The richness of difference. Practically everything we have discovered about being human, and that we have learned from the natural and social sciences; tells us that difference is the engine of growth and creativity, and that it is the catalyst of the continuous remaking of our world.

Even the music we play arises not out of isolation, but out of contact with other peoples, forms, and genres. Our democratic principles of free speech and expression, a free press, public education, and participatory democracy are all premised on the idea that we are a people of numerous and wildly divergent views, perspectives, experiences, and values.

But, as we are too often reminded, there is a gap between our espoused ideals and our reality. Being different in America is still too often associated with fear, mistrust, inequality, discrimination, and violence. You don’t have to live in Baltimore, or Saint Louis, or in North Carolina, to know we have a long way to go to close this gap. And, I believe, as I know many of you do, that we have a role to play as citizens and as artists, to live by the values we espouse. And as we work to close that gap, we make our organizations stronger and take the orchestra experience to ever higher levels.

So what are we to do? A good place to start is to be clear about what it is we are talking about. You’ve probably noticed that I have yet to use the word diversity. It’s become a rather blunt term glossing over many very significant distinctions, sometimes dulling our ability to focus and act.
Race, ethnicity, class, religious belief, sexual orientation and gender identity are among the many differences we experience in our lives, yet lumping them all together under the banner of diversity misses important distinctions.

For example, in U.S. orchestras

- The number of musicians of Asian descent has increased by 72% over the last 12 years. (2002-2014)
- And over the last 25 years, the percentage of women instrumentalists has gone from 40% to nearly 50%.
- But, women conductors still lag representing only 14% of all conductors.
- And as we know all too well, the percent of African Americans over the past 40 years has moved from only 1.4% to 1.8%;
- And the number of Latino musicians from 1995-2014 has moved from only 1.6% to 2.4%.

The dynamics at play are all very different. And of course, there is far more to this conversation than numbers and representation.

As we go through the next few days together, let’s try to say what we mean. And let’s hold one another accountable to do just that. After all, there are a lot of loaded terms associated with conversations about diversity: equity, white privilege, structural racism, inclusion, cultural equality, political correctness, intersectionality to name just a few.

And let’s acknowledge that every orchestra has its own unique circumstances and this is not a one size fits all conversation. Some orchestras are in minority majority population centers; others in predominately white ones; while yet others have sizeable Native American populations.

Some of you have a long history of addressing diversity and inclusion while others are just beginning. Wherever you come into this work is the right place for you to
enter. And that includes those of you who wonder how in the world can we take on yet another challenge when it takes every ounce of ingenuity and resource just to keep playing great concerts. I have worked in orchestras very big and very small and believe me, I know the reality of that feeling – there is never enough time or money. This is a time to get that out on the table.

The content of this conference is organized around its theme, the richness of difference, and how we can advance our work to realize that goal. But a quick scan of our sessions will reveal a concentration on issues of race and ethnicity. It’s not that other dimensions of diversity are less important. Rather there is urgency with respect to race and ethnicity.

In part because there is a pressing national conversation going on that we ignore at our peril. And the absence of racial and ethnic diversity on our stages, on our staffs, in our audiences, and in our board rooms is an immediately visible indicator of a legacy of discrimination that has yet to be significantly addressed.

Conversations about diversity can be difficult. Difference also causes friction and heat. That goes with the territory. Like a good stew on the stove, if it’s not hot enough, the flavors won’t come out and come together. But if gets too hot, it boils over. So here are a few thoughts to keep in mind, so nobody boils over:

- Assume good intentions.
- Listen for understanding, not debate.
- Speak from your own experiences. Allow everyone to speak for themselves, not on behalf of an entire group.
- Use curiosity as a tool.
- No one knows everything, together we know a lot.
That last one, no one knows everything, together we know a lot, has special resonance for me. It is, after all, the premise of our being associated with one another through our League of American Orchestras. We have accomplished a lot together. But we will not rise to the challenges of diversity, inclusion, and equity by only talking among ourselves. Now is the time to listen and engage with those voices that are most different and most challenging. And this conference is chock full of opportunities to do just that. So lean in, listen hard, speak your mind, and have a great conference. Thank you.

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