

Catalyzing Change

The League of American Orchestras' groundbreaking Catalyst Fund is helping dozens of orchestras build understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and implement effective EDI strategies. And it's making a real-world impact at orchestras and communities across the country.

By Heidi Waleson

In the last year and half, rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd, many arts groups have been taking stock of where they stand as community members. For 49 orchestras, this reckoning has been aided and strengthened by grants from the League of American Orchestras' Catalyst Fund, launched in 2019. The three-year pilot program, funded by \$2.1 million from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation with additional support from the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation, is designed to help orchestras develop their internal organizations and build capacity in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Lee Ann Norman, the League's Director of Learning and Leadership Programs, who oversees Catalyst, says, "We hope, through the program, both in this iteration and future iterations, to support our members in transforming the field."

The Catalyst Fund grew out of the recognition that the orchestra business is still overwhelmingly White—on staff, in the board room, in the audience, and on the stage. According

to Susan Feder, the performing arts program officer in Mellon's Arts and Culture program, the roots of the Catalyst Fund go back decades to orchestra fellowship programs, including several Mellon-supported projects. The fellowship strategy to diversify musician ranks by immersing young Black and Latinx musicians who had completed their formal music education in the day-to-day life of an orchestra for a significant period, with the objective of preparing them to compete for jobs, ran up against a barrier: the cultures of the organizations themselves did not change, and individual musicians of color were often isolated and uncomfortable. Following a 2015 meeting co-convened by the League of American Orchestras and Mellon to examine barriers to inclusion, projects like Mellon's Musical Pathways and the National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS) were launched with the objective of creating a critical mass of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) candidates for orchestra posts by targeting musician training and professional development. NAAS aims to increase diversity in American orchestras by offering Black and Latinx musicians



“Over the past three years, the Catalyst Fund has worked to advance equity in American orchestras,” says Elizabeth Alexander, president of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which supports The Catalyst Fund.

mentoring, audition preparation, financial support, and audition previews. NAAS is made up of the Sphinx Organization, the New World Symphony, and the League of American Orchestras. NAAS is supported by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as well as contributions from orchestras across the U.S.

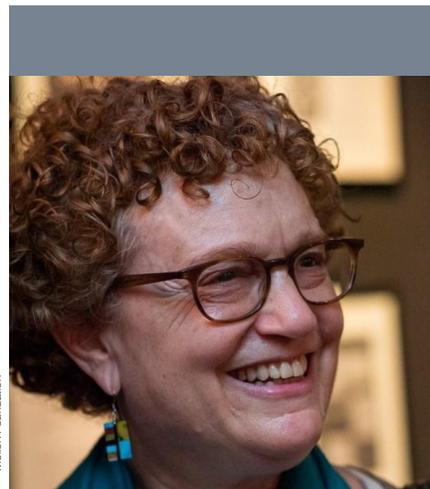
The Catalyst Fund, Feder says, was a corollary and a natural outgrowth of NAAS: “It was a promise to musicians of color that we would help improve the culture of orchestras: to make them more inclusive and to deal with unconscious bias, microaggressions, and racist behaviors.” Dedicated grant funds would ensure voluntary buy-in from orchestras; each year’s grantees would also be connected through meetings and other communication channels, encouraging them to share what they learned.

Numerous diversity-focused discussions at the League’s annual Conferences, as well as industry-wide conversations and surveys, revealed an appetite for changing the culture but a lack of knowledge or resources about how to do so effectively. Jessica Schmidt, an EDI consultant who helped the League gather information and shape what became

Catalyst, explains that transformation starts with internal work. As recently as ten years ago, she says, orchestras tended to tackle their diversity issues with external programmatic efforts. “Something wrong? Add a program,” Schmidt says of the thinking at the time. “It’s easier to land in transactional relationships, versus taking a hard look at the internal practices of an organization and pulling apart the systems.”

Catalyst Fund grants pay for EDI consultants who help orchestras take a serious look at those systems and the individuals who work within them, thereby earmarking funds, time, and attention that might not otherwise be allocated to this challenging work of self-examination and decision-making. Susan Lape, executive director of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras, which received one of the first round of Catalyst grants in 2019, says, “Catalyst is a great national investment in EDI, a really good statement from the League to our board and our whole community that this work is important—and it is important for us to do it.”

The grants, recommended by an independent review panel, have been



The Catalyst Fund, says Susan Feder, the performing arts program officer in the Mellon Foundation’s Arts and Culture program, was a corollary and a natural outgrowth of the National Alliance for Audition Support: “a promise to musicians of color that we would help improve the culture of orchestras.”

THE CATALYST FUND

The Catalyst Fund is a three-year pilot program of the League of American Orchestras that awards annual grants to build the internal capacity of League-member U.S. orchestras in advancing their understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and in encouraging effective practice. To assist orchestras in creating more equitable cultures, The Catalyst Fund provides:

- Annual grants ranging from \$15,000 to \$25,000, enabling grantees to work with a professional EDI consultant to self-define and advance internal EDI objectives during the one-year grant period.
- A community to share learning with other grantees that includes an online forum as well as remote and in-person convenings.
- Opportunities to lead and participate in fieldwide learning activities, giving visibility to EDI work in orchestras.
- Disbursing 76 grants over three years, the \$2.1 million program has helped create change in the orchestra field through programming and policy changes, organizational alignment, and fostering of community.

The Catalyst Fund is made possible by a generous grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, with additional support from the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation.

Learn more at <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/grant-programs/the-catalyst-fund/>.



Representatives of orchestras receiving Catalyst Fund grants met at the League of American Orchestras' 2019 National Conference in Nashville. Catalyst Fund advisor and Canarii Solutions founder Liz Alsina (at right) facilitated the meeting, which helped build a sense of community and set a baseline understanding of what equity, diversity, and inclusion mean.

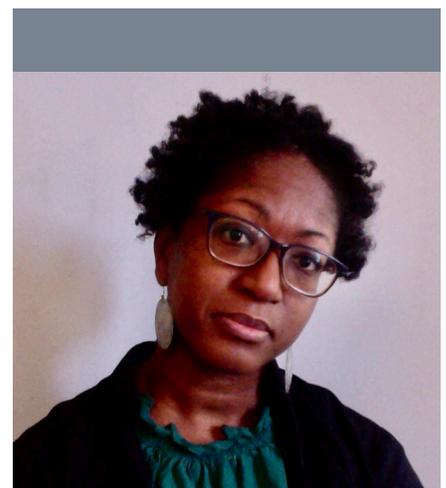
awarded to 49 orchestras large and small, in big cities and small towns, in different areas of the U.S. Some grants have been renewed for second and sometimes third years. The grantee orchestras are at very different stages of development in EDI. Norman points out, "For some orchestras, it is transformative to begin to have conversations about this in an intentional way, to see who is not at our table. Others have been doing the work longer and are ready to identify priorities that can be put into action. Some are still further along and are looking at the integration piece: they've made decisions and put strategies in place. Now they are looking at things like, how are we communicating, and showing that our actions match our values."

The Catalyst Fund gives orchestras the understanding and the tools to change. And it's making an impact, says Elizabeth Alexander, president of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation: "Over the past three years, the Catalyst Fund has worked to advance equity in American orches-

tras—including building towards equal access for traditionally underrepresented musicians and representation in leadership and across program initiatives—and they've done so by confronting internal practices and building a strong coalition of U.S.-based orchestras committed to doing this important work. We look forward to the return to live programming, and hope that the Catalyst Fund's ongoing efforts lead to orchestras that are more representative of diverse talent both onstage and off. We are proud to support the League of American Orchestras and the Catalyst Fund as they continue this critical work."

Changing Internal Culture

In 2016, the Virginia Symphony Orchestra went through a strategic planning process and resolved to be "more outward-facing and community-oriented," says Karen Phillion, president and CEO. One-third of the Norfolk, Virginia community is Black, yet people of color represented only a tiny fraction of the



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The League of American Orchestras' 2019 National Conference in Nashville featured a meeting of Catalyst Fund grantees. During a group discussion, Shiva Shafii, then Director of Communications at the Seattle Symphony and part of the Catalyst cohort, proposed a definition for the word equity. Shafii is currently Director of Communications, Content, and Digital Strategies at the San Diego Symphony.

orchestra's audience, so the orchestra started looking for community partners. The Catalyst grant radically reframed that work. "Our EDI work [with the consultant funded by] Catalyst was internal," says Philion, "but it helped shift the focus of these efforts to listening to the perspectives of other people in our community and thinking about how we may put up barriers. We came to understand that just throwing open the doors and saying, 'We are right here, you can find us,' didn't make sense."

With its first year of Catalyst funding, the Virginia Symphony started at "square one" with an equity audit, assessing EDI in the organization's governance, operations, programming, and culture using interviews, focus groups and surveys of stakeholders, as well as a review of its programming history and marketing materials. The consultant also did education sessions focusing on basic anti-racism training. In the second round, the consultant worked with four staff members who produced individual equity plans in their

areas—artistic planning; development; human resources; and education/community engagement—as well as continuing with education sessions and holding focus groups with existing partners and new community groups.

From the beginning, Philion says, "We got especially incredible enthusiasm from the musicians. They said, 'Where have we been all this time?' It was really encouraging—we felt we were really tapping into something." The third year of funding will focus solely on the musicians and how to diversify their ranks. "That is the place to start: the audition committee is all musicians, and the language in the collective bargaining agreement about auditions is something they have to agree to," Philion says. "That's the group that needs to have the confidence in anything that changes where the needle is going to move."

With only a few Black staffers and board members, and, since the retirement of the organization's principal violist last fall, no Black members of the orchestra, Philion acknowledges that the Virginia



David A. Beirli

A Catalyst Fund grant radically reframed the Virginia Symphony's EDI work, says President and CEO Karen Philion, and led to "listening to the perspectives of other people in our community. We came to realize that we can't serve the community if we don't look like it."

Symphony has a long distance to travel in terms of representation. “We came to realize that we can’t serve the community if we don’t look like it,” she says. “We’ve named this as something we value; it’s now a higher priority and we have to work actively on it.” The hardest work, she thinks, won’t be changing programming, or how and where jobs are announced, or even continuing to change internal culture. The challenge is “to be successful in actually bringing people who were not invited before in on decisions.”

Articulating the Vision

The Oakland Symphony has a Black music director (Michael Morgan), a long-standing practice of artistic collaboration with individuals and groups from different musical and cultural backgrounds, and a programmatic focus on themes of social justice and equity. When Mieko Hatano became executive director in 2018, the orchestra was part of the first cohort of museum director Nina Simon’s “Of/By/For All” program, in which cultural institutions learned to share resources with their communities. However, Hatano says, “We realized that we didn’t



Oakland Symphony

With Catalyst Fund support, the Oakland Symphony worked on “recruiting a task force of people inside and outside the organization and building an equity framework so we could be explicit about our values,” says Executive Director Mieko Hatano.

ORCHESTRAS PARTICIPATING IN THE CATALYST FUND

- Adrian Symphony Orchestra
- Albany (NY) Symphony
- Arkansas Symphony Orchestra
- Berkeley Symphony
- BRAVO Youth Orchestras
- Charlotte Symphony Orchestra
- Chicago Sinfonietta
- Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras
- Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra
- Contemporary Youth Orchestra
- DC Youth Orchestra Program
- Detroit Symphony Orchestra
- East Texas Symphony Orchestra
- Empire State Youth Orchestra
- Grand Rapids Symphony
- Grant Park Music Festival
- Handel and Haydn Society
- Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra
- Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra
- Kaleidoscope Chamber Orchestra
- Kennett Symphony
- Lexington Philharmonic
- Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra
- Los Angeles Philharmonic
- Louisiana Philharmonic
- Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra
- Minnesota Orchestra
- Nashville Symphony
- New Haven Symphony Orchestra
- New Jersey Symphony Orchestra
- New Jersey Youth Symphony
- New World Symphony
- New York Philharmonic
- North Carolina Symphony
- Oakland Symphony
- Oregon Symphony
- Pacific Symphony
- Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
- Princeton Symphony Orchestra
- Richmond Symphony
- San Diego Symphony Orchestra
- San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory
- San Francisco Symphony
- Seattle Symphony
- South Dakota Symphony Orchestra
- St. Louis Symphony Orchestra
- The Philadelphia Orchestra
- The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra
- Virginia Symphony Orchestra

have anything that articulated that vision [of inclusion] of our organization—internally or externally. We were still an orchestra, with an orchestra structure. The orchestra was still very White. Having the Catalyst consultant for two years gave us the opportunity to dig into this for the first time.”

Changing vocabulary was one of the first steps, Hatano recalls. “We started to use more empathetic vocabulary. The way we approach meetings, and getting more information from each other, has deepened. Our ears have gotten better. Our collaborative programming model is slow. It requires listening, getting to know new people, developing trust. Now, the administration, the board, our committees are starting to develop some of those same modeled habits and intentions that they didn’t have before.” That makes those participating “open to innovative ways of doing things. We’re taking time in meetings to ask, how do we do this? Is this comfortable? How would it make others feel? We’re considering implications for staff, musicians, audience, board—everyone.”

In the fall of 2019, soon after beginning the Catalyst work, a hate crime

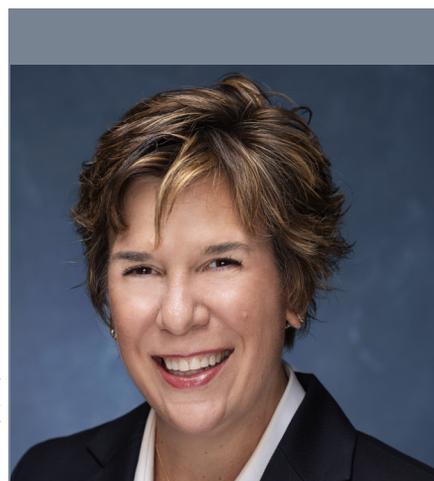
was committed against an Oakland Symphony staffer at a concert. Hatano prefers not to divulge painful details, but the incident, she says, “made us realize that our culture is not as open, welcome, diverse, and positive as we thought. We were challenged by that incident, and not equipped to deal with it.” The Catalyst consultants helped with the internal and external response, and the awareness gained from that experience helped inform the subsequent work of addressing internal issues and structures.

In the past year, with no concerts possible due to the pandemic, the orchestra worked on “recruiting a task force of people inside and outside the organization and building an equity framework so we could be explicit with our internal and external constituents about what our values are,” Hatano says. “We had our consultants for that [hate-crime] incident; now I have 20 people that I can call on. We’re not finished, but the process has created a network of support so that we can move forward and be accountable.”

Changing the Conversation

For the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, which was part of the second group of Catalyst grant recipients, learning how to have difficult conversations was the point. “We want to be more inclusive, equitable, and diverse, and that is really hard work,” says CEO Christina Littlejohn. “We have to hold the mirror up to ourselves. That’s uncomfortable. It’s not something we normally do. The Catalyst grant gave us a chance to hire a consultant to hold our hands and make it easier for us to learn to sit in that space, which is critical to our becoming what we want to become. It’s not like strategic planning. Coming to grips with where you are starting, looking at systemic racism and implicit bias, is very different from saying, we want to serve 1,000 more people.”

For Littlejohn, the biggest surprise in the process was “the number of people who think we are as diverse as we need to be, that we are inclusive, and that no changes need to be made.” Jessica Schmidt, who began her career in orchestra administration more than 20 years ago, pivoted to EDI consulting for the field, and has worked with several orchestras through Catalyst, is no stranger



Arkansas Symphony Orchestra

“We want to be more inclusive, equitable, and diverse,” says Arkansas Symphony Orchestra CEO Christina Littlejohn. “The Catalyst grant gave us a chance to hire a consultant ... which is critical to our becoming what we want to become.”

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to those opinions. “Folks are at different moments in their journeys,” she says. “When a statement like ‘racism doesn’t exist’ is made, it comes from a place of fear—often the fear of loss, of comfort, of ‘this is my special place and it’s going to change.’ I hear your fear and your experience. Having compassion in that space is a big part of the work.” Schmidt says she has seen progress. “The conversation has changed. Over the last year, I have watched orchestras start to say the words, to understand what anti-racism is, to explore White supremacy, which is difficult for us even to say, and to go from talking about diversity to the need to disrupt oppressive systems.”

The goals of the Catalyst work are not easily quantified by traditional metrics. “For a long time, our field has viewed this work as representation only and failed to understand inclusion and equity,” Schmidt says. “We have welcomed people of color into environments that were not healthy for them”—places in which even unconscious racism makes them feel isolated and unwelcome. “Representation is deeply important, but it will not stick without inclusion,” which means changing the culture of an organization. Through the Catalyst work, she says, conversations that have not taken place before are now happening. “Organizations are hearing directly from a board member of color who walked into a reception and was mistaken for the wait staff; or a Black musician, walking outside the concert hall in a tuxedo and carrying an instrument, who was asked what he was doing there.”

EDI and Youth Orchestras

The Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras began its EDI work two years ago, using support from the League’s American Orchestras’ Futures Fund, before receiving a Catalyst Grant. “EDI is an immediate issue for youth orchestras,” says Susan Lape. “We deal with evaluation, admissions, families; we’re connected to schools.” With support from previous Futures Fund grants from the League, CYSO did an inclusion audit and focus groups, analyzed how its student body was evolving, where the students are coming from, where they are not coming from, and why. “Things



Susan Lape, executive director of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras, which has received Catalyst Fund support, says, “Catalyst is a great national investment in EDI, a really good statement from the League to our board and our whole community that this work is important.”

we heard a lot were, ‘I don’t understand why some kids are advancing and my kid isn’t; I don’t feel it could work for me; I didn’t want to apply because I felt scared,’” Lape recalls.

In 2019, the first year of the Catalyst grant, Karen Mari joined the CYSO organization full time in the new position of community and family engagement coordinator. One of her most important roles is one-on-one communication with students and families. “Someone like Karen, who has time to meet with people, talk these questions through and help them, is what we needed more than any other shinier bells and whistles,” Lape says.

Advancing through CYSO’s ensembles and orchestras is competitive; its players are, Lape says, “top-tier.” “Kids who are from all different kinds of backgrounds deserve to be part of that, but they need information and help, guidance and support. Sometimes they need literal support, like an internet connection or an instrument, and Karen handles all of that.” Mari also does recruitment relationship-building for CYSO. “We never used to have time to do that—for example, meeting with someone who

runs an all-Black music program in Chicago, and saying, ‘You are not referring any students to us. Do you know about our program? Are you suspicious of us?’ That takes slow, deliberate relationship-building.”

So far, the slow and steady work has paid off: an increase in the number of Black and Latinx students in CYSO’s top and middle school orchestras, for example, as well as a broader income range. However, the organization is working just as hard on inclusion. Mari says, “That focus on numbers and demographics has become a little less important in our minds, taking a back seat to ‘How do our students feel at CYSO?’ Rather than, ‘We have ten students of color in this orchestra and they all feel terrible,’ it’s better to say, ‘We have eight students, they love it here, they feel 100 percent included, and they are going to recommend this to their friends.’”

With its Catalyst funding, CYSO worked with consultant Derrick Gay on writing and refining the group’s EDI statement with feedback from staff, faculty, board, families, students, and the community. Mari says, “He showed us how to do the work ourselves, so we didn’t stop after the grant ended. This past year, we put together another document, ‘Promises and Requests,’ which outlines what it means to live up to our EDI statement: the actions we want to take, the behaviors we want to see.” This intensive process of self-examination meant that during the summer of 2020, during the protests in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, CYSO was able to respond with a statement immediately. “We had a position, because we had already done a lot of work about a youth orchestra’s role in trying to be a force of anti-racism,” Lape says. Similarly, after the alarming rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, CYSO organized a Circle of Community Care for its Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, with AAPI facilitators and board members. “Students said that this was the only organization they knew that had mentioned this at all or provided any safe space for them to process it,” Lape says.

Mari stresses that such programs are “our cutting edge. We are able to start offering these kinds of new tools because



With its Catalyst funding, Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras worked with an EDI consultant who “showed us how to do the work ourselves, so we didn’t stop after the grant ended,” says Karen Mari, the CYSO’s community and family engagement coordinator.

of the work we’ve done over the past years. We have partnerships with teachers who told us how to do it; the partnerships came about because of the work we did with Derrick Gay and our team. We started trying to build a common vocabulary so we can talk to each other, even though we are all coming from different places. We’ve had three or four years of practice talking about topics that maybe other orchestras and workplaces aren’t discussing. The staff all feel empowered to speak up—that is a skill we practiced with Derrick Gay. It’s been a long road of baby steps that have led up to this really cool stuff.”

Continuous Learning

Michigan’s Grand Rapids Symphony also used its Catalyst funding to build on earlier EDI work, which had included the creation of a new neighborhood concert series. The Catalyst consultant spearheaded an organization-wide EDI audit and identified priorities for implementation. “We believe strongly that this is about

culture, an organic way of operating that should affect everything we do every minute of the day,” says CEO Mary Tuuk Kulas. The orchestra has also started work on an Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a personal inventory of values and beliefs across the organization and its constituencies. “It’s part of the path forward,” she says. “We need to be honest with ourselves and recognize what our implicit biases might be.” Grand Rapids, she says, has had no issues with accepting the value of the work. “The primary concern is that we don’t lose sight of the long-term path in light of day-to-day pressures and operational priorities.”

Tuuk Kulas, who came to the orchestra world after a long career in the for-profit sector, sees one significant difference in the two areas. “EDI tends to reflect itself more directly in a nonprofit’s mission,” she says. “Especially in the orchestra world, it is directly relevant to the desire to deliver on the mission to the community; you can’t deliver on the mission without progress in EDI.” The first test

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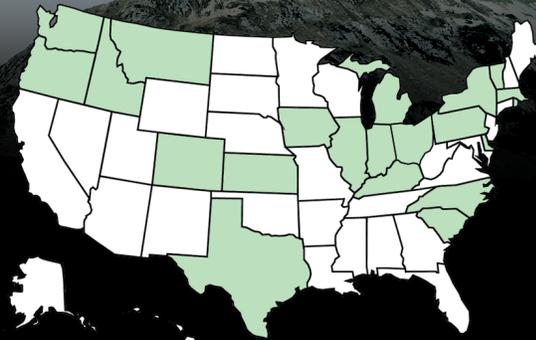
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Unpacking CYSO's EDI Statement

1. Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras' dedication to equity, diversity, and inclusion is inseparable from our commitment to musical excellence.
2. We value the unique role and contribution of every one of our musicians and recognize that we will only create world-class music when each member of the ensemble can participate to their fullest potential.
3. CYSO supports the personal and musical growth of our students, honors all voices, and stands in solidarity with our students, families, and community members to dismantle the systems that create inequality in music.
4. Students come to CYSO through their common love of music, but quickly learn that they have so much more than music in common.
5. The experience of sharing the stage with a diverse group of peers equips them to excel as the next generation of leaders.

Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras

With Catalyst funding, Chicago Symphony Youth Orchestras created a new EDI statement—and invited its young musicians to unpack and mark up the statement (photo). The organization also sought input from staff, faculty, board, families, and the community.



Grand Rapids Symphony

Equity, diversity, and inclusion affect “how we look at things and evaluate them, how we make decisions, the impact we have on patrons and the community,” says Grand Rapids Symphony CEO Mary Tuuk Kulas.

of success? “EDI no longer has to be discussed as separate topic. It affects how we look at things and evaluate them, how we make decisions, the impact we have on patrons and the community. It just is.”

The League’s Lee Ann Norman notes that the process isn’t quick. “It has been striking to see how time has been a big factor,” she says. “More talk and focus open a Pandora’s box. It’s the nature of orchestras to be really polished and put their best foot forward. I think it can be frustrating and surprising to have to rethink that, to backtrack, to discover that everyone is not in the same places as we thought. On the flip side, there was anxiety about how this would be perceived, as well as skepticism, and the idea that taking the time to do EDI is an extra thing. Now, we’re starting to understand that it’s a different lens through which to do our work. When you take that approach, it’s easier to make a case for it.”

That assessment reflects the experience at CYSO. “The biggest surprise to me was how many times you have to repeat

this stuff,” Susan Lape says. “That ‘everybody’s on board and now we’re going’ moment: we’ve done enough orientation, everyone can define these terms, everyone agrees that classical music has an equity and diversity problem, and now we’re going to change stuff—getting to that moment is more work and harder than I think many people expect. For some people, this is really new content. You have to repeat things, especially when you have big generational differences, as we do on our board, when people came into it with the right spirit, but not using the right words. We’ve done the training four times in four years. Now we can do pretty radical stuff for the orchestra world. But it took a lot of drilling to get to that point.” [S](#)

HEIDI WALESON is the opera critic of the *Wall Street Journal* and the author of *Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America* (Metropolitan Books/Picador).