by Steven Brown

Soon after Peter Landgren began his freshman year at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, Cincinnati’s Music Hall became practically his second home. As he got to know the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, he noticed exactly one African-American face among its musicians. Thirty-six years later, in 2011, Landgren’s alma mater brought him back as its dean, and he promptly returned to his old concertgoing haunt. “Looking at the orchestra, I saw one African-American musician,” Landgren recalls. “And it was the same person.”

Although the Cincinnati Symphony employed musicians of color in the years between Landgren’s visits, and currently employs several Latino musicians, his anecdote illustrates a stark reality: despite the best intentions, U.S. orchestras are behind the times. With the nation’s crossover to a majority-minority population less than 30 years away, Latinos make up 3 percent of orchestras’ members, according to 2014 figures from the League of American Orchestras. African-Americans comprise 2 percent.

The orchestra business has a lot of catching up to do, Landgren says, and the Cincinnati Symphony and the College-Conservatory are doing their part. This fall, five young musicians will enter the new CSO/CCM Diversity Fellowship Program, working toward graduate degrees from CCM as they gain playing experience with the Cincinnati Symphony.

So the two-year CSO/CCM Diversity Fellowship Program will offer potential graduate students $26,210 a year in tuition and fee waivers; a university stipend of $10,000 a year; $9,000 a season in payment for playing in the orchestra; a one-time Graduate School Dean’s Excellence Award of $3,000; and an array of enrichment sessions in addition to their classes. The lead funding is a $900,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which also recently pledged $50,000 to help the Memphis Symphony Orchestra plan its own diversity fellowships.

The Cincinnati initiative joins a burgeoning list of projects aimed at helping U.S. orchestras gain playing experience with the Cincinnati Symphony.
Orchestras are working to broaden musician diversity with talent-development projects, fellowships, and mentoring programs for everyone from the youngest students to musicians starting their professional careers.

Orchestras better mirror the society around them. From nurturing talented youngsters in Nashville to cultivating conductors and administrators in Chicago, orchestras are thinking both long-term and short.

“In Cincinnati, we talk a lot about the pipeline,” Landgren says. “You can’t have a diverse group of high school seniors auditioning for college—or college seniors auditioning for graduate school—if they haven’t started, like everyone else in the creative arts, before they’re ten years old. If we sit here at the professional level waiting for communities like Detroit or Cincinnati or Baltimore or Los Angeles to suddenly start producing talented musicians who are going to get into those orchestras, but we have not fed that pipeline, we will never change the face of the American symphony orchestra.”

**Developing Talent**

The Nashville Symphony starts supplying the pipeline in September, when it welcomes the first set of fourth-graders into its new Accelerando program. Over the next few years, Accelerando will become a community of 24 gifted fourth- through twelfth-graders from underrepresented groups. Picked from the ranks of students whose talents have begun to stand out, they’ll study with Nashville Symphony members and teaching artists, play in ensembles, and attend camps and workshops—all for free.

Accelerando’s goal: prepare the budding
musicians to win college auditions and go on to become professionals. “We want to find the very best students and enable them to do their best,” says Walter Bitner, the Nashville Symphony’s director of education and community engagement. “I envision that a generation from now, students who have gone through the Accelerando program will have graduated from major conservatories and will be playing in major orchestras around the United States.”

A $900,000, six-year grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is launching the program, but Accelerando can draw on less-tangible assets, too, Bitner says. “The Nashville Symphony’s hometown, which bills itself as Music City USA—embracing the Grammy-winning orchestra and the Grand Ole Opry, pop and country stars, recording studios, and publishing companies—embodies music’s array of career options. The fact that the Nashville Symphony has a Hispanic music director, Costa Rica native Giancarlo Guerrero, is proof that once-neglected groups indeed have a place in classical music.

Accelerando’s leaders patterned it after the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra’s decades-old Talent Development Program. The Atlanta program not only gives its 25 participants lessons, playing experience, and mentoring, but supplies free tickets to Atlanta Symphony concerts and helps pay for summer music camps and college audition trips. Each semester, the students play juries to demonstrate their progress; the program’s leaders meet with the families to map out what the youngsters need to do next. And the aspiring musicians motivate one another.

“Once they become part of the program, all of a sudden they have a peer group of students who are interested in the same things they are,” Talent Development Program Manager Adrienne Thompson says. “They’re all in different places in their musical journey. So the newer students get a chance to see others who are interested. Those who are closest to [college] audition time get a bird’s-eye view of what goes into that preparation. What we end up with is a group of students and families who are all striving to reach the same goal.”

Founded in the 1990s to help African-American and Latino children study music for enjoyment and enrichment, the Atlanta Symphony’s program grew from ten students a year to 25. And as graduates began landing in top music schools, the program raised its sights: beginning about 2008, students who wanted to stay in the program beyond tenth grade had to promise to shoot for becoming college music majors. The 77 students who have stayed through high school have all gone on to college, landing at institutions including the Juilliard School, Curtis Institute of Music, Northwestern University, University of Michigan, Rice University, and UCLA.

“I really enjoyed being surrounded by a like-minded set of people who were all living the same experience, namely that of being a black classical musician,” says violinist Keanu Mitanga, who just finished his sophomore year in Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music. A 2014
graduate of Atlanta International School, he took part in the Atlanta Symphony’s Talent Development Program from grades four through twelve. Studying with orchestra members and seeing them perform onstage—doing what he hoped to do—was a powerful motivator, he adds.

“Most other students play in youth orchestras, but few receive the kind of meaningful time with their mentors that the Talent Development Program provides. I also don’t know of any other program that holds students to their own commitments,” Mitanga says. “The annual jury performance evaluations to track performance and the annual planning sessions with program staff were invaluable to figuring out my long-term plan and helping me stick to it.”

Music—and Beyond

The teachers’ roles in these programs reach far beyond musical instruction, says Dwight Shambley, who co-founded the Dallas Symphony Orchestra’s Young Strings in 1992. Unlike the Atlanta and Nashville programs, Young Strings starts with beginners, reaching out to second-graders in five elementary schools with largely minority-student populations. Budding musicians citywide can apply to a second division, aimed at later grades. Since Young Strings’ founding, about 2,000 students have taken part. Shambley teaches bass players.

“Most of the students are shy at first,” says Shambley, who has played bass in the Dallas Symphony since 1972. “They’re very introverted. They almost strike me as afraid and distant. I try to get a little knowledge about who they are and what makes them tick. They gradually open up. The time I spend with them in lessons often ends up being more about mentoring them and finding out what’s going on in their lives, helping them figure out what to do with this issue or that issue. It becomes much more than, ‘What finger goes here?’ or ‘How much bow speed do you use there?’ You almost become a secondary parent to them.”

Especially in the elementary-school program, called Overture, some youngsters leave as other interests attract them, says Jamie Allen, the Dallas Symphony’s director of education. Even the students in the advanced program, Finale, which focuses on gifted students, don’t have to commit to becoming college music majors. But the program pushes them to apply for music scholarships and to play in their college orchestras. Some, Allen says, become the first in their families with a university education.

“Rather than a basketball or a football, they have a violin in their hands, and that helps them get into college,” Allen says. Ninety-eight percent of students in the Finale program have gone on to college, he says, compared to 52 percent of graduates from the Dallas Independent School District. Those who have gone into musical careers include members of regional orchestras, freelancers, and music teachers.

Carnegie Hall and Purchase College begin working toward orchestras’ diversity this summer through NYO2, an offshoot of Carnegie’s National Youth Orchestra of the United States of America. Focusing on underrepresented groups, NYO2 enables 14- through 17-year-olds to work with Philadelphia Orchestra members and conductor Giancarlo Guerrero, culminating in a side-by-side concert July 2.

League Resources

Diversity is a key component of the League of American Orchestras’ activities. As the League’s new strategic plan states, “Diversity, and in particular the place of race and ethnicity, is an urgent national issue, and the League must seize its role to focus attention and help orchestras find pathways, individually and collectively, to take action.” The focus of this year’s League Conference, June 9-11 at the Baltimore Marriot Waterfront, is “The Richness of Difference,” and attendees will examine the diverse nature of our communities through multiple lenses: artistic, civic, audience-building, fundraising, mission, and more. Among sessions at the Conference is “Opening the Door to Diversity: Lessons Learned from 30 Years of Orchestra Fellowship Programs”; it will draw on the latest League research to analyze past and current orchestra fellowship programs and the opportunities they offer to young musicians of color. Visit americanorchestras.org/conference2016 for more information and to register.

For resources on diversifying your orchestra and organization, go to the League’s online Diversity & Inclusion Resource Center at americanorchestras.org/learning-leadership-development. Find more on the League’s new strategic plan at americanorchestras.org/strategy.
Even if the graduates of these programs pursue other careers, Dallas’s Shambley points out, they still can nourish the music world. “I don’t expect most of them to become professional musicians. That’s just not a reasonable expectation,” Shambley says. “But I do expect that they will become familiar with the genre, the music. Quite often, they really love this music, and even if they become doctors or lawyers or whatever, they are willing to support it.”

**Getting Started**

Students who do earn music degrees need help breaking into an extremely challenging profession. The Detroit-based Sphinx Organization and its Sphinx Virtuosi chamber ensemble have helped black and Latino musicians gain orchestral experience since 1996. And for the Chicago Sinfonietta, inclusiveness—in musicians and repertoire—has been its mission ever since African-American conductor Paul Freeman co-founded it in 1987.

The Sinfonietta’s new principal bassoonist is Sandra Bailey, who won the position after two years as a fellow in the group’s Project Inclusion, which Sinfonietta launched in 2008. The project’s main initiative, its Orchestral Fellowship, brings in four to six musicians for a season or two of performing and learning. Bailey juggled her Sinfonietta work with graduate studies at Northwestern University. “The Project Inclusion experience brought me something school couldn’t give, and that’s real playing experience with professional musicians,” Bailey says.

Fellows receive feedback and mentoring from the group’s core musicians. And they learn about the nitty-gritty of professional life: the Sinfonietta is not a full-time orchestra. “The world of the full-time orchestra beckons in other cities. The Pittsburgh Symphony’s Orchestral Fellowship Program for African American Musicians, launched in 2007, hosts one fellow for two years of coaching, occasional performances with the orchestra, and preparation for orchestral auditions. The San Antonio Symphony has hired two of the program’s participants. In the Houston Symphony’s Community-Embedded Musicians program, which just completed its first season, four young professionals play occasionally with the orchestra in the midst of appearances in schools, nursing homes, and community centers. The orchestra hopes to draw in minority musicians as the program develops, says Houston Symphony Executive Director and CEO Mark Hanson.

“**The real efficacy of diversity and inclusion is that we are far stronger when everyone is encouraged and allowed to make their contributions,” says Chicago Sinfonietta Executive Director Jim Hirsch.**

In September 2016, the Nashville Symphony will launch its Accelerando program, for fourth-through twelfth-graders from underrepresented groups. Walter Bitner, the orchestra’s director of education and community engagement (at right in photo), states, “A generation from now, students who have gone through the Accelerando program will be playing with orchestras around the United States.”

The Cincinnati Symphony/College-Conservatory Diversity Fellowship Program will expand the definition of inclusiveness by looking beyond ethnicity: it’s also open, for instance, to students who were the first in their families to attend college, regardless of their race. The program attracted 70 applications—marking a sea change in the diversity of CCM’s graduate applicants, CCM Dean Peter Landgren says. “College is expensive. You can see, purely from an economic standpoint, why people would question whether they can even enter an undergraduate school, much less go on to six or eight years of col-

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lege education. But if we can keep more people in the pre-professional pipeline of musicians..."

The orchestral field consists of more than musicians, of course. The comprehensive diversity plan that led the Pittsburgh Symphony to start its training program also called for making its board and staff more inclusive, says Suzanne Perrino, senior vice president of education and strategic implementation, leading to greater diversity onstage and off. At Chicago Sinfonietta, a new branch of Project Inclusion similarly aims to help diversify the field. In the just-completed first season of the Sinfonietta’s Administrative Fellowships, two participants gained hands-on experience of marketing, fundraising, and other skills. “We believe that the most beautiful sounds are made when all voices are lifted together,” says Sinfonietta Executive Director Jim Hirsch. “The real efficacy of diversity and inclusion is that we are far stronger when everyone is encouraged and allowed to make their contributions.”

What about the podium? The Houston Symphony—whose first Hispanic music director, Colombia native Andrés Orozco-Estrada, took over in 2014—last season hired another Colombian, Carlos Andrés Botero, as its first Musical Ambassador to one of the nation’s most diverse cities. Botero, trained as a violist and conductor, is also the orchestra’s assistant conductor, covering classical subscription programs and leading pre-concert talks. He has led the orchestra’s Lunada concert, an annual evening sponsored by the Mexican Institute of Greater Houston that recalls events held in small towns and pueblos in Mexico, at which community members come together to share music, poetry, and stories.

The Chicago Sinfonietta’s Conducting Fellowship program, begun in 2013, invites four to six participants a season to conduct, observe, and take part in seminars about the intricacies of leading orchestras. For one assignment, Project Inclusion Manager Dave Belden says, the fellows had to sketch out the program for their imaginary first concert as the Sinfonietta’s music director. It was a reality check. “One of the fellows suggested that for the second half, he wanted to do an 80-minute opera,” Belden recalls. “We said, ‘Well, you need to scale that back.’”

Trey Devey, the Cincinnati Symphony’s president, says orchestras have been discussing shortfalls in diversity ever since he entered the field in the 1990s. But he sees a new urgency today. “Of course we need to perform music at the highest level,” Devey says. “That will always be core to what we do. But the relationship we have with our community enables everything else to happen. We bring beauty into the world at a time where you see ugliness around the world in so many ways. We allow people to dream bigger and aspire for greater things. And that should involve as many people as possible.”

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