

TEACHING

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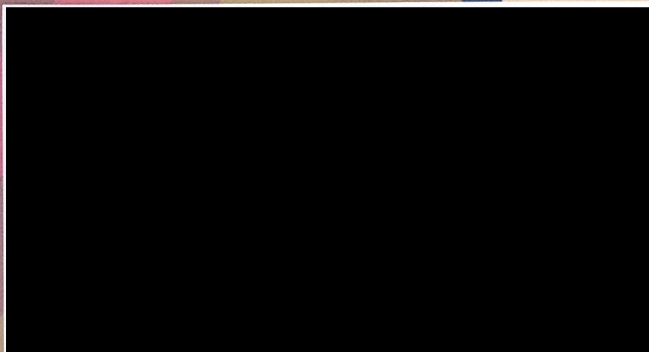
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National Association
for Music Education



NAfME COUNCIL FOR ORCHESTRAL EDUCATION

Bridging Empathy and Action: A Call for Change in the Orchestra Classroom

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are imperatives that have come more clearly into focus in our profession and society. In June 2020, the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) articulated clearly the belief that Black Lives Matter. Positions on Equity and Access in Music Education and Inclusivity and Diversity in Music Education were previously expressed by NAfME, highlighting both the organization's intent and commitment to actively further these objectives.

As educators are potential model figures in our students' lives, we must listen and "hear our students' pain," states NAfME's 2020 Black Lives Matter Belief Statement. These opportunities for empathy and understanding must then extend beyond the moment and inspire us to act in meaningful, identifiable ways.

The League of American Orchestras has already taken steps to measure the underrepresentation of minorities within the nation's top 100 orchestras. As educators, how do we then address these challenges, which likely persist in our own communities, to create a more diverse environment in our classrooms?

HOW CAN WE HELP?

NAfME and many other musical, educational, and service-based organizations have been hard at work assessing their practices, articulating positions, and identifying the next steps.

However, as a classroom educator, facilitating change can seem challenging, as the moral imperatives must also be aligned with the educational objectives we have for

our students. Recently, the NAFME Council for Orchestral Education met with several Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) composers to solicit their input on how diversity might be addressed within the orchestra community. During this meeting with David Robinson, Rick Robinson, Trevor Weston, Vanessa Fanning, Rodney Lamar Page, and Portia Dunkley, some principal themes emerged. These may offer educators areas to consider as well as tangible acts to help move toward these aims, which ultimately benefit the students in our care and the communities we serve.

1 Address “who” we represent in the classroom.

Addressing “who” we represent in the classroom can be as simple as curating diverse representation concerning who we choose to share in our classroom environments, be they physical or digital. According to a report by the League of American Orchestras with research and data analysis by James Doerer, representation of musicians in our nation’s orchestras stands at around 2% for both African Americans (1.8%) and Latinos (2.5%), respectively. This disparity may also be reflected in our own classroom environments, and we must consider why this may be the case and be prepared to implement the changes needed to address this underrepresentation.

What professional orchestras, musicians, and ensembles are we sharing with our students? Did you know there are several ensembles made up of BIPOC musicians/performers? In our conversation with Rick Robinson, composer and owner of CUTTIME Productions, he suggested that we “teach students about black and Latinx orchestras and ensembles.” The Sphinx Organization, Gateways Music Festival, Colour of Music Festival, Chineke! Foundation and Orchestra, and The Dream Unfinished are just a few examples of ensembles and festivals we should be promoting. Many of these organizations (and others like the Chicago Sinfonietta) have been working for decades to address diversity in the arts as well as social justice issues, including the diversity deficit that exists between orchestras and the vibrant, nuanced communities for which they play.

Other intentional acts, like visual images of minority musical models in classroom environments, can serve as an inspiration to student musicians. The Imani Winds, Black Violin, String Queens, and Quintet Latino are incredible groups that can serve as inspiration. These intentional collective choices help us create and maintain environments that promote equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging in our classrooms.

Additional Reading: Black Artists on How to Change Classical Music (*New York Times*) – [nytimes.com/2020/07/16/arts/music/black-classical-music-opera.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/arts/music/black-classical-music-opera.html)

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2 Address “what” repertoire we use.

After addressing whom you share with your students, the next step is to reflect on your own programming. What percentage of your current repertoire reflects the diversity of your classroom demographics or that of your community?

While progress is being made in this area, readily available data courtesy of the Institute for Composer Diversity demonstrates a significant underrepresentation of BIPOC composers (female composers, too) in the professional ranks. Sphinx Founder Aaron Dworkin advocates for similar programming goals outlined in a section dedicated to best practices concerning programming.

While our ability to deliver change at the professional level may be limited, the compositions we select for our students, ensembles, and communities is very much something we can control. And while this process may begin with a critical (and potentially sobering) self-assessment, it is something we can measure — an area we can quantifiably track.

Once a commitment to change is made in this area, there are numerous opportunities available to amplify your voice, highlight the work you do alongside your students, and inspire change in your local organizations and even your states. In our dialogue, David Robinson and Rodney Page encouraged individuals to submit compositions to music organizations for consideration on required music lists. Vanessa Fanning noted the significance of having BIPOC compositions included in reading sessions at regional and state-level conferences, increasing access to these rich works. In addition, the composers and the council encourage educators to reach out to individuals and organizations who help guide professional development to ask how they plan to integrate works by BIPOC composers in their events, including All-Region and All-State. These lists, reading sessions, and honor ensemble programming opportunities can significantly impact the visibility of these works, and by their inclusion, the likelihood that others will see, hear, and program these composers.

Finally, take advantage of this moment to include more stakeholders throughout the programming process. Have students come up with programming ideas, share possible pieces with your ensemble, discuss their merits and context, and as noted by Trevor Weston, invite a composer to speak with your students to share their insight and experience. The recent dive into a digital ecosystem has introduced significant challenges, but also a significant opportunity for educators. No longer are programs limited by the exterior walls of their individual school sites. A more connected, inclusive, accessible educational space is being created. We all have the opportunity to use our newly developed skills and resources to enrich and enhance our students’ lives.



We have been provided a time and place to rethink music education, how it is delivered, and how we would like to shape the experience of our students moving forward. We must show that we are willing to examine which ... students and cultures are not yet reflected adequately.

Additional reading: “Best Practices for Creating Diverse Concert Programs” (Institute for Composer Diversity) composerdiversity.com/programming

3 Address “when” change should happen.

The time is now.

At present, we are in the middle of a historic moment — one full of change, challenge, and opportunity. We have been provided a time and place to rethink music education, how it is delivered, and how we would like to shape the experience of our students moving forward. We must show that we are willing to examine which students we are reaching and reflect upon which students and cultures are not yet reflected adequately in our classrooms, curricula, and performances.

Then, we must take steps to implement the change our students deserve, turning empathy into action.

Luckily, many folks are already beginning this vital work. Music Educators Associations (such as Maryland) are foregoing approved repertoire lists, and sites such as www.composerdiversity.com are making it easier to select and program diverse repertoire. As a council, we are continuing to find ways to open up meaningful conversations and support classroom teachers.

Moving forward with empathy and action requires reflection and forward motion. What will you do? ☰

Photo by LaSaundra Booth

