

**ANTI-ASIAN
DISCRIMINATION
AT AMERICAN
ORCHESTRAS**

BY MARI YOSHIHARA

MUSICIANS OF ASIAN DESCENT ARE VISIBLE ON ORCHESTRA STAGES ACROSS THE COUNTRY. YET THEIR PRESENCE ONSTAGE BELIES THE FACT THAT MANY ASIAN MUSICIANS EXPERIENCE MALTREATMENT OR MARGINALIZATION IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL LIVES, AND CONFLATES NUMBERS WITH VOICE, POWER, AND INFLUENCE.

The considerable presence of Asians in American orchestras has been evident for decades, but the more complex reality of what it means to be an Asian American musician in the United States has rarely been addressed head on. What prompted the League of American Orchestras to take up the issue recently was the rapid growth of anti-Asian hate and violence painfully crystallized by the mass murder in Atlanta last March, in which six out of eight victims were Asian women. On June 15, the League’s 2021 National Conference featured a session entitled “Spring of 2021: A Renewed Awakening of a Needed Conversation” to address the issues of Asians and Asian Americans in the orchestra world. The conveners (Jennifer Koh and Ed Yim; both are members of the League’s Board of Directors), moderator (Eun Lee), and panelists (Vijay Iyer, Christine Lim, Shzr Ee Tan, and myself) were all of Asian descent and spoke candidly about race and racism in the classical music field.

The sense of hope that may have arisen from such a conversation taking place in the League’s official forum did not last long, however. Only ten days after the session, news of the “Zukerman incident” spread quickly. According to reports, during a virtual masterclass at the Juilliard School, violinist Pinchas Zukerman commented to the students—two young sisters whose videorecorded performance had been shared in advance—that their playing was “almost too perfect” and needed “a little more vinegar—or soy sauce.” It was a crude version of the common characterization of Asian musicians as technically precise but artistically lacking and in need of more, well, flavor. Yet Zukerman did not stop there. In telling the students to play more lyrically, he said, “I know in Korea they don’t sing.” One of the sisters spoke up and informed him that they are not Korean but of half Japanese descent. Unperturbed, Zukerman continued, “In Japan they don’t sing, either.” He then mimicked a presumably Asian sing-song vocal style. He returned to the topic during the Q&A and proclaimed, “In Korea they don’t sing. It’s not in their DNA.” (Juilliard later stated that Zukerman was not a faculty member and that his “offensive cultural stereotypes” did not represent the school’s values, and



The League of American Orchestras’ 2016 “Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field” study, with research and data analysis by Dr. James Doerer, documents gender and ethnic/racial diversity in U.S. orchestras among musicians, conductors, staff, executives, and board members. Read the complete report at <https://americanorchestras.org/knowledge-research-innovation/diversity-studies.html>.

Zukerman apologized for what he termed “culturally insensitive remarks.”)

In the subsequent days and weeks, many musicians of Asian descent expressed their fury through various platforms. Many also shared stories of similarly offensive treatments by their teachers, jurors, conductors, critics, peers, and audiences that they have experienced throughout their careers. What was notable was not Zukerman’s comment

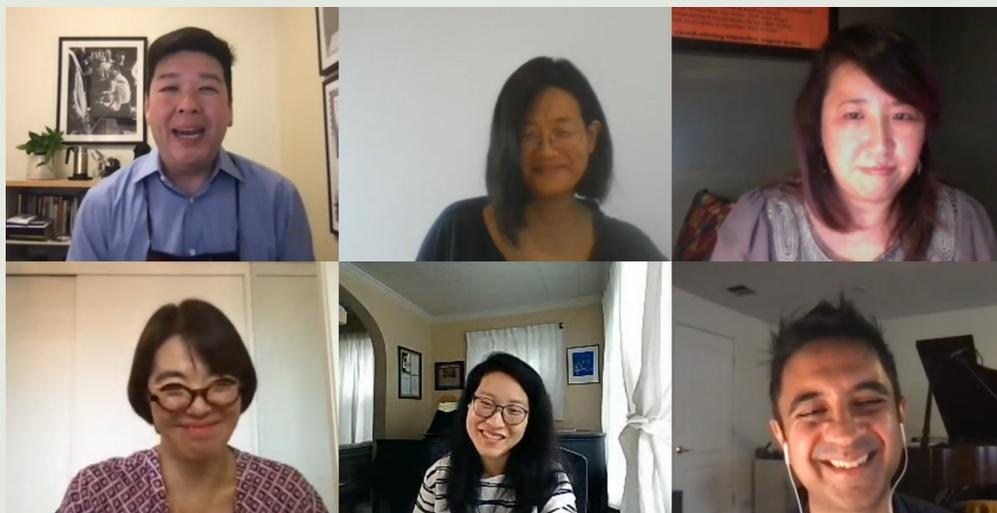
Asian musicians have been given a place insofar as they are performers of music written and programmed by others, yet rarely have been sought out for their own creative voices or visions.

itself—which was extreme in its absurdity but the tenor of which was, sadly, all too familiar to Asian and Asian American musicians—but the chorus of uproar that it incited. Although many musicians of Asian descent have been targets of such offenses for decades, it was rare for them to raise a collective voice prior to this incident. Partly prompted by the outrage and controversy it caused, several mainstream media outlets including the *New York Times* gave substantial coverage of not only the Zukerman incident itself but the larger subject of the situation of Asian musicians in classical music.

Demographic Patterns

The presence of Asians in classical music has been steadily growing since the 1960s, when Japanese musicians began to build careers in the United States and

SPRING OF 2021: A RENEWED AWAKENING OF A NEEDED CONVERSATION



During its 2021 virtual National Conference in June, the League of American Orchestras presented a session entitled “Spring of 2021: A Renewed Awakening of a Needed Conversation,” which addressed the issues, challenges, and opportunities facing Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders in the orchestra world. Speakers at the session were (clockwise from top left): Ed Yim, Christine Lim, Shzr Ee Tan, Vijay Iyer, Eun Lee, and Mari Yoshihara. Visit <https://americanorchestras.org/conference-2021-spring-of-2021-a-renewed-awakening-of-a-needed-conversation/> to watch video of the session.

elsewhere, most notably conductor Seiji Ozawa. Korean musicians followed suit in the 1980s, forming a new wave of Asian musicians on the American and the world stage. Musicians such as cellist Yo-Yo Ma, pianist Mitsuko Uchida, violinists Midori and Sarah Chang—all of whom come from different cultural backgrounds and upbringing—became international stars during this period and remain so today. Since the 2000s, China’s economic rise and the classical music boom propelled by the popularity of Lang Lang, Yuja Wang,

and other artists have shifted the landscape of the industry. Orchestras and soloists eagerly seek performances in China; Juilliard opened a conservatory campus in Tianjin, China; few music schools today can afford not to actively recruit students from China. Many of the Chinese musicians who have studied in the U.S. continue to build careers in American orchestras, universities, and the freelance world. These demographic patterns correlate to the Asian nations’ economic conditions, which shape people’s cultural aspirations and social mobility as well as the availability of musical instruments, performances, recordings, and training. In addition to Asian-born musicians who have built their careers in the United States, there are also many Asian American artists whose families have lived in the country for generations, as well as those of mixed descent with multiple family and cultural routes across the world.

“Asian musicians” are thus highly diverse—in terms of national and ethnic origin, citizenship, language, religion, geographical location, length of residence in the United States—and by no means form a coherent category with shared roots, identities, or experiences. And yet, they are all too often perceived to be homogenous and interchangeable: one of the most common experiences they share is being mistaken for another Asian musician, not infrequently by colleagues with whom they have been working for

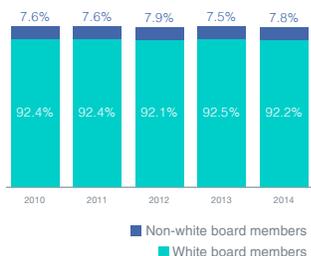
quite some time. They are also assumed to all play in the same way, with technical precision but little voice of their own, as was evidenced by Pinchas Zukerman’s remarks. The sense of Asian homogeneity and interchangeability is accompanied by a widespread perception that Asians are dominant in classical music, often expressed with varying degrees of shock and dismay, like “Juilliard is wall-to-wall Chinese and Koreans” or “Asians are taking over American orchestras.”

Experiences range from everyday microaggressions to blatantly racist remarks to unwanted sexual advances.

Are Asians actually dominating American orchestras? According to the League’s “Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field” survey, which includes data gathered in 2014, Asian/Pacific Islander musicians comprised just over 9 percent of orchestra musicians, up from 5.3 percent twelve years prior. (The “Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field” study was commissioned by the League with research and data analysis by James Doeser; it reports on gender and ethnic/racial diversity in orchestras among musicians, conductors, staff, executives, and board members. The full study is available at

Racial / Ethnic Diversity: Board Members

The League began collecting race / ethnicity data on orchestra board members in 2010. Since then, the percentage of African American, Latino / Hispanic, Asian / Pacific Islander, American Indian / Alaskan Native and other non-white board members has hovered at just under 8%, including 3-4% African American and 1-2% Hispanic / Latino representation. For comparison, a national survey by BoardSource⁴ found that the representation of non-white people on nonprofit boards across the United States had increased from 16% in 2010 to 20% in 2014.



As documented in the League’s “Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field” study, board membership at orchestras has remained predominantly White over many years.

A Violinist on How to Empower Asian Musicians

Jennifer Koh, an acclaimed soloist, calls on classical music to make space for artists of Asian descent, who remain marginalized in the field.



In July, violinist Jennifer Koh wrote an article for the *New York Times* about her own and others' experiences as Asian American musicians, and proposed ways for classical music to "empower and create space for all members of our community."

<https://americanorchestras.org/racial-ethnic-and-gender-diversity-in-the-orchestra-field/>.) At the New York Philharmonic, the percentage of Asians on the roster is as high as 30 percent and comprises almost two-thirds of the violin section. Relative to their approximately 6 percent share in the total U.S. population, Asians are indeed "overrepresented" in American orchestras, numerically speaking. (As a point of comparison, the percentage of Asian musicians in the Berlin Philharmonic is roughly 5 percent, London Symphony Orchestra 3.5 percent, and the Vienna Philharmonic less than 1 percent.) This is in stark contrast to African Americans, who comprise approximately 18 percent of the U.S. population yet have hovered around 1.8 percent of American orchestra musicians, and Hispanic/Latinos, who were 17 percent of the nation's population but were about 2.5 percent of orchestra members. Similar patterns are seen in the student bodies of conservatories and music schools across the U.S. as well as among contestants in major music competitions around the world.

Asians' "overrepresentation" in classical music reinforces the narrative of the "model minority," the phrase that came

to be used frequently in American media in the post-WWII decades to describe Asian Americans' collective achievement. This narrative typically attributes Asian Americans' academic success and upward social mobility to their cultural characteristics (like the Confucianist ethos and the commitment to education), family investment (parents paying for lessons; driving long distances for lessons, performances, and competitions; mothers supervising children's practice at home; sometimes the entire family relocating for children's music education, etc.), and individual effort (practice, practice, and more practice). In doing so, it glosses over the historical and structural factors that led to Asian Americans' upward mobility and the relative lack thereof among other racial minorities. It also ignores the vast diversity within the Asian American population. The image of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese American students who grow up practicing figure skating, chess, and violin under the watchful eyes of their tiger mothers and attend prestigious universities en route to medical schools or law schools defies the reality that, even within each of those ethnic groups, more than a quarter of them have annual household incomes below \$40,000. By focusing on the success of a select slice of the Asian American population, the model minority narrative diverts attention away from the real struggles many Asians face because of their race, ethnicity, and citizenship status, which intersect with their gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, and language barriers. It also discredits other racial minorities' fight for justice and equality by suggesting that they ought to be able to achieve success like Asians have only if they work hard enough.

A seven-year-old Chinese American leading Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* or a ten-year-old Korean girl performing a Prokofiev piano concerto is an iconic picture of the model minority. Asian Americans' presence in classical music jives well with the logic of the model minority narrative. Asians' serious pursuit of, and success in, music of European origin seems to affirm the status of classical music as a coveted form of cultural capital and Asians' eager and successful assimilation into White culture. As a field that requires many years of rigorous training and disciplined practice, classical music is easily associ-

ated with individual effort, commitment, and sacrifice. Especially in the American orchestra world, where most auditions are conducted behind a curtain, the faith in meritocracy—that it's the chops and nothing else that matters—prevails, skirting the question of who gets to the curtain and how.

Yet the notion that Asians are overrepresented in American orchestras—and classical music in general—conflates numbers with voice, power, and influence. Despite—and sometimes because of—their numerical presence, many Asian musicians experience maltreatment or marginalization in their professional lives. Such experiences range from everyday microaggressions to blatantly racist remarks about their heritage or unwanted sexual advances and harassment undergirded by the notion of Asian women's sexual appeal and availability. Compounded with the stereotype of docile, quiet Asians who do not rock the boat, many acts of racism that would no doubt be called out if they were directed at African Americans frequently go unaddressed when Asians are the target. While some Asian musicians have courageously stood up and spoken up about these issues, such voices are often dismissed with the claim that the number of Asians in American orchestras is proof of the lack of discrimination against them and show that Asian classical musicians are a privileged class whose grievances are unwarranted. In such a climate, many Asian musicians are still hesitant to raise their voices on these matters, as they fear repercussions for their own careers or creating tensions within their workplace. Even amid the rising anti-Asian hate and violence since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, few orchestras have addressed the issue head on, whereas many music organizations have begun to take steps to address anti-Black racism in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Furthermore, while Asians have "Asian musicians" in the United States are highly diverse. Yet they are all too often perceived to be homogenous and interchangeable.

EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION AT THE LEAGUE

As part of its longstanding commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the orchestra field, the League of American Orchestras offers multiple resources, initiatives, and publications focusing on EDI.

The League's online **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Resource Center** provides practical insights, advice, and paths to greater diversity and inclusion at orchestras. It is intended to be a useful source of information and practices that will help change discriminatory systems, so that musicians, administrators, volunteers, and board members—regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, or any other dimension of diversity—will thrive in the orchestra field.

Visit the **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Resource Center** at <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/equity-diversity-and-inclusion/>.

Two recent League publications address the vital importance of EDI at orchestras. **How Orchestra Boards Can Advance Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion**, written by Carmen Corrales and Douglas Hagerman, offers practical advice, contextual information, and strategies for boards and orchestras to become truly representative of the communities they serve. Learn more at <https://americanorchestras.org/edi-guide-for-boards>. **Making the Case for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Orchestras** offers concrete answers and helpful resources that orchestras can use to advance anti-racism and EDI at all levels of their organizations. Read more at <https://americanorchestras.org/making-the-case-for-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-orchestras>.

The **Catalyst Fund**, launched in 2019, has provided annual grants to help League-member orchestras increase their understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion and to practice more effective EDI strategies. Catalyst Fund grants, supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000 each, have been awarded to 49 U.S. orchestras, which were required to use the funds to retain a skilled EDI practitioner to advance EDI learning objectives. In September, the League of American Orchestras received a \$2.1 million leadership gift from the Mellon Foundation to continue work through the League's Catalyst Fund and launched the **Catalyst Fund Incubator program**, which will provide 20 orchestras with three years of support enabling them to work with an EDI consultant, participate in a peer learning community, and receive mentorship and guidance. Visit <https://www.americanorchestras.org/learning-leadership-development/the-catalyst-fund.html>.

In 2018, the League partnered with the Sphinx Organization and the New World Symphony to create the **National Alliance for Audition Support** (NAAS), a field-wide initiative with the goal of increasing diversity in American orchestras. Supported by a four-year, \$1.8 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, along with additional financial and programmatic contributions from America's orchestras, NAAS offers customized support to Black and Latinx musicians to enhance their audition skills, increase their participation in auditions, and expand their representation in orchestras. Visit <https://americanorchestras.org/learning-leadership-development/diversity-resource-center/national-alliance-for-audition-support.html>



Cleveland Orchestra violinist Miho Hashizume performs at a #StopAsianHate march. Protests in Cleveland following the murder of George Floyd gave Hashizume a renewed determination to make an impact through music. "Music gives us a chance to be together," said Hashizume, who is profiled in the article about Ford Musician Awards elsewhere in this issue.

numerical presence among orchestra musicians, most orchestras can count on one hand—if they need any fingers at all—Asian composers whose work they have performed in any season. Music by Asian composers is often performed on occasions like the Chinese New Year or Asian American History Month or when the guest conductor is of Asian descent. Such niche programming then puts expectations of stereotypical "Asian sound" on the works to be performed, drawing facile connections between particular sonic qualities and the composer's ethnicity and national origin. Moreover, Asians have quite a minuscule place in administrative leadership: less than 8 percent of orchestra board members are non-White, including 3 to 4 percent African American and 1 to 2 percent Hispanic/Latino, and the number of Asians is too small to be disaggregated in the data. In other words, Asian musicians have been given a place insofar as they are dutiful performers of music written and programmed by others, yet rarely have been sought out for their own creative voices or visions.

Asian musicians in U.S. orchestras represent only a very particular slice of "Asian America" today, and their presence should not be used to check off "addressing the Asian American community" on the orchestras' agendas. Because of the confluence of history, politics, and economics, Asians in American orchestras—and classical music at large—are overwhelmingly East Asian, i.e., ethni-

cally Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. Yet, after the Chinese, the largest Asian ethnic groups in the U.S. are Indian, Filipino, and Vietnamese, and there are more than a dozen other ethnic groups that have sizable presence in the country. (It is also important to note the problem of the category "Asian American/Pacific Islander" frequently used in many demographic data, including the League's Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity report. Asians Americans and Pacific Islanders have distinct histories and relationships to the United States, and the structures of racism against them are different. Grouping them together in effect subsumes Pacific Islanders under the larger Asian American umbrella and renders them even more invisible.) Many Asians are in the U.S. because of war or political and economic turmoil caused in no small part by U.S. foreign policy. A great many Asians and Asian Americans struggle to make a living by cooking people's food and washing their dishes; cleaning people's homes and offices and hotel rooms; working in factories or warehouses or on farms; selling produce and drinks; tending to people's bodies; taking care of people's infants, the sick, and the elderly. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Asian Americans have fallen victim to the illness while caring for others or have been assaulted and killed while doing their job or walking down the street.

Embracing Asian Americans as part of the nation and making symphonic

Spring Community Concert

Standing Against Asian Hate Crimes
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Friday, April 9 from 4-5pm

Bergen Town Center

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in front of former Century 21 entrance

New York Youth Symphony



On April 9, New York Youth Symphony Concertmaster Myra Cui led a live chamber music concert at New Jersey's Bergen Town Center Mall to benefit the families of hate crimes targeting the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

music relevant and meaningful to them would require a lot more than being content with the presence of many Asians on the orchestra stage. Those numbers show that a certain segment of the Asian and Asian American population gained access to quality music education, worked hard, and did well in the auditions—nothing more, nothing less. It does *not* illustrate that Asian Americans reign in the classical music world nor that they are working harder and doing better than other minorities. It most certainly does not prove that there is no racism in American orchestras or in American society. There is.

How to reckon with the past and the present and move forward? Learn what “Asian America” is. Orchestras can then begin to reimagine what it is they want to share through music, with whom, and to what end. Think hard about whose voices are needed for such reimagining. Finding those voices and learning to listen to them will shape the thinking behind what music to play, who would conduct and perform, where they should perform, and how to reach and welcome their audiences. Think beyond “inclusion.” Asians are not the “others” who are waiting to be allowed entry through the gatekeepers’ benevolence. They—and other minorities—are partners in the exciting process of musical transmission and innovation. But partnering requires mutuality and equality. **S**

PUBLIC STATEMENT

Statement on Violence and Discrimination Against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, March 2021

The League of American Orchestras stands in solidarity with the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community as it faces a terrible new wave of hate crimes and racism.

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are an integral part of our orchestra community and our country. AAPI discrimination precedes the pandemic and has long existed—though it has previously been ignored. The League is dedicated to fighting this racism as part of its long-term commitment to advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion in our own organization, and in supporting our members to do the same.

RELATED

Public Statements →

The hate against our fellow Americans must stop. Discrimination, stereotyping, and aggression must stop. As we [stated in August 2020](#), “We choose to move fully and without delay toward absolute diversity and equity within our field; and henceforth to respect the value and boundless creative capacity of every human being.”

On March 19, in response to the rise in anti-Asian American violence, the League of American Orchestras issued a statement condemning violence and discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Read the full statement at <https://americanorchestras.org/statement-on-violence-and-discrimination-against-asian-americans-and-pacific-islanders-march-2021/>.

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