

Further, an orchestra's accountability does not end at the moment of offering employment to a musician. It is equally important to handle trial weeks and tenure review through an ongoing equity lens. Blind auditions are a starting point, not the finish line.

In answering this question, one must also consider the current culture of orchestras. In its anonymous 2015 survey, the Sphinx Organization reports that more than half of the Black and Brown classical musicians surveyed do not seek orchestral careers, citing among other reasons their belief that orchestras do not have diversity and inclusion as visible or actionable priorities. Achieving broader onstage racial representation requires intention in all areas of process and culture at orchestras, including gathering buy-in and long-term commitment from music directors, and the negotiation of union contracts that embrace equitable audition practices. There is an especially interesting opportunity for per-service orchestras to advance change on stage, given their more flexible, concert-by-concert hiring processes.

Answering Common Questions *(continued)*

QUESTION

Where can I go if I would like additional learning resources on equity, diversity, and inclusion as well as antiracism?

A: The League's online Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Center offers hundreds of resources, including:

[League research studies on racial equity efforts in American orchestras](#)

[Information on the National Alliance for Audition Support](#)

[Continuum on Becoming an Antiracist Multicultural Organization](#)

[Launching a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion program at your nonprofit](#)

“Imagine that the greatest masterpieces of classical music have yet to be written. Imagine that the greatest composers, conductors, and musicians are yet to be heard. Now imagine a future where we do take action to seek out, cultivate, and give opportunity to every member of our community, regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation. Imagine that each of us takes action today so that we create a powerful, artistic world for the future—a world that is so inclusive, so multitudinous, so emotionally expansive that we cannot even imagine it today.”

Jennifer Koh, Violinist and League of American Orchestras Board Member

The journey toward a more equitable orchestra field is a journey toward joyous inclusion, new artistic richness, and a fundamental assertion of humanity. We at the League are sustained by a vision of orchestral life that reflects the vast diversity of American society, where all those who choose to immerse themselves in the joy of orchestral music have equal opportunity to do so and where all lived experiences are recognized and valued.

What does this look like at a more granular level within our organizations? [Equity in the Center](#) lists the following characteristics for organizations that have deepened and increased their commitment to racial equity:

- Leadership ranks hold a critical mass of people of color.
- Staff, stakeholders, and leaders are skilled at talking about race, racism, and their implications.
- Programs are culturally responsive and explicit about race, racism, and race equity.
- Communities are treated as stakeholders, leaders, and assets to the work.
- Evaluation efforts incorporate the disaggregation of data.¹⁶
- Expenditures reflect organizational values and a commitment to race equity.
- Continuous improvement in race equity work is prioritized.

In addition, [“Considerations for EDI and Anti-Racism Work at Orchestras,”](#) by Jessica Schmidt of Orchestrate Inclusion (and the League’s former Senior Advisor for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) may be especially helpful as a next step after reviewing this guide.

The League of American Orchestras sends gratitude and good thoughts to all who are taking this journey—as organizations and as individuals. We will be richer in our selves and in our art as our whole field continues to embrace this vital work, and hold itself accountable for meaningful change.

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