

Detroit Symphony Orchestra Case Study

The Color Barrier Is Broken

Joe Striplin remembers listening to his favorite radio show, *The Lone Ranger*, in his family's living room on Saturday afternoons. Those memorable first notes of the *William Tell Overture* became an early childhood memory that led him at the age of ten to attend his first concert at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. He remembers:

“I was blown away by the sight and the sound of the orchestra. I had never seen or heard anything like that before and it made me want to be a part of something like that.”

Little did he know then that two years later he would take up the violin, changing forever the direction of his life. Joe began college at age sixteen to study music and was soon to meet a member of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra string violin section who took a personal interest in him and provided invaluable instruction and mentoring. In 1972 Joe Striplin became the orchestra's first full-time African-American member. He joined an organization that just two years prior had selected Paul Freeman as Resident Conductor.

However, the story of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's involvement with its diverse communities had begun decades before Paul Freeman or Joe Striplin broke the color barrier.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra: Industrialization and the Great Migration

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra performed for the first time in 1887 at the Detroit Opera House and continued to present subscription seasons until 1910 when it ceased operations for the first time. Those early years pre-dated and then overlapped with the city's explosive manufacturing growth of the early 1900s as well as the societal changes that this new industrialization engendered. Suddenly there were thousands of jobs that needed to be filled, and an eager population to the south looking for new opportunities.

Since the early 1900s, demographic shifts and related racial issues have impacted Detroit in ways both positive and negative. Abundant, well-paid jobs in the auto industry helped fuel the “great migration” of African-Americans from the south to northern cities including Detroit in the early 20th century. These, and similar manufacturing positions, helped establish a Black middle class that contributed to the population and economic growth of Detroit, not to mention enriching the cultural landscape of the city.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra began performances once again in 1914 thanks to the donations by ten socially prominent women, and by 1919 the organization had committed to building Orchestra Hall. The DSO's storied history intersected with the African-American community as far back as the late 1930s when the orchestra left its long-time home, Orchestra Hall, to relocate to a variety of other venues over several decades. Orchestra Hall was rechristened two years later as the Paradise Theater and began featuring world-renowned African-American artists including Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne, and Pearl

Bailey.

Detroit's infamous race riot of 1967 shook the downtown area and significantly accelerated "flight" of the upper and middle classes to the suburbs. This rapid relocation of so many people adversely affected the city's tax base and led to a decline of many of its civic and cultural institutions. Even established cultural organizations were touched by the tensions evoked by questions of racial equity. However, few have faced the threat of reduction of financial support and public scrutiny like the Detroit Symphony Orchestra did in the late 1980s.

The DSO Gets Called Out About Diversity on Stage

In February of 1988 the Michigan Arts Council, at the behest of two African-American state senators, threatened to withhold over \$1.25 million of the orchestra's \$2.5 million annual support due to the lack of racial diversity among the DSO's musicians unless an affirmative action plan was developed and implemented. The orchestra had one African-American member on its roster at that time – one more than most orchestras of that era. Additionally, two of the orchestra's largest corporate sponsors, GM and Ford, came under intense criticism for their support of the DSO by these senators. With the appointment of Richard Robinson to the bass section and the promise to do more in the future, half of the lost funding was restored.

Having survived the aftermath of the riots in the late 1960s and financial challenges that dogged the orchestra in the 1980s, this loss of funding and the public relations damage the coverage provoked put the Detroit Symphony Orchestra at significant risk. The DSO was at a critical juncture. How would these challenges be resolved and what would it mean to the orchestra's future?

A History of Engagement

Ironically, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra had been on the forefront of engaging its city's sizable African-American community with important initiatives dating back to the early 1970s, a full eighteen years before the Michigan Arts Council controversy. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra's early interactions with the city's large, upwardly mobile African-American community began with the appointment of Paul Freeman in 1970 as the orchestra's Resident Conductor, followed soon after in 1972 by the hiring of its first African-American musician, Joe Striplin. During that period, Wayne Brown (now President and CEO of the Michigan Opera Theatre) served on the administration as an assistant manager, and in 1979 Dr. Arthur Johnson became the first African American Board member. Soon after, Judge Damon Keith joined the board as well. These high-profile additions to the DSO's artistic team and orchestra happened soon after the riots of 1967 and set the stage for the first of a series of programs developed to create a greater connection to Detroit's diverse minority communities that continue to this day.

In 1978, Paul Freeman, along with local chorale director Brazeal Dennard, DSO board member, Dr. Arthur Johnson, and a group of community members and volunteers launched "Classical Roots," a program dedicated to showcasing the work of African-American composers,

soloists, and conductors. Paul had long been a proponent of the work of African-American composers and recorded the definitive collection, *The Black Composers Series*, on CBS Records in the mid-1970s. The Classical Roots program, which continues to this day and was added to the orchestra's regular subscription schedule in 1989, touched people in a profound way. Dr. Johnson remembered one of the early performances:

“The remarkable thing about the Classical Roots program is how deeply the music touches people. When I heard the orchestra play Adolphus Hailstork's *Done Made My Vow* at an early Classical Roots program, I turned to my wife and said, ‘This is the first time that I felt a piece of music created from my own experience and it touched me as deeply as Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*.’ It was exhilarating.”

The Classical Roots program was, and continues to be, a huge success. An annual fundraising event grew out of these early performances and money raised through these efforts supported programs such as the DSO's African-American Composers Program in 1989 that identified, commissioned, and performed works by contemporary African-American composers. Sponsored by a major bank and other corporate and individual supporters, the 2015 Classical Roots fundraiser netted nearly \$200,000.

Another important initiative that grew out of the Classical Roots program is the African-American Fellowship Program, the first of its kind by a major U.S. Orchestra. Started in 1990, the Fellowship Program identifies one musician to work with the orchestra for one or more years. Of the fifteen musicians involved with this program since its inception, ten have gone on to secure places with America's top orchestras or are working in related areas of the field and the two are currently performing with the DSO. Current DSO Fellow Joshua Jones recalls his experience with the fellowship:

“Before, and even during, college there was no mention of a type of steppingstone between school and ‘the job’. One would take lessons, finish undergrad then grad school, perhaps do summer festivals and finally win an audition. When I was a sophomore in college, my instructor informed me of the Detroit Fellowship opportunity. I went to the live audition and there were about 11 other musicians present. After my round was over I was almost positive that I at least did well enough to be considered, and though I wasn't chosen that day, I was told that the panel had a very hard time deciding between myself and the winner and that I should try again next time. Finally, senior year arrived and the process began again to prepare for the audition. That day, I played my round, went to the warm up room to pick up my things and not even 2 minutes later they asked me to come to the lounge to hear the results. I had won! Since then the program has been extremely supportive and helpful with learning, including how to obtain tenure status, the do's and don'ts of playing in an orchestra, and overall skills on the job. This has been a blessing and I am looking forward to the second year of this program!

“Ultimately this experience has given me a chance to really seek out what I want to do in music. I do love playing orchestral music, but I also have a passion for

teaching and have found a lot of things that currently aren't being taught in colleges that I could contribute in the future. Hopefully this will be a starting platform to realize my aspirations and it has been a great start so far!"

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra's quest to reflect the diversity of their community has changed significantly since the race riot of 1967 and financial stress in the late 1980s. What began as a pioneering effort to reach out to the African-American community continues to evolve into a more sustainable value with the goal of reflecting and engaging Detroit's increasingly diverse people. These efforts are being seen and heard at every level of the organization. CEO Anne Parson's noted:

"When stakeholder representatives from across our organization and the communities we serve invest in the creation of a deep and thoughtful understanding around why embracing diversity and inclusion matters, the greatest possibilities can be imagined. When we evaluate our current position, and then project together what success might look like in future, we exponentially increase opportunities to more effectively realize our collective aspirations."

A New Structure and a New Vehicle to Advance Diversity and Inclusion

When asked about the DSO's approach to developing and implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives, President Anne Parsons talks about taking "an organic" approach to the work. Rather than creating and adhering to a set of strict boundaries, she prefers to provide channels for a myriad of voices and ideas to be considered. The most recent vehicle for this work was created in mid-2014, when the Board of Directors convened a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force to develop the institution's first-ever diversity and inclusion policy.

In 2012 the DSO unveiled a new governance structure that included a 75-member Board of Trustees complementing a streamlined Board of Directors. The DSO's governing board, while lacking in gender diversity, has one third of its members comprised of minority members. The new Board of Trustees began with only 25 inaugural members in place, creating an unprecedented opportunity to build a body that represented Detroit's many communities. The Board of Trustees is comprised of 58 members, 16% of whom are African-American and 13% of whom are from other minority communities. They are about to add ten new members that will further diversify this group. The DSO administrative staff is diverse as well. Of its 193 employees, 31% are from minority communities and 40% are women. DSO's musician cohort is less diverse with three people of color and twenty-four women among its seventy-five roster members. It is the DSO's belief that a diverse governing coalition and work force can better ensure that the organization values and seeks out diversity and inclusion in talent recruitment, external partnerships, and audience development.

While the DSO has long been a leader in developing programs to expand participation and representation, from the much-studied African-American Fellowship to the Elaine Lebenbom Competition for Female Composers, the institution has lacked a clearly defined and shared diversity policy to guide its decision-making. In October of 2014 the first meeting of the DSO's

Diversity and Inclusion Task Force took place to begin addressing this need. The committee determined that as its first step, they would develop this vision statement to serve as an initial guide in this work, which was delivered in December 2014 at the DSO's annual meeting as a part of Shirley Stancato's report to the board. Stancato is Executive Director of New Detroit, a race relations organization formed after the race riots:

“The Detroit Symphony Orchestra is an inclusive and culturally relevant community where all people can experience their world through music.”

But even before convening the task force, the DSO made changes to its governing structure, which resulted in broader representation at the highest levels of the organization, signaling natural progression in their serious commitment to this work. The Task Force is made up of fifteen members who represent all of the DSO's major stakeholder groups and is chaired by former board member Shirley Stancato. The Task Force continues its work today, looking at the DSO's diversity and inclusion policies and institutional practices that will operationalize these institutional goals and core values.

The DSO's decision to create a formal framework for its diversity and inclusion work is both wise and critical. It's often tempting to try to be all things to all people, but given the paucity of resources available, focusing on which investments will have the most impact will greatly enhance the long-term success of DSO's efforts. Having said that, when you consider all of the initiatives the DSO has launched over the years, it will be interesting to see if or how they might rethink their current portfolio of D&I programs.

Current Examples of DSO Diversity & Inclusion Initiatives:

- The Classical Roots Celebration – An annual concert developed in 1978 to increase awareness of the contributions of African-American composers and musicians through performance and recordings and to support increased opportunities for African-Americans in classical music through the DSO's African-American Composer Residency, Emerging Composer Program, and African-American Fellowship.
- The African-American Fellowship Program – Developed to address the shortage of African-Americans in professional orchestras, the DSO offers a yearlong fellowship to one selected musician. The orchestra is beginning to think about how to stay connected to and engaged with the past fellows, but no specific tactic has been developed at this time.
- Paradise Jazz Series – An annual jazz series featuring internationally renowned artists.
- Concert of Colors – This five-day event is metro Detroit's free annual diversity music festival produced by the Arab American National Museum with partners, including the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Institute of Arts, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, and others.
- The Elaine Lebenbom Memorial Award for Female Composers – This program supports

the creation of new orchestral works by women and is the only annual symphony sponsored award in the world exclusively for female composers.

- Wu Family Academy – Through live and digital partnerships, hands-on music education, and training in classrooms, communities, and virtual settings, the Wu Family Academy cultivates relationships that can change lives today, and, thereby, the trajectory of our community tomorrow. This season the DSO focuses on partnerships in the Harper Woods School District, a largely African-American community, and in the Southwest Detroit region of Detroit Public Schools, comprised of mostly Latino students.
- Civic Youth Ensembles: Scholarship Program and Audition Program – Since 1970, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's Civic Youth Ensembles (CYE) have provided Michigan's musicians of all ages and backgrounds with a comprehensive music education experience.
- Live from Orchestra Hall: Classroom Edition – Every student in Detroit – and around the country – can now experience the DSO's school-time educational concerts free and directly in their classrooms at dso.org/classroom. The program's initial goal is to ensure that every Detroit school child can experience symphonic music without any barriers. The pilot program in November 2014 was viewed by nearly 30,000 Detroit youth in over 125 Detroit schools, as well as thousands of other students nationwide.
- Incubation Partnerships: Sphinx and Detroit Children's Choir – The DSO has entered into "incubation" partnerships with the Sphinx Organization and the Detroit Children's Choir. The partnership with Sphinx, a national organization committed to expanding opportunities for Black and Latino classical musicians, includes hosting the Sphinx National Competition, collaborating on early education training programs, and providing performance opportunities for Sphinx soloists. The partnerships with the Detroit Children's Choir provides much-needed administrative capacity to this small but growing organization that uses the power and discipline of choral singing to bring together Detroit-area children and strengthen team building, creativity, social interaction, understanding, and connection.
- Music Alive Residency with Gabriela Lena Frank – During the 2014-2015 season, Ms. Frank was in residency at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) for six weeks. In addition to performing her existing works on the DSO's Neighborhood, Educational, and Classical Series Concerts, the Orchestra has commissioned new works that correspond with existing outreach and education work.
- Ford Resource and Engagement Center Partnership – In a new partnership, the DSO is bringing music performance, music education, webcast watch parties, and coming soon – training programs – to the Ford Resource and Engagement Center in Southwest Detroit.
- Symphony in D – What does Detroit sound like? The Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) and composer Tod Machover will ask every Detroiter that question in the

coming year as they work with the community to create a collaborative symphony with sound submissions and conceptual contributions from the public. The work, entitled Symphony in D, will premiere at Orchestra Hall on Nov. 16, 2015. The project strives to bring the orchestra into contact with communities and groups that haven't traditionally had exposure to the DSO.

- Ticketing Programs: Detroit Rush, 37eleven, and Soundcard – As part of its quest to become a more accessible orchestra, the DSO is committed to keeping its ticket prices affordable, particularly for three key constituencies: Detroit residents (Detroit Rush), young professionals (37eleven), and students (Soundcard). These initiatives have helped create point-of-entry opportunities for younger audience members
- Panel discussion during the Tchaikovsky Festival about the composer's sexuality, presented in partnership with Affirmations, a Ferndale-based LGBT resource center. This event was held in The Music Box at The Max M. Fisher Music Center, and some 200 people attended.

The Road Forward

The City of Detroit and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra have both seen periods of growth and success as well as incredibly challenging, even harrowing times. And yet, both have persevered, and, more importantly, gained strength from the challenges faced and overcome. When the DSO returned to Orchestra Hall in the late 1980s, it served as the catalyst for the redevelopment of Midtown, the Detroit neighborhood that today leads the renaissance of the city.

In a diverse community like Detroit with limited resources and populated with people of competing interests and needs, the role of major cultural institutions takes on dimensions beyond just creating and presenting great art. These institutions must, on some levels, reflect the broader community, and perhaps more importantly, provide a neutral meeting ground for people of divergent backgrounds and cultures to interact with one another and form connections. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra has played this role for a long time -- from its early programs aimed at serving the city's sizable African-American community, to its more recent efforts to engage with the GLBT community, the Arab-American community, and other underrepresented groups.

The DSO recognizes that there is much more to be done including refining its goals and objectives, developing a set of metrics to chart progress, and further integrating diversity and inclusion into its organizational culture. In its quest to be "inclusive and culturally relevant," the Detroit Symphony Orchestra is taking important steps to reflect its community and build new constituencies for its future.

Key Learnings

- Leadership is critical. Anne Parsons, Board Chairman Phillip Wm. Fisher, Leonard Slatkin, the staff, the musicians, and the board are in alignment about the need to

advance diversity and inclusion initiatives within the organization.

- This work can attract funding. The DSO has been successful in attracting support from the philanthropic and corporate community. Many initiatives have naming-level sponsors attached to the programs.
- Organizational structure can facilitate this work. The DSO's decision to recruit diverse candidates to the Board of Trustees and create the Diversity and Inclusion Task Force to help create vision, policy, and practices puts real muscle and investment behind this work.
- Seek opportunities to scale successful programs. The growth and evolution of the DSO's Classical Roots program from a single, stand-alone concert into a series of spin-off initiatives is a great example of leveraging a signature event.