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### Symphonic metamorphoses

*Variations on vulnerability: orchestral musicians' employment in times of crisis*

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## 15. Diversity, ethnicity and race at the orchestra

*“While the economic downturn is certainly having a negative impact on racial discrimination in the world of work, the truth is that even before 2008 progress in this area was limited.”*<sup>1848</sup>

In advance of a discussion as to how the comparatively contemporary #metoo movement relates to post-crisis 2007-2008 orchestral challenges, ‘racial’ issues that have concerned orchestral insiders pre- and post-crisis are addressed here. Keeping in mind the fact that financial crisis goes beyond pure funding issues and has a markedly negative effect on the increasing precarity of the ‘already disadvantaged’ in markets that have severely affected by economic downturn, the question as to whether or not minority orchestral players have been negatively affected post-2008 is relevant. In general, although recent years have shown an increase in programs to tackle ‘diversity’ in orchestras, the impact of these programs is hard to measure without significant data collection.<sup>1849</sup>

Leave it to Hollywood, not a traditional center of orchestral activity but a hotbed for activism and social media hashtags to fuel the fires of the #metoo movement. On the heels of that combustible movement to be discussed in the following *Intermezzo*, the #Oscarssowhite debate led the call for more racial diversity on the silver screen.<sup>1850</sup> Orchestras are a ‘bastion of whiteness’ performing predominately white male music in a very white setting.<sup>1851</sup> Musicians interviewed post-financial crisis are as concerned about the future of their orchestras in terms of solvency and crucial financial stability and also in terms of ‘social longevity.’ No longer satisfied to communicate through music alone, orchestral musicians regardless of tenure or freelance status, expressed the desire to work in organizations that have moved with the times. Beyond the call for equal pay for equal work and employment contracts the ‘modern’ musician articulates other concerns voiced here in a suggestive tone.

Several key points:

1. Repertoire traditionally centered on the extraordinary ‘great white male oeuvre’ of classics must be expanded to include new voices;

<sup>1848</sup> Lisa Wong, Senior Declaration Officer in the ILO’s Programme on Promoting the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, remarks prefacing *World of Work Magazine* n°72, August 2011 - Fighting discrimination at work: Progress at risk Available at: [https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/world-of-work-magazine/issues/WCMS\\_160434/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/world-of-work-magazine/issues/WCMS_160434/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>1849</sup> Orchestras in the U.S. as well as the Netherlands have not to date published comprehensive statistics concerning any form of discrimination.

<sup>1850</sup> Meme #oscarssowhite started to protest the Oscar awards in 2015, a superlative article explores the movements’ legacy, see <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/is-the-era-of-oscarssowhite-over>

<sup>1851</sup> Chi-chi Nwankoku. “Classical music is overwhelmingly white and male” *The Guardian*, 26 July 2019.

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2. The bridge to a better orchestra is built on gender balance and greater inclusivity in terms of ethnicities. Orchestras should strive to include a multiplicity of ethnicities both on and offstage (administration, board, and management).

A heightened awareness of diversity issues provides fuel for the fires of the next section of a *movement* devoted to equality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century orchestra comprised of socially aware musicians. Although a thorough discussion of diversity in repertoire and orchestral programming falls far beyond the core issues in this inquiry, it bears mention as ‘what we hear mirrors what we see.’ Of the hundreds of concerts performed within the eight weeks of concerts (two-four on average per day) broadcast worldwide on the BBC in the Proms concert series 2019, less than four hours of music was composed by a non-white male. And, in terms of total broadcast time, “less than 20 minutes from black and minority ethnic composers, throughout the whole season.”<sup>1852</sup> ‘The BBC has pledged to adhere to a 50/50 gender balance for all music commissioned in the 2020 season, a commendable step in the right direction. The balancing act is crucial as the mainstay of the orchestral repertoire is the 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century oeuvre of ‘dead white males,’ the ‘greatest of the great composers’ attempts to sanitize the classical and romantic periods of music through retroactive diversity would deprecate that greatness. Taking the first quote in stride, if the orchestral organization with its hierarchical structures eschews ‘egalitarian and multicultural values’ notwithstanding appeals for modification, ‘what the orchestra plays’ can seem to be representative of ‘who the orchestra hires.’ “Look at an orchestra on TV and see all these white people, they are not ‘us’; there is no identification so you automatically switch the channel regardless of how beautiful the music might be. I think it’s important that young black and ethnic minorities can actually see role models in orchestras.”<sup>1853</sup>

Repertoire questions aside, another vital question that faces the orchestras nowadays is: how can the orchestra, its administrators, board members, and managers reach a more equal balance of ethnicities in the future? Diversity and inclusion issues related to the orchestral field call for more in-depth research beyond the purview of the present study. The paucity of lawsuits dealing specifically with racial discrimination does not reflect the seriousness of the issues due to the difficulty to prove overt racism, the cost of legal proceedings, and the damage such suits can cause with regard to further professional advancement. From affirmative action to educational initiatives, a brief exploration follows.

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<sup>1852</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1853</sup> Conversation with minority cellist (term chosen by the interviewee) Juilliard School of Music 2017, anonymity assured.

*“The racial conformity of our orchestras points to a lack of non-white players coming up through the system.”*<sup>1854</sup>

Recent statistics published by the League of American Orchestras in a study entitled *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestral Field* provides somber facts with regard to U.S. orchestras.<sup>1855</sup> Whereas Blacks and Hispanics were represented respectively at 1.7 % and 1.8 % in 1980, the 2018 percentages weighed in at a mere 1.8% and 2.5%. The four-fold increase reported in the aforementioned study on onstage diversity in American orchestras was generated by the rapid rise in successful candidates from a specific ethnic group: Asian and Asian-American musicians.<sup>1856</sup> Off center-stage, the statistics show that orchestral administration and board membership is a white bastion in which gender is less of an issue than race.<sup>1857</sup> “Sad but true, the only place where we actually find a significant representation of any sort of minority participants of color at the orchestra is if we look at our stage hands and of course the cleaning crews.”<sup>1858</sup>

## 15.1 The Asian Invasion

If a picture is really worth 1000 words this depiction says it all. A poster announcing a conductor’s performances at the prestigious Baden-Baden festival depicts the most nationalistic German composer of all times, Richard Wagner, with slanted eyes. To portray Wagner in Asian guise implies that a ‘foreign’ interpretation of the ur-German master’s music will ensue.

For those who may not find anything questionable at best or reprehensible at worst in this depiction, a reminder of Wagner’s overt anti-Semitism can be found in his copious letters from the outset of his career. One of the multiple examples of Wagner’s prejudice is exemplified by a quote in a letter to his adoring patron, Ludwig II of Bavaria: “I hold the Jewish race to be the born enemy of pure humanity and everything noble in it.”<sup>1859</sup> Hitler’s reinterpretation of the opera *Parsifal* as a racial purification is

<sup>1854</sup> Elizabeth Day, “Why are our Orchestras so White?” *The Guardian* 14 September 2008. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/sep/14/music.classicalmusicandopera>

Author’s interview with ‘minority’ voices in three U.S. orchestras 2014-2016.

<sup>1855</sup> See, “Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestral Field: A report by the League of American Orchestras” Research and data analysis by James Doeser September 2016. Available at: <https://americanorchestras.org/learning-leadership-development/diversity-resource-center.html>

<sup>1856</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>1857</sup> A tradition of women on boards was long established in the U.S. (see, for more) and several leading ladies sit at the helm of major U.S. orchestras, New York Philharmonic CEO-President, Deborah Borda and Deborah Rutter at the helm of the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. since 2014 to name but two.

<sup>1858</sup> Comment made by minority string player, member of a major U.S. orchestra, anonymity assured.

<sup>1859</sup> References to Wagner’s letters in *Richard Wagner* (translation W. Ashton Ellis) vol. 3 *Judaism in Music and Other Essays*.

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not far-fetched for those steeped in the Wagnerian mix of myth and melody and the composer's obsession with 'purifying German blood from others.'<sup>1860</sup> The fact that the 'greatest interpreter of Wagner's music, the German-Jewish 'Wagnerian' Hermann Levi conducted the premiere of Parsifal at Bayreuth has intrigued historians, musicians and psychiatrists for over a century.<sup>1861</sup> Armed with a bit of background on Wagner



**A culturally questionable poster announces concerts led by the Japanese-American conductor Kent Nagano in 2006**

and his racial rantings, the Nagano portrayal is alarming considering the difficulties Asian musicians have faced in their quest to enter the European orchestral 'territory' as several disturbing examples from the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (VPO), perhaps the most iconic of great European orchestras, show.

Otto Strasser, a violinist, and former Vienna Philharmonic General Manager presented his take on the matter of 'how to deal with' increasing competition by superlative Asian musicians as follows. At the time of his commentary, Vienna's legendary conservatories

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<sup>1860</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1861</sup> Laurence Dreyfus. "Hermann Levi's Shame and Parsifal's Guilt: A Critique of Essentialism in Biography and Criticism" 1994 pp.125-45.

were popular destinations for Asian students estimated at 45% of the total number of students.

*“I hold it incorrect that today the applicants play behind a screen; an arrangement that was brought in after the Second World War in order to assure objective judgments. I continuously fought against it. . . because I am convinced that to the artist also belongs the person that one must not only hear, but also see, in order to judge him in his entire personality. [ . . . ] Even a grotesque situation that played itself out after my retirement was not able to change the situation. An applicant qualified himself as the best, and as the screen was raised, there stood a Japanese before the stunned jury. He was, however, not engaged, because his face did not fit with the Pizzicato-Polka of the New Year’s Concert.”<sup>1862</sup>*

Ten years later, in 2000, the Viennese press broke the news of the acceptance of a half-Japanese violinist, the son of a VPO member into the ranks of the VPO. In an article entitled, ‘A Heaven full of violins,’ readers learn that the aforementioned ‘half-Japanese’ violinist was the son of a VPO member thus more acceptable as ‘one of the elites.’ Strikingly, the report reiterated the view that such a move would have been unthinkable in the past as the worldwide VPO broadcasts of the New Year’s Concert, Mozart masses and Beethoven symphonies were a greeting to the whole world and should be seriously considered as representative of middle-European bliss without the intrusion of other cultures.<sup>1863</sup> In 2003, the Japanese tubist Yasuto Sugiyama was let go before the end of his first trial year. The VPO’s chairman Dr. Clemens Hellsberg stated that Mr. Sugiyama was one of the world’s best tuba players, however, “even when sitting in the audience, I could hear how differently he played compared to the rest of the orchestra.”<sup>1864</sup> This begs the question: did Dr. Hellsberg see, or did he hear the difference?

The VPO’s dismissal of the Korean American flutist Jasmine Choi in 2013 met with condemnation a long way from the gilded glory of the VPO’s home, the Musikverein, as international music blogs spread the news. Ms. Choi’s response to questions concerning her dismissal following one trial year alluded to ongoing discrimination toward Asian musicians:

<sup>1862</sup> Otto Strasser. *Und dafür wird man noch bezahlt. Mein Leben mit den Wiener Philharmonikern* 1990.

<sup>1863</sup> *Focus*, Dezember 31, 2000, „Ein Himmel Voller Geigen.“ Quote in original German, „Sogar ein Halbjanaper, Sohn eines Philharmonikers, darf jetzt mitgeigen. Das galt lange als undenkbar, weil die Fernsehbilder von Neujahrskonzert, Mozart-Messen und Beethoven-Symphonien als Grußkarten nostalgischer Mitteleuropa-Seligkeit in alle Welt gesendet wurden.“

<sup>1864</sup> Francesca Jakes. “All white on the night: why does the world-famous Vienna Philharmonic feature so few women and ethnic minorities?” *The Independent* 4 March 2010. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/all-white-on-the-night-why-does-the-world-famous-vienna-philharmonic-feature-so-few-women-and-ethnic-1915666.html>

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*“Many colleagues questioned my trial year, mostly because of the things that I could not change – being a foreigner, Asian, female, principal position, studied in the United States, never lived in Europe, never studied in Vienna, etc. I am only the second musician to be out after their trial year, following the exit of a concertmaster who happened to be a female Japanese a few years back.”<sup>1865</sup>*

Is it not possible to posit that even in an orchestra run by its members, questionable practices with regard to discrimination can persist? From the Musikverein to Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw assertions on the order of ‘we are an orchestra steeped in tradition, and part of what makes us great is this tradition that cannot be explained in words.’<sup>1866</sup> Fair enough, as music often takes over where words fail, however, as long as overtly discriminatory statements are presented openly, prejudice and inequity in the orchestral workplace endures. “It’s out of the question to say that our orchestra does not accept Japanese musicians. It is just that we have never found any whose musical approach fit in with our special style of playing.”<sup>1867</sup>

### **15.1.1 Asian musicians at the U.S. orchestral workplace**

Beyond gender, ethnic diversity is a sensitive and challenging issue in the orchestral workplace. According to a recent study of racial/ethnic diversity in U.S. orchestras, approximately 10% of musicians in major U.S. orchestras identify as Asian in terms of ethnicity, an increase of 80% between 2012-2016<sup>1868</sup> with higher percentages reported in the string sections of major U.S. orchestras.<sup>1869</sup> The New York Philharmonic website shows that at the ‘violinists port of entry’, the second violin section, 12 of the 14 second violinists are Asian/Asian-American with similar statistics at other top-tier orchestras.<sup>1870</sup> The answer as to how and why are not central to this research, however a cursory response can be found in a combination of factors starting with the fact

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<sup>1865</sup> “Vienna principal flute speaks out about her ‘sexist, racist’ dismissal” as reported on the blog, *Slipped Disc* August 9, 2013.

<sup>1866</sup> Ample variations on this theme found in VPO sources and multiple interviews with Jan Raes, Managing Director RCO including texts in the multiple author text (including Jan Raes) *Toonaangevend: Wat topbedrijven kunnen leren van... het Concertgebouworkest* 2006.

<sup>1867</sup> News (Issue 13, 1998) (“Es ist keine Rede davon, daß wir keine Japaner nehmen. Es war nur bisher keiner dabei, der vom Spielstil zu uns gepaßt hätte. Wer den nicht hat, wird nicht genommen, und in Wien studiert zu haben, ist noch keine Garantie. Unsere Musiker kommen aus 10 Nationen, viele aus der früheren Donaumonarchie, unser neuer Solocellist, zum Beispiel von der Budapester Oper. Das ist auch eine Sache der kulturellen Tradition.”)

<sup>1868</sup> *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field*, available on the website of the League of American Symphony Orchestras at: <https://americanorchestras.org/knowledge-research-innovation/diversity-studies.html>

<sup>1869</sup> For example, 20 of the 27 violinists (including principal players) listed on the roster of the New York Philharmonic in 2021 are of Asian background, see <https://nyphil.org/about-us/meet/musicians-of-the-orchestra>.

<sup>1870</sup> See for example, Chicago Symphony viola section at <https://cso.org/about/performers/cso-musicians/> and Philadelphia Orchestra string sections <https://www.philorch.org/your-philorch/meet-your-orchestra/musicians/>

that music study is given pride of place in many Asian cultures. Parental involvement and sacrifice key to a young person's early training in any perfection-oriented field of endeavor is another significant factor that leads for career longevity in the competitive orchestral field. "Korean society is particularly suited to musical success as hard work is rewarded and respect for authority is part of our culture: my students practice and are motivated, no problems with sacrifice for art."<sup>1871</sup> In the 2011 bestseller, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Yale Law professor and supermom Amy Chua's methods to get her daughter to practice were considered mainstream by Chinese parents and abusive by her American peers.<sup>1872</sup> And, along with discipline and sacrifice, there is an emphasis on humility. "I arrived in the U.S. as a teenager with a violin to speak for me, certainly not English! It is still amazing for me to think that I made it into one of the world's greatest orchestras: I am grateful each and every day."<sup>1873</sup>

Keep in mind that most orchestral musicians will have to withstand at least one financial-organizational crisis in the course of their professional career. Glen Kwok, Executive Director of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis and former President of the Board of the World Federation of International Music Competitions is a vociferous champion of change in the 'classical' music world who believes that for orchestral musicians in crisis, organizational skills, and the will power to stand together are two factors of greatest importance. He dreams to empower superlative Asian orchestral members to find their voices as participatory orchestral committee members.

*"Musical excellence is only the beginning to a great career in an orchestra. Winning the audition is just a first step. Afterwards, the challenges really kick in. You have to be savvy on so many levels—I am not talking about contract negotiation but how a musician can take a role in shaping the future of the orchestra and their career. To become the best musical 'citizen' in the broadest sense makes the whole orchestra better. And let's face it; I can speak for the 'Asians' coming from a Korean background myself. Humility is a wonderful character trait but in the modern orchestra you need more than great playing. You need participation on many fronts. 'Where there is talent, there is leadership.'"*<sup>1874</sup>

Although the players might have the best interests of 'their' orchestra in mind, who will guard against bias and subjective decision making that does not have the best interests of equal opportunity, gender equality in mind? To gain a broader perspective

<sup>1871</sup> Conversation with Professor Nam-Yun Kim, Korea's modest, exacting and internationally renowned violin 'talent trainer,' May 2015.

<sup>1872</sup> Ms. Chua threatens her daughter during a piano practice session with the words, "If the next time's not perfect, I'm going to take all your stuffed animals and burn them!" Many successful musicians who claim that their disciplined childhoods led to future success reported similar experiences.

<sup>1873</sup> Conversations with Yu Yuan, member of the first violin section, The Cleveland Orchestra.

<sup>1874</sup> Multiple conversations with Glen Kwok.



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on this issue, the question was posed to several well-known conductors, key decision-makers with regard to personnel decisions in orchestras.<sup>1875</sup> A pioneer in her own right as one of the most successful musicians to break the gender barrier amongst



1876

conductors, Marin Alsop notes, “[h]ow can we approach what the media dubs an Asian invasion without sounding ‘racist’? This challenges all of us in the profession who are fully cognizant that to win an audition and pass through all the hurdles to join an orchestra is akin to a superhuman act of perfection and artistry. Nowadays, Asian musicians have the commitment and discipline, fantastic training and individual talent, the magic mix that leads to audition success. Their culture supports music as ours once did.”<sup>1877</sup> Jaap van Zweden who leads great orchestras worldwide concurs: “An orchestra is an instrument that lives and breathes through its great musicians. May the

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<sup>1875</sup> As *Intermezzo: of competitions* elucidates the gateway to the orchestra is the audition process. In some orchestras (the Cleveland Orchestra for example) conductors exert significant control, final say over candidates. In others, conductors exercise one vote on a committee of musician peers.

<sup>1876</sup> @Orchestraisracist post available at: <https://www.instagram.com/orchestraisracist/>

<sup>1877</sup> Interview with Marin Alsop, Music Director Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and the Vienna Radio Symphony.

best woman or man win regardless of appearance.”<sup>1878</sup>

In order to address what appears to be an anti-excellence, anti-Asian backlash, racist behavior must be addressed at the earliest stage possible: pre-auditions. A recent report from an Asian musician who attended Amsterdam’s renowned conservatory (CvA),<sup>1879</sup> went viral on social media. Discussions with a significant pool of CvA graduates corroborated the shocking disclosures. Repeated calls to the powers-that-be at the CvA netted ‘no comment.’ Probing further, several CvA pedagogues disclosed that the offensive allegations were in all probability true, based on frequent, behind-the-scenes comments relating to Asian musicians.<sup>1880</sup>

## 15.2 Call it by another name? Financial barriers

*“At first it was kind of awkward, and I think it was awkward for the other players too because I got some strange comments. One guy came up to me and said, ‘You must fry some mean chicken.’”*<sup>1881</sup>

The versatile music-commentator and blogger Norman Lebrecht is one of many who has explored the subject of the ‘white orchestra’ with particular emphasis on the fact that although the orchestral color barrier has been broken by Asians and women have entered the hallowed halls of the notoriously all-male orchestras, the paucity of black and other minority musicians is striking. His observations written upon the announcement of the Chicago Symphony’s appointment of the black trumpet player Tage Larsen in 2002 underline core issues that have kept orchestras white, and of late, Asian in recent decades. “Social aspects have to be taken into consideration. Too few blacks can afford a tertiary musical education.”<sup>1882</sup> His observation is supported by the award-winning black oboist Althea Ifeka: “the lack of black orchestral musicians is about money, not colour.”<sup>1883</sup>

A significant part of the problem of integration essentially takes place long before the audition route is undertaken. The cost of studying music, purchasing an instrument, and receiving the kind of training that leads to the expertise needed to even attempt

<sup>1878</sup> Interview with Jaap van Zweden, former Music Director Dallas Symphony. Music Director, Hong Kong Philharmonic and The New York Philharmonic.

<sup>1879</sup> Conservatorium van Amsterdam (the Amsterdam University of the Arts) <https://www.conservatoriumvanamsterdam.nl/en/>

<sup>1880</sup> “The look alike, they play alike,” was the oft-repeated comment, anonymity assured to the CvA pedagogues.

<sup>1881</sup> Ann Hobson Pilot, the sole black musician in the Boston Symphony interviewed in 1989 *Senza Sordino* June-August 1989 p. 5. Ms. Hobson Pilot retired after 40 years of service in 2009.

<sup>1882</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>1883</sup> Prize-winning oboist Althea Ifeka, quoted by Elizabeth Day. “Why are our Orchestras so White?” *The Guardian* 14 September 2008. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/sep/14/music.classicalmusicandopera>

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an audition is massive for any entrant into the field. For economically disadvantaged aspirants of any background, these costs much like the costs associated with advanced education are real and insurmountable obstacles. Thus, the diversity issue is a tricky one to address through the audition system because the pool of other ‘diversity’ players aside from Asian players is comparatively small due to factors related to access to early training and ongoing financial support for young musicians. The road to a competitive career means the young musician has to be nurtured by excellent teachers, summer programs that promote musical excellence, instruments that motivate the student to improve – all features that cost money. Without music in all schools, after school programs with backups and teams to provide moral support, it is harder for kids from poorer families to make it in the music profession. There is no lack of talent, just a lack of mentors and money. And, if you think the orchestras are bastions of white culture, look closer at the conductors and boards of directors.”<sup>1884</sup> For recent arrivals, investment in a child’s musical aspirations is questionable due to the chances of eventual professional success, “it’s a bad career choice. . . First-generation immigrants don’t want their children going into a profession that is uncertain and poorly rewarded.”<sup>1885</sup> For all the difficulties that face musicians en route to professional careers, the ‘worst is yet to come’ for trained black musicians. The record shows that several black musicians who passed auditions struggled with another hurdle: tenure requirements. From the archives of the New York Philharmonic, examples in which ‘men and women of color take up the gauntlet’ are preserved in microfiche files ranging from letters to the Board to the *Special Files: Racial Discrimination Charges, Nov 5, 1969*.<sup>1886</sup> The personal account excerpted below is in no way meant to single out the New York Philharmonic and tarnish its reputation: the existence of the aforementioned files provides a unique testimony in this disconcerting *movement* on discrimination in the orchestral workplace. Take the saga of Elayne Jones, a black timpanist in the San Francisco Symphony who was beloved by the audience and who was denied tenure in two years after winning the audition in 1974.<sup>1887</sup> In an imbroglio in which accusations of discrimination and overt racism were widely discussed in the local press, the orchestra’s Music Director, Seiji Ozawa, “parted company” with the San Francisco Symphony to concentrate on his duties as music director of the Boston

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<sup>1884</sup> Author’s interview with ‘minority’ voices in three U.S. orchestras 2014-2016.

<sup>1885</sup> See, Althea Ifeka, *supra* at fn. 1883.

<sup>1886</sup> Available at the extraordinary research source, New York Philharmonic Archives online: <https://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/artifact/adf17ae6-6531-4c58-874b-fb4299920fb0-0.1/fullview#page/6/mode/2up>

<sup>1887</sup> William Duncan Allen. “An Overview of Black Concert Music and Musicians in Northern California from the 1940s to the 1980s” 1989 pp. 81-92.

Symphony Orchestra.<sup>1888</sup> “By coincidence perhaps it was announced shortly after Mr. Ozawa’s decision to leave that Ms. Jones agreed to drop a lawsuit in which she sought tenure with the orchestra.”<sup>1889</sup> While Ms. Jones was denied tenure by a vote of her orchestral peers supposedly based on specific performance, the taint of discrimination remains. To quote a fellow orchestra member,

*“To prove a player is incompetent is practically impossible. But it happened with Elayne Jones. No, she wasn’t fired, she didn’t get tenure. For tenure all the musicians are asked. After you have your two probationary years, there must be a consensus of people who have knowledge, and with Elayne Jones people complained that her tympanies were not in tune. Was it true? No, the people have no sense of pitch...all of us in the symphony were polled. I don’t know how, most of us do not even know where the tympanies were—I wasn’t asked about Elayne Jones, but why I wasn’t asked, I don’t know.”*<sup>1890</sup>

Only one illustrative story tells the tale of many thousands of careers in the shadow of success. Off to New York, “a haven of opportunity for all musicians.”<sup>1891</sup>

“When I began my career in 1941, it was almost unthinkable for a black musician even to ask for an audition with a symphony orchestra. I did get a job as a bassist with the National Youth Administration orchestra, which was an outgrowth of the WPA, but after it was disbanded, I couldn’t even get an audition with Phil Spitalny’s all-girl orchestra, and that’s no kidding. It was then that I began playing primarily with jazz groups, as so many black musicians have done when they had no alternative.

Yet years later, I did ask Leopold Stokowski [distinguished U.S.-based conductor, started his legendary career at the Philadelphia Orchestra, author’s comment] for an audition, citing two awards I had won from the National Orchestral Association. He auditioned me despite my relatively advanced age for a symphony orchestra beginner and told me that was acceptable and that there would be a job for me in his orchestra in the fall. Yet when the fall came, I learned that the musicians for his orchestra had already been chosen and I was not included among them.

In 1965, Stokowski saw me playing a club date with dance group at a reception in his honor. He came over to me and said, “This music is all right, but how about playing in my orchestra?” This remark I took very lightly until Stokowski’s manager congratulated me on my new appointment. By the end of the evening, it was publicly announced that I had just become a new member of the American Symphony for the following season. Yet when I called his office the next day, I was told that would have to audition. I declined because I felt that it was most unfair to hire me and then ask me to audition. It’s not done that way, at least not with white musicians.

<sup>1888</sup> As reported in the *New York Times*, August 28, 1975. Donald Henahan. “Ozawa at 40: A Flamboyant Bostonian. Available at: <https://nyti.ms/1LsOYIU>

<sup>1889</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>1890</sup> Listen to Felix Khuner “A violinist’s Journey from Vienna’s Kolisch Quartet to the San Francisco Symphony and Opera Orchestras: An oral history transcript/1996.” Available at: <https://archive.org/details/violinistsjourn00khunrich>

<sup>1891</sup> Repeated by the New York Philharmonic’s exuberant Music Director (1978-1991) Zubin Mehta.

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*“As a woman musician, I must say that it’s rather nice that the New York Philharmonic is hiring members of my sex these days. Since 1966, the Philharmonic has judged four women competent enough to be employed as permanent members of the ensemble, and a fifth will start this fall. think that’s fine. But as a black woman musician, I’d like to ask a question: How come the Philharmonic could find five qualified women musicians in such short period of time when in the entire 129 years of its history it has found only one qualified black musician, irrespective of sex?”<sup>1892</sup>*

More troubling, when a black musician finally ‘makes it’ in the white, white world of classical music performance, he/she might well discover that there are other barriers to acceptance, barriers that show themselves at the front door to the concert hall, “a shored-up sonic refuge of whiteness.”<sup>1893</sup> A jaw-dropper of a blog written by the successful, and yes, black conductor Brandon Keith Brown outlines what the very act of entering a concert hall feels like, from ‘the other side,’ reporting on ‘Why Blacks don’t go to concerts.’ Before engaging the reader in tales from the concert crypt replete with jibes and nasty comments, he observes:

*“Classical concerts are racially traumatic experiences. It’s why we don’t go. Why pay to sit stone-still, quiet, cooped up with white folks who don’t want us there? Does this sound like a relaxing Saturday night to you?*

*Artists on stage — and the composer(s) — rarely look like us. Instead of masterworks on subscription concerts, Black artists are mostly relegated to ethnically pigeonholed variety shows during Black history month or other auxiliary dates white administrators choose to look and feel less racist.*

*As a Black male, I’m not afforded the option to express the same range of emotion white men can. I’m required to be demure, mitigate my speech, be overly gracious and smile like a Cheshire cat at all times. At concerts, I should think, “Gosh oh gee, I’m SO privileged to sit with all you white people after years of legalized segregation!”*

*I don’t. It makes folks nervous and mad. Not my problem.*

**The Cost of Admission**

*So, what does a ticket cost when Black?*

*Our dignity.*

*The concert hall is white people turf, another space where I’m not wanted.”<sup>1894</sup>*

### 15.3 Affirmative action and protests against discrimination

Despite calls for greater diversity within contemporary orchestras, affirmative action as a means to serve this end is as controversial in 2021 as it was in 1989, as an example from the Detroit Symphony (DSO) foregrounds. At that time, the Michigan state

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<sup>1892</sup> Lucille Dixon. “Is it Artistic Judgment or is it Discrimination?” *New York Times* August 1, 1971. A version of the archives appears in print on August 1, 1971, on Page D11 of the New York edition with the headline: Music.

<sup>1893</sup> See, Brandon Keith Brown’s blog at: <https://medium.com/@maestrokbk/smile-for-white-supremacy-no-more-ad78df59c42c>

<sup>1894</sup> Ibid.,

legislature warned that it would withhold funding unless the DSO changed its tune to hire more black musicians as a proper reflection of the city's population. With a DSO total of two black musicians in 1989 in a predominantly black city (75% of Detroit's population was black as confirmed by census reports in 1990, up from 63% in 1980), the DSO abandoned the use of screened auditions to expedite its hiring process to encourage the legislature's demands. While the purpose of this expedited system was intended to promote a commendable goal, it incurred the wrath of DSO musicians who threatened to file unfair labor charges. It also caused anguish on the part of minority musicians, including those who were new hires: they were concerned that they would be scorned by their colleagues for entering the orchestra on a fast-track. The reader might well be persuaded to support affirmative action in orchestras after a consideration of the New York chronicles to follow.

### ***15.3.1 Tales from the New York Philharmonic***

In 1969, as the civil rights movement gathered momentum in the United States and captured international attention, two black musicians who had freelanced regularly in the New York Philharmonic, bassist Arthur Davis and cellist Earl Madison, accused the orchestra of discriminatory hiring practices and subsequently filed suit at New York's Commission on Human Rights.<sup>1895</sup> The New York Philharmonic's civil rights materials can be accessed through a file on the great Leonard Bernstein.<sup>1896</sup> Mr. Bernstein was a vociferous supporter of civil rights and made frequent speeches advocating equal rights for all. Putting deeds to back up his words, he was a founding father of the Symphony of the New World, a completely integrated orchestra founded just after the Civil Rights Act came into effect in 1964.

Although Maestro Bernstein's heart may have been in the right place with regard to his general feelings for equality, when queried about the lack of integration in 'his' orchestra, he retorted: "the New York Philharmonic is not in the social rearmament business." Perhaps the most shocking statistic that emerged from the evidence showed that during the period of a decade (1960s) 277 substitutes and extra players performed a total of 1,773 weeks with the Philharmonic. Amongst those musicians one of those who was hired was black and he was hired for one week.<sup>1897</sup> Reacting to the claims presented by the two musicians including evidence of a 'structural lack of racial

<sup>1895</sup> Ibid., The New York Philharmonic civil rights materials can be accessed through the Leonard Bernstein files.

<sup>1896</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1897</sup> Archives of the New York Philharmonic, Black Musicians Human Rights Commission Hearings 1969, Jul 30, 1969 - Sep 26, 1970 (ID: 011-03-22) Available at: <https://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/artifact/abb6b2d1-5a2e-4a0d-888d-6ba897f038e6-0.1/fullyview#page/1/1/mode/2up>

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integration at the workplace,' the National Urban League called on the orchestra to put affirmative action in place.

The panel ruled in November 1970 that the orchestra was not guilty of racial discrimination although it had “engaged in a pattern and practice of discrimination”<sup>1898</sup> regarding the hiring of substitute and extra musicians: an old-boy system, a system of “cronyism” that usually relied on the students of tenured players. With regard to auditions for permanent positions, the Commission dismissed the charges against the Philharmonic, as auditions are based on subjective decisions and “discrimination in matters involving artistic judgment is, in the very nature of the case, most difficult to prove.”<sup>1899</sup> Arthur Davis was called to substitute with the Philharmonic a few more times post judgment, however within a few months he lost most of his work save for his principal position in the Symphony of the New World.

Sanford Allen, a violinist who held the distinction of being the only black member of the New York Philharmonic decided to leave the orchestra after 15 years of service in 1977. In a *New York Times* interview, he stated that he was “simply tired of being a symbol.”<sup>1900</sup> In his opinion, one of the reasons why so few blacks ‘made it’ in orchestras was a matter of education and ‘statistics’. Of the many musicians who train and compete for orchestral jobs in any given period, the numbers who will make it into one of the major orchestras is extremely small. The sole black musician member on the roster at the New York Philharmonic in 2019 is principal clarinetist Andrew McGill.

### ***15.3.2 Raise a fist against discrimination: George Szell sets an example***

In the gallery of ‘musicians in power’ along the road to integration there are heroes, rogues and many who may have tried to foster integration but failed.

Amongst the heroes, the martinet and master of minutiae was the Cleveland Orchestra’s legendary Maestro/Music Director George Szell. Mr. Szell hired the orchestra’s first black musician, cellist Donald White in 1959. Mr. White who performed in the orchestra for 39 seasons recounted, “Szell would pass by and put his hand on my shoulder” as if to say, “I know what you are going through.”<sup>1901</sup> And in March 1961 two months before the Freedom Riders were attacked in Birmingham, Alabama,<sup>1902</sup>

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<sup>1898</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1899</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>1900</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/08/29/archives/only-black-in-philharmonic-is-resigning-after-15-years.html>

<sup>1901</sup> Listen to Mr. White in his own words, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDCCcEsW1bVw>

<sup>1902</sup> The Heinous KKK Attack on the Freedom Rides captured on video, courtesy the Smithsonian. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8WnT6v\\_W3o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8WnT6v_W3o)

Mr. White was denied entry to the city's concert hall. A municipal regulation that forbade blacks and whites from appearing together in a public place was enforced at the hall's artist entrance. In a crucial gesture of solidarity, Maestro Szell announced that the entire Cleveland Orchestra would boycott the concert unless Mr. White was granted his right to enter the hall along with his colleagues. The show did go on, with Mr. White joining his colleagues in the cello section.<sup>1903</sup>

#### 15.4 The Dutch touch: imbalance but not racist

Missing amongst these tales of discrimination in orchestras is an appraisal of the Dutch touch, the orchestral landscape in the Netherlands. Do these lacunae bear witness to an ideal multicultural state of affairs or is it possible that a discussion of discrimination at Dutch orchestras is somehow not applicable to the status quo with particular relation to orchestras? Debates concerning multiculturalism, a buzz word of sorts within political as well as cultural debates, include discussions about subsidy shifts toward pluriformity: 'the recognition and inclusion of a multiplicity of cultures into the mainstream culture.' This entails a change of direction from encouraging and enhancing awareness of the Western canon towards embracing all culture as part of a larger conception of poly-national culture.<sup>1904</sup> Opening the floodgates to a discussion of culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is certainly not the intention here although these issues could be of great relevance to the future of the orchestra as an organization that represents all musical cultures.

It is difficult to attribute the paucity of minorities in Dutch orchestras to direct discrimination. Interviews with 'minority' musicians, orchestra personnel managers, conductors and orchestral musicians fosters the hypothesis that racism in Dutch orchestras certainly has not been as overt as the 'anti-Asian' sentiments expressed by the VPO and according to reports, many German orchestras until recent years. The RCOs caretakers report, "our orchestra welcomes the players who succeed at auditions: we have Asians, two foreign concertmasters and many other representatives of foreign countries. "The 'musicians of color' issue, or lack thereof, is more related to 'who auditions, who even gets to that point' in terms of training."<sup>1905</sup> Once again, as in the U.S. example, the 'maintenance and sustenance' issues tied to early training, parental support, and financial sponsorship crucial to enable young musicians to begin and continue the arduous process that leads to an orchestral career is central

<sup>1903</sup> Recounted in Michael Charry's biography, *George Szell: A Life in Music* 2011 pp. 174-175.

<sup>1904</sup> Adri Schreuder. *Multiculturele variaties in muziekeducatie*. Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de kunsten 2008.

<sup>1905</sup> Conversation with Joel Fried, Artistic Director Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (RCO).



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to changing orchestral ‘color’ and ‘identity.’ Other key issues that have maintained a ‘white’ status quo at Dutch orchestras relate to cultural differences, subsidy challenges and EU nationality politics.

In terms of cultural differences, ‘minority’ classical musicians brought forward the point that there is a marked tendency to dismiss or disregard non-mainstream ‘national’ culture. “Many ‘minorities’ who are Dutch nationals (Surinamese, Antillean, Turkish and Moroccan) have rich cultures of their own; the link to the Western classical music tradition is tenuous at best. For some there might even be a stigma to get involved in ‘white man’s music’ as that means you turn your back on your roots.”<sup>1906</sup> To others queried “do not forget the political considerations that relate to the fact that at orchestras non-EU candidates must ‘wait in line’ for auditions, as EU candidates and those holding work permits are given a first chance to play. This means that many fine ‘non-European’ nationals are effectively barred from winning auditions as many orchestral vacancies are filled before they get a chance to play. This might not be viewed as a discriminatory policy, but it certainly keeps the orchestras in Europe-first mode.”<sup>1907</sup>

## 15.5 Positive notes: a call for commitment and action

The ups and downs of affirmative action aside, the number of contemporary orchestras that fund and actively support diversity initiatives is growing and becoming a structural part of an orchestra’s status quo. A growing number of U.S. orchestras have announced Minority Fellowships<sup>1908</sup> and all U.S. and Canadian orchestras place the following text on their websites, “The (name of orchestra) is an *Equal Opportunity Employer*.”<sup>1909</sup> As this *movement* illustrates, inclusive texts on websites and anti-discrimination black letter law is commendable but nevertheless inconsequential unless followed up by action. Suggestions for tangible improvement on the orchestral integration front should reach out on three fronts. Firstly, orchestra budgets should earmark funds to initiate local educational projects for young students. The subsidized Dutch orchestras are now required to implement fair pay regulations; why not pair subsidy grants to educational fulfillment requirements to benefit those who have little or no access to classical music? Secondly, whereas orchestras in the past were required to showcase ‘national’ repertoire, the modern orchestras should showcase minority voices in programs. Thirdly, orchestras

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<sup>1906</sup> Conversations with Ernst-Paul Fuchs, pianist.

<sup>1907</sup> Conversations with a South American national on the Dutch audition scene, anonymity assured.

<sup>1908</sup> For example, both the Cleveland Orchestra and the Detroit Symphony announced special fellowships on their websites 2016-2017, see, <https://www.dso-org>

<sup>1909</sup> Information drawn from multiple websites readily accessible through the *Musical Chairs* website, available at: <https://www.musicalchairs.info/jobs>

should collaborate actively with conservatories to develop programs geared to aspiring performers and composers with the aim to foster professionalism. Conservatories in search of relevant projects for their advanced students could aid in the development of appropriate models to foster action on the diversity front.

From the Amsterdam-based combination ‘music and social project’ *Leerorkest*<sup>1910</sup> to the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s showcase youth orchestra YOLA (with its own youth center),<sup>1911</sup> and the pan-U.S. *Sphinx* initiatives,<sup>1912</sup> social justice through classical music training startups modeled on the Venezuelan El Sistema “tocar y luchar” (to play and to struggle) are transforming the classical music scene at least at the rudimentary training level.<sup>1913</sup> Whether this will alleviate discriminatory practices and alleviate vulnerabilities remains to be seen and heard. Let the closing kudos go to a classically trained top-tier orchestral musician who has devoted a significant portion of her life to develop classical music programs for disadvantaged children. “We build bridges, together. Sharing and communication through music is defined by give-and take. We learn, they learn. The benefit is mutual: start small, dream big, the orchestra will capture the imagination and grow.”<sup>1914</sup>



**Hands-on training,  
Consuelo, Dominican  
Republic 2017**

<sup>1910</sup> See, [www.leerorkest.nl](http://www.leerorkest.nl) as of 2019 the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra cooperates with Leerorkest projects.

<sup>1911</sup> See <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-yola-center-commentary-20180815-story.html>

<sup>1912</sup> <https://www.atlantasympphony.org/community/~media/b7d970f28422427a9caceff25f908405.ashx> and <http://www.sphinxmusic.org/our-history/>

<sup>1913</sup> A critical note on the hierarchy within El Sistema and its inability to reach the most precarious can be found at <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/11/geoff-baker-el-sistema-model-of-tyranny>

<sup>1914</sup> Visionary violinist Isabel Trautwein, member Cleveland Orchestra; founder El Sistema@Rainey; initiator of a classical music startup in Consuelo, Dominican Republic (2017) where the author and her daughter, Yaël Kurzbauer joined Ms. Trautwein in coaching and performance.