



Participants in the National Alliance for Audition Support's August 2019 Audition Intensive at the New World Center, the New World Symphony's home in Miami Beach.

On the Right Track

In just two years, the National Alliance for Audition Support, which aims to increase the numbers of Black and Latinx musicians at orchestras, is making an impact. Through the initiative, more Black and Latinx musicians are taking more auditions—and winning positions at orchestras nationwide. While work to address the underrepresentation of musicians of color at orchestras is far from done, the National Alliance for Audition Support is helping to move things forward, with real-world results.

by Janaya Greene

When Bill Neri began playing the viola at age seven in hopes of being a little bit more like his older sister, who also played the viola, he didn't expect the instrument to put him on a path of performances across the world in his adult life, or that the instrument would introduce him to the National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS), an initiative with a mission of increasing the number of Black and Latinx musicians—a mission that could redefine classical music nationwide.

A few years later, a middle-school-aged Neri and his dad were shocked to learn that the Sphinx Organization's Performance Academy was free, among a sea of classical music summer programs for kids that cost in the thousands of dollars. Sphinx's Performance Academy is a chamber-music program that includes career enrichment sessions, masterclasses,

Orchestral Partners Audition program in 2018, he heard about the newly established National Alliance for Audition Support and applied to NAAS later that year. NAAS addresses the longstanding underrepresentation of Black and Latinx

NAAS addresses the longstanding underrepresentation of Black and Latinx musicians in American orchestras by providing financial and mentorship support.

musicians in American orchestras by providing financial and mentorship support to Black and Latinx musicians. As reported in the League of American Orchestras' *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field* study, the number of African-American musicians in American orchestras has hovered around 1.8 percent since 2002, and the number of Hispanic and Latinx musicians has

poned to 2021 due to the pandemic). During his second year with Central City Opera in 2019, Neri also joined NAAS as a project manager, beginning a more purposeful journey in helping to expand opportunities for underrepresented musicians.

In its second year (2019-20), NAAS has assisted even more artists, providing financial and mentorship support to 81 Black and Latinx musicians as they refine their talent at New World

Symphony's audition intensives; connect with orchestras that are members of the League of American Orchestras; and receive guidance from Sphinx, the organization that is coordinating the program's overall efforts.

The program's financial support is key to working towards leveling the playing field for white, Black, and Latinx musicians. White American families have



Priscilla Rinehart, a horn player who participated in a National Alliance for Audition Support intensive in 2019, recently won a position in Florida's Sarasota Orchestra.



Bassoonist Francisco Joubert-Bernard won a position in the Louisville Orchestra after an audition funded by the National Alliance for Audition Support.



Violist Bill Neri was awarded support from NAAS in 2018, making it possible for him to audition for Denver's Central City Opera, with which he performed for two summers. In 2019, Neri joined NAAS as a project manager.

recitals, and mentorship opportunities for young string musicians. Like NAAS, the program is focused on the inclusion of groups underrepresented in classical music. Neri, who is Latinx, enjoyed participating in the Sphinx Academy, but it wasn't until he was in college that he decided to pursue a solo career as a violist. After Neri participated in Sphinx's

only grown to 2.5 percent in 2014 from 1.8 percent in 2002.

Neri was among the first 57 musicians awarded support in 2018, with NAAS funding making it possible for him to audition for orchestras like Denver's Central City Opera, with which he performed for two summers (Central City Opera's 2020 summer festival was post-

three times as much wealth as Latinx families and four times as much wealth as lower- and middle-class Black families in America. This financial disparity makes it far more difficult for many Black and Latinx families to afford music instruction, summer programs, instruments, instrument repairs, travel to auditions, and more. Money is a major barrier to entry among these communities. For adult musicians of color, this can translate to difficulties affording travel to out-of-town auditions, where they bear the burden of housing, food, and travel costs.

All professional musicians face these costs, but many musicians of color aiming for full-time gigs at orchestras have other, non-classical job obligations that can leave little time for preparation.

To date, NAAS has awarded support to 138 musicians, of whom 73 are Black, 61 are Latinx, and four belong to both groups. Of these 138 participants, 19 have won 22

National Alliance for Audition Support

To advance diversity, equity, and inclusion at American orchestras by expanding the numbers of emerging Black and Latinx musicians, in 2018 the League of American Orchestras, Sphinx Organization, and New World Symphony joined forces to launch the National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS). An unprecedented nationwide initiative, NAAS offers Black and Latinx musicians a customized combination of mentoring, audition preparation, financial support, and audition previews. Now in its second year, NAAS has already made a substantial difference in the lives of hundreds of musicians of color and dozens of U.S. orchestras.

- Nineteen musicians have won 22 auditions in orchestras.
- Twelve musicians were placed on substitute lists or won fellowship positions with orchestras.
- Five musicians won one-year contract positions with orchestras.
- 138 musicians have received NAAS support since 2018; support includes NAAS grants and/or participation in NAAS Audition Intensives.
- Since August 2018, 261 NAAS grants have been awarded to 107 musicians. The grants enable musicians to take part in auditions, pursue substitute or short-term playing opportunities, or repair their instruments.
- In two years, the number of Orchestra Partners providing financial contributions to support the program has nearly doubled, from 41 to 77.
- In 2018-19, 68 musicians participated in five NAAS Audition Intensives for strings, low strings, and winds and brass, hosted by the New World Symphony.

Visit auditionalliance.org for more information.



Above and below: A session during a NAAS Audition Intensive at New World Symphony.



New World Symphony

auditions in orchestras; 24 have won auditions and or placements at orchestras; five have won one-year contract positions; and twelve were placed on sub lists or won fellowship positions.

According to League of American Orchestras President and CEO Jesse Rosen, before NAAS, fellowships were the primary way that many orchestras tried to increase the number of musicians of color in their rosters. However, as the League documented in its 2016 report, *Forty Years of Fellowships: A Study of Orchestras' Ef-*

forts to Include African American and Latino Musicians, these fellowships did not have a significant impact on diversity in the classical world. “On the one hand, musicians who participated in those fellowships had good career-advancing experiences and musical development,” says Rosen, “but it didn’t actually have an impact on the overall representation of African-American musicians. Nothing changed for the most part. Fellows reported having unsatisfying experiences of often being the only African American person in the orchestra, not

always being welcomed particularly warmly or supportively.”

The National Alliance for Audition Support is a more coordinated effort among many orchestras in the U.S. At the initiative’s start, 41 League-member orchestras opted to be a part of the program; today an additional 36 League-member orchestras are helping Black and Latinx musicians through NAAS. “In this particular program, our role has been to get our membership to say, ‘Yes, we want to be a part of this, we want to help,’” says Rosen. “There are now 77 orchestras annually making contributions to the NAAS, and it’s their money that’s being pooled and distributed out to musicians. We communicate with the orchestras frequently about progress in the program, how much money is being spent, how many people are auditioning, continuously recruiting more of our members to participate financially in supporting the program.”



New World Symphony

NAAS Audition Intensives include sessions with a performance psychologist who is expert at helping musicians prepare for auditions and performances.

Toward Winning Auditions

As project manager for the National Alliance for Audition Support, Neri, now 28, keeps NAAS leaders up to date on prog-

ress and needs within the program, acting as a liaison among the initiative’s moving parts. As a former participant in the program, Neri brings a unique perspective to

The National Alliance for Audition Support had its genesis, in part, in a two-day meeting (below) convened by the League of American Orchestras and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in December of 2015 to address the barriers to diversity in orchestras. The 50 attendees included musicians, administrators, representatives of community music schools, conservatories, and community-engagement experts. Seated left to right (listed with orchestra affiliations at the time): Sandra Bailey, principal bassoon, Chicago Sinfonietta, second bassoon, Arkansas Symphony Orchestra; Adedeji Ogunfolu, associate principal horn, San Antonio Symphony; Alexander Laing, principal clarinet, Phoenix Symphony; and bassoonist Garrett McQueen, second bassoon, Knoxville Symphony Orchestra.



his role. After taking 40 orchestral auditions himself, Neri stopped counting how many times he tried out for positions at orchestras. “For me, auditioning has been a rollercoaster—it’s been up and down,” says Neri. “I’ve had the fortune to have successful results with some auditions, being offered positions, but also not advancing at auditions. You roll up to an audition after spending hours a day for two months practicing and practicing and practicing, and you fly all the way across the country, you stay in an Airbnb or hotel, you rent a car—all the really boring stuff that’s not a part of your daily routine. You show up to the audition, you play behind the screen, and they might just stop you after two excerpts and say, ‘thank you.’ After all that work. That’s an experience that is trying in itself, but I’ve been down that road countless times.”

For bassoonist Francisco Joubert-Bernard, the cost of auditioning was like a cloud over his head for every audi-



José Antonio Rivera Moreno

NAAS has awarded support to 138 Black and Latinx musicians, including bassoonist Francisco Joubert-Bernard, above. Of these, 19 have won auditions in orchestras; 24 have won auditions and placements at orchestras; five have won one-year contract positions; and twelve were placed on sub lists or won fellowship positions.

tion before receiving financial support from NAAS. Joubert-Bernard, who is Afro-Latinx, won a position in the Louisville Orchestra after a NAAS-funded audition, whereas before the grant, he did not see as much success. “There are many auditions in the year and money runs out real quick,” says Joubert-Bernard. “At my first audition, I went by myself, I paid all the expenses, and then I realized I spent a lot of money and I didn’t even pass the first round. This is pretty sad. Then I applied for the NAAS grant and they awarded me [support]. It was such a relief in terms of the pressure. You have someone supporting you and you don’t have to

break your bank. Even then, my pressure towards myself diminished a little bit. I didn’t have to think about, oh my God, if I don’t pass this, it’s another hand in my wallet.”

Financial assistance from NAAS helped ease the turbulence of traveling and preparing for auditions for Neri as



NAAS musicians familiarize themselves with concert hall set-ups and mock auditions during NAAS Audition Intensives at New World Center, home of Florida’s New World Symphony.

well. This is why he's eager for more musicians to learn about how NAAS can serve as a resource for new and growing artists. "I'll get applications and I see a lot of the same names throughout the year because one musician might have an opportunity in February, have the audition in March, and need an extra instrument repair in June. I see them all along the way and how their career is developing," says Neri. "What excites me is to see a new name, someone I don't recognize. I see their applications, their resumé's, and I'm like, 'I can't believe I don't know this person.' It's exciting to see that there are so many musicians. We assume that we know them all because the community is so small. It's really exciting to know there are so many more musicians out there."

Beyond the fiscal support, Joubert-Bernard sees NAAS's grant-funded auditions as much-needed emotional backing. "It's like an almost emotional kind of support you get, too," says the bassoonist. "You have this organization that is actually believing in you to get a job. They trust that you're going to do your best to get the job that you want. And by doing so, you're actually diversifying scenes in classical orchestras. When I went to the final auditions, I'm like, NAAS, Sphinx, they funded this. I told myself to make them proud—like your parents, if they paid for your college. I better make them proud because they paid the expenses. I had that feeling when I went to the final auditions in Louisville."

Gaining Confidence, with Audition Feedback

Given the high numbers of veteran and emerging musicians seeking opportunities in American orchestras, receiving feedback is one of the most challenging aspects of a classical musician's career. At auditions, feedback is not given. The first round of an audition could be five minutes or less and, as noted by Neri, the financial investment can at times seem not worth an uncertain outcome. NAAS is helping musicians master these auditions, performance-wise and mentally, with mock auditions hosted

National Alliance for Audition Support orchestra partners for the 2019-20 season:

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 Arkansas Symphony Orchestra
 Atlanta Symphony Orchestra
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 Boston Philharmonic Orchestra
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 Seattle Symphony
 Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra
 St. Louis Symphony Orchestra
 Symphony NH
 Symphony of Northwest Arkansas
 Vermont Symphony Orchestra
 Virginia Symphony Orchestra
 West Michigan Symphony
 West Valley Symphony Association
 Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra
 Yakima Symphony Orchestra

by New World Symphony as part of New World's audition intensives.

Priscilla Rinehart, a horn player who participated in a NAAS audition intensive in 2019, was lucky enough to have a private teacher at a young age. She joined her middle school's band program, and after

telling her mother she wanted to continue learning the French horn, they found a teacher who lived fifteen minutes away, and charged an affordable rate for her family.

New World Symphony President and CEO Howard Herring says musicians believing they can win is the first step, with

The National Alliance for Audition Support is made up of The Sphinx Organization, the lead program and fiscal administrator; the New World Symphony, America's Orchestral Academy; and the League of American Orchestras, representing 700 orchestras. NAAS is supported by a four-year grant of \$1.8 million from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as well as contributions from orchestras across the U.S. The Alliance is also grateful to the American Federation of Musicians, the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, and the Regional Orchestra Players Association for their participation and support.

or without the support of a mentor. He's encouraged by the personal growth of NAAS musicians since year one, citing a transformation in their attitudes. "Gaining confidence is harder to measure or understand, but if you spend a week with these musicians, you know it's happening," says Herring. "They gain camaraderie; some of the musicians have known each other for years and some just met, but they fuel each other's aspirations, and not so many people see that. You can hear it in their conversations; you can hear it in their tone of voice. They lead with far more confidence than they did in the beginning."

As a participant in NAAS, Rinehart echoes these sentiments. For her, gaining a network of fellow Black and Latinx musicians is invaluable. Witnessing the talents of her peers helped her fully recognize her own strengths as a horn player. "The experience of the audition intensive was a turning point in my belief in myself, both with an external validation from the faculty but also internally, showing myself I really can achieve what I'm setting out to do," says Rinehart. "I had some success in the months leading up to the audition intensive, which helps, and I think it all just lined up really well that I was feeling very ready or close to very ready." Rinehart recently won a position in Florida's Sarasota Orchestra.

At New World Symphony's audition intensives, sixteen to eighteen NAAS musicians participate in individual lessons and masterclasses from coaches of color in preparation for mock auditions where they can receive feedback. "There are ways to think about yourself. There is psychological preparation that you can follow," explains Herring. "We have a performance

psychologist at NAAS, Noa Kageyama, who is an expert at getting musicians ready for the last week, the last day, the last hour, the last ten minutes of an audition, because you have to prepare yourself to have the best performance possible." A 2020 survey shows that of 34 respondents, 44.1 percent felt Kageyama's Optimal Per-

impacting low-income Black and Latinx communities the most in America, the intensives were moved entirely online. Technology already in place at the New World Center made the facility ready to adapt to a fully online process. "COVID-19 has redefined our society," says Herring. "This time, we're going to have 50 to 60 participants



Photo: Das Adges/New World Symphony

Priscilla Rinehart performs at a Pulse Concert with the New World Symphony during her fellowship as a musician there.

formance Training sessions were extremely helpful and 32.4 percent found the training helpful.

This year's three-day audition intensives were originally scheduled to take place at New World Center in Miami Beach beginning May 5 but had to be rescheduled in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. As the realities of the devastating toll COVID-19 around the world became clear,

in the audition intensives, and we're going to work on and off through May, June, and July. We wonder if it'll have an even greater impact because we won't be in a hurry. The coaches will be able to be more expansive, there will be more time for questions and answers. It's going to be a very different experience, and perhaps even more powerful."

Leveling the Playing Field

Like Jesse Rosen and Bill Neri, Howard Herring wants to see the number of NAAS musicians increase, especially given the encouraging amount of auditions that participants are winning. After one year of NAAS, there was a 70 percent increase in the number of NAAS-funded auditions taken by participants. In 2019, musicians took 259 auditions, a 114 percent increase from the previous year, totaling 380 auditions taken by musicians in 2018 and 2019. NAAS musicians are now averaging three auditions each, with some even taking seven auditions.

Having felt the impact of NAAS's sup-



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port, Rinehart and Joubert-Bernard have similar hopes for the classical music field: evolution. As orchestras gradually grow more inclusive, the two expressed hopes that the field evolves in its presentation—and evolves in a way that brings more communities in instead of keeping communities out.

At this writing, the future of large-gathering events is uncertain. COVID-19 is an unprecedented global pandemic, and the League of American Orchestras, Sphinx, and New World Symphony are halting in-person gatherings until public health officials make it clear that large-


NAAS started with 41 orchestras that were members of the League of American Orchestras taking part. Today, 77 League-member orchestras are helping Black and Latinx musicians through NAAS.

scale events are safe again. In the meantime, Neri hopes that NAAS participants continue to work on their craft as best as they can from home, and continue asking for support when they need it. “I don’t want musicians to lose their ambition because of what’s going on today,” he says. “We have an opportunity for musicians to explore aspects of their instruments that they couldn’t have before; they couldn’t access that part of their mind with other real-life stresses that were going on. I wonder if musicians can seek opportunities to play for teachers or coaches and mentors that they otherwise couldn’t. We have interim grants; they may not be playing in large groups or for a large audience, but a lot of our musicians are performing through streaming on YouTube or for Instagram or Facebook.”

Though auditions have been postponed and mock auditions have been reimaged online, musicians in the program continue to receive financial support during the pandemic. The digital audition intensives will be a first for NAAS administrators and for many of the musicians involved. The outcome of the digitally focused process may be unknown, but one thing’s for sure: the National Alliance for Audition

Support’s goal has not changed. With more Black and Latinx musicians earning positions in orchestras across the country, NAAS is on track to make more orchestras reflect the communities they play in.

“The biggest orchestras are all in urban settings,” says Neri. “I don’t think the makeup of orchestras often reflect what is in their communities. I really think that bridging that gap and leveling the playing field to allow musicians of color to have ac-

cess to orchestras and to the audition process is one step in the right direction.” 

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