Give us racial harmony

American symphony orchestras seem totally out of tune when it comes to adding minorities

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON justin.davidson@newsday.com
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A couple of weeks ago, I wrote a column chastising the Vienna Philharmonic for being a pathologically reactionary organization that has resisted admitting women long after it claimed to welcome them. Among the more polite responses I received were those suggesting I examine American orchestras to see if they are any more inclusive of women and minorities. I have, and they are, but distortions that persist in American society are amplified in the competitive world of symphony orchestras.

The role of auditions

In the 1970s, most orchestras adopted the practice of blind auditions: Candidates play from behind screens, and in some cases even remove their shoes so that judges can't distinguish a man's steps from a woman's. Each vacancy attracts hundreds of hopefuls. In the final round, once they have been winnowed down to three or four, the screens often come down so that the music director and the panel of orchestra members can meet their potential colleagues.

Whether that face-to-face opens the door to prejudice is hard to say, but the system has clearly benefited some groups more than others, and not in consistent ways. A couple of generations ago, symphony orchestras were all-male, lily-white clubs. Today, women make up 46 percent of orchestra musicians and nonwhites 14 percent, according to a survey by the American Symphony Orchestra League.

But women do far better getting positions in smaller, part-time ensembles, where they outnumber men (they constitute 67 percent of the Long Island Philharmonic, for instance) than they do in the most prestigious orchestras, where they constitute just over a third of the players. For Asians, the situation is exactly reversed: Though they represent less than 4 percent of the U.S. population, they make up nearly 10 percent of players in the top tier of orchestras.

A generation into blind auditions, African-American and Latino classical musicians remain few and lonely. The New York Philharmonic has exactly one black member: horn player Jerome Ashby. The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra's principal cellist is Rafael Figueroa, a member of a Puerto Rican musical dynasty, but he has only one or two comrades to help him carry the standard for Latino musicians in major New York orchestras. Of the Long Island Philharmonic's 71 tenured members, one is black and two are Latino.

Recruitment, other factors

The rarity of blacks and Latinos in music schools, in audiences and at auditions makes it hard to charge that orchestras harbor outright resistance to hiring them. League president Henry Fogel recalls that in the 18 years that he ran the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the number of blacks among the 150 candidates for each opening "was somewhere between zero and two. And the first African-American who made it to the finals got hired." (That was the trumpeter Tage Larsen.)

The situation is hardly better at the Juilliard School, one of the stringently competitive conservatories that keeps orchestras supplied with candidates.

Out of 501 undergraduate and graduate classical musicians enrolled in the school, 10 are black and 17 are Latino. Juilliard spokeswoman Janet Kessin says that the school has tried various ways of raising those numbers, with mixed success.

For a while, it held auditions around the country rather than requiring applicants to come to New York, but
while the number of nonwhite applicants increased, few of them got in. Then, 15 years ago, a donor funded the Music Advancement Program, which draws 35 students a year from New York City public schools. The program was intended to create enthusiasts, not future professionals, but a few graduates have gone on to conservatory and professional careers.

Alison Scott-Williams, Juilliard's director of diversity, sees the situation as circular. Since minorities are so scarce in classical music, orchestral life does not appeal to many nonwhite musicians. "It's the new racism," she says - not hostility, but an insidious form of skepticism. "The climate is not supportive."

While schools in affluent suburbs have orchestras, and parents there can pay for instruments and lessons, many urban school districts consider music an unaffordable luxury. So classical music exists only at the margins of African-American and Latino communities. Now, given America's persistent racial inequities in education, health care, crime and life expectancy, the scarcity of black piccolo players might not seem like an issue of national urgency. But discrimination is discrimination, whether it is passive or active, and whether it affects orchestras or jails.

Besides, orchestras themselves have much to gain from diversifying in an ever-less-white America: new audiences, new donors and a new profile as dynamic cultural institutions.

But would a more multihued orchestra also be a more multitalented one? Absolutely, argues Aaron Dworkin, founder of the 10-year-old Michigan-based Sphinx Organization, dedicated to advancing the cause of minorities in classical music. Dworkin argues that a greater variety of musicians would bring more versatile orchestras, able to play a broader range of music. He might be right, but it's a tricky argument.

Some young players of all races get out of music school these days with good bluegrass chops and a nocturnal habit of playing in a rock band. While audition panels generally aren't terribly interested, that background does help the flexibility of the orchestras they join. Generational turnover seems to be increasing the skill set of orchestras pretty effectively, even without tweaking the ethnic makeup.

So what should the music world do? Dworkin believes that orchestras should make diversity a top priority and attack the problem on multiple levels: train and hire staff members of color, start apprenticeship programs for young minority musicians, actively recruit black and Latino musicians and establish long-term relationships with local community organizations.

Then, there's the question of how to hire players. "This is where it gets a little hairy," Dworkin admits. "We should look again at the current standard of screened auditions. I believe that more information about the candidate should be incorporated, in the same way that institutions of higher learning take cultural and racial background into account."

In other words, Dworkin wants to weaken the very tool that orchestras use to guarantee impartiality, making race a factor in an applicant's arsenal of qualities. After all, he argues, if orchestras were true meritocracies, musicians would have to reaudition every year, making it easier to shed those who have stopped practicing or lost their zeal. If tenure can protect incumbents, why can't racial considerations help candidates?

It's hard to imagine that idea getting much traction, even with Dworkin's own constituents. Take the case of Ebenee Thomas, a 27-year-old flutist from a mostly white suburb of Dallas who is now a third-year fellow in the high-powered Miami-based training orchestra, New World Symphony.

"Sometimes, people assume I got where I got because I'm black," Thomas says. "One thing that drew me to classical music was that most of the time, people really just want to know how you play."

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