

Dear American Orchestras,

In May 2022, the Black Orchestral Network (BON) issued a letter calling on American orchestras and the anchors of the American orchestral community to reckon with both the history of bias, exclusion, and indignity, as well as the current realities and barriers, faced by Black orchestral musicians in sharing their extensive talents and skills. Thousands joined our call to action for American orchestras to honor and center your moral and artistic commitments: to build and sustain spaces where Black musicians' unique artistic contributions belong and thrive; to hire Black musicians and support their development; and to fully embed and be accountable for practices that promote respect, fairness, grace, and equity.

Despite your stated desire for greater inclusion and dignity, barriers and biases persist and, in 2023, are manifest in explicit and tangible ways, including in the unfair denial of tenure to multiple Black musicians. Unfortunately, concerns about respect and fairness in the tenure process for Black musicians are both present and longstanding, extending back at least as far as Elayne Jones's well-documented struggles in 1972.

And so, we take up the pen once again to spotlight the many failings of the tenure process. We conducted a listening tour to receive guidance and better understand the lived experiences of Black orchestral musicians across America. Many of our stories highlight and underscore the concerns about dignity, equity, respect, transparency, and inclusion in the tenure process. And while grounded in and too often experienced by Black orchestral musicians, these accounts also speak to challenges faced by all non-tenured musicians.

A year and a half ago, we wrote words that remain true today: *"We cannot call ourselves an American orchestral community if we are not inclusive of Black Americans and do not respect and acknowledge Black Americans' contributions to American music and the orchestral community."* Exclusion harms orchestras – artistically, spiritually, and financially – and a practice of exclusion can generate a practice of exit. Talented Black musicians are already exiting orchestras because of unfair and abusive experiences. We must invest in and commit to a different path forward: one that honors the talents, personhood, and community that enrich and sustain American orchestras.

Themes from the Conversations: A Process That Can Harm Many and Serves Few

Professional orchestras typically fill positions through competitive auditions and hire those musicians for a 1–2-year probationary period. During that period, orchestras decide whether to retain the musicians permanently as “tenured” members of the orchestra. Musicians who fail to get tenure are usually forced to leave their positions altogether; not only do they lose the time and investment made to the orchestra and the economic security and stability of a long-term orchestral position, they are effectively starting over, once again thrust into the challenging and precarious audition process. The harm inflicted by the denial of tenure is tangible – for musicians and for orchestras – and can linger across the arc of an entire career.

While practices differ across, and even within, orchestras, many broader themes emerged in our conversations with Black orchestral musicians:

Weak or non-existing standards and guidelines. There seem to be few written standards in place to guide the tenure process, whether in collective bargaining agreements, job advertisements, or policy guidelines. Without explicit job responsibilities or behavioral standards, orchestras lack the criteria or even a framework to articulate the expectations, norms, and standards for success. Moreover, most audition and/or tenure committees do not receive training or guidance on the tenure process. This lack of standards impedes transparency and can lead to inconsistent procedures. Often, musicians have little to help them understand what orchestras expect of them, which makes it hard to successfully deliver on those expectations.

Conflicts of interest. Many potential conflicts of interest have emerged in the tenure process. These conflicts are often not recognized or voiced, and few, if any, mechanisms are in place to anticipate such conflicts and ensure they do not impact the process. For example, tenure committees can include individuals who sought the position, individuals whose students or family members sought the position, or members of the audition committee who preferred another candidate. Relatedly, some orchestras ask for feedback from individuals who are competing, or have competed, with the candidate, like substitute musicians and others who auditioned for the job. Power disparities can also impact the process;

for example, the informal (or formal) deference and/or assignment of final or sole decision-making authority to the music director and/or principals. The sense of competition within a section, including between principals and section members can infect feedback and tenure decisions.

Bias that can drive adverse and inequitable outcomes. The absence of clear goals and aligned criteria creates opportunities for subjectivity and bias to impact the tenure and evaluation process. The long history of marginalization of Black artistry in American classical music underscores the particular and significant risk of unfair outcomes for Black musicians. Without standards in place, Black musicians face myriad challenges: from being evaluated according to criteria that are trivial or irrelevant to their playing and performance (from using the wrong font size in emails to their rehearsal attire) to navigating and being subject to conflicting feedback, moving goalposts, and unstated rules and requirements. Black musicians described working in hostile and unwelcoming environments, and experiencing and too often silently enduring, many forms of harassment and discrimination. Black probationary musicians in principal positions face standards of leadership that too often are formalized, set by, and preference white musicians.

Lack of power and rights. Many non-tenured musicians lack access to representation, and in some cases, to the grievance process altogether. The common perception is that there is no room to raise concerns, and in at least some cases, an expectation that non-tenured musicians need to take any abuse, harassment, or retaliation that comes their way from tenured musicians or other members of the orchestral community. Non-tenured musicians report experiencing hostile, abusive, threatening, and inappropriate behavior and comments they feel they cannot address or report without putting their employment at risk. In turn, some tenured musicians use their tenure as a shield for inappropriate conduct, effectively deeming tenure a “free pass” to engage in harassment, abuse, and discrimination. Musicians have observed that even in cases where this kind of conduct is common knowledge, few, if any, steps are taken to address the behavior or engage in any disciplinary action.

A Better Way

We believe there is a better way - concrete and achievable steps you can implement today that better serve your needs and those of musicians and audiences too. Steps that improve the tenure process for Black musicians will also improve the health of orchestral workplaces overall. It starts with a foundational commitment to inclusive orchestras which center the dignity and artistry of each of your members. We reissue our call to action to "build a richer and more robust American orchestral community," a call that necessitates meaningful changes to tenure practices to support essential talent through a fair, collegial, and transparent decision process.

The 2021 National Alliance for Audition Support's (NAAS) [published guidelines for audition and tenure processes](#) include important recommendations for all orchestras. We build upon those recommendations here, with effective and efficient practices and innovations that are already emerging within the ecosystem.

Ground tenure evaluation practices and decisions in relevant, job-related criteria contained in written position descriptions. Criteria for evaluating a musician for tenure should be job-related and aligned, which starts with having a written description of the position and expectations focused on job competencies. Collective bargaining agreements must define the skills and job responsibilities and clarify the relationship to the criteria for tenure. Create a formal rubric based upon the defined skills and job responsibilities to guide the committee's feedback and evaluation.

Re-orient the tenure process toward growth for individual musicians and the orchestral community. Setting clear, objective, and meaningful goals for the tenure process will help refocus feedback and decision-making on what is actually important. Consider the granting of tenure to musicians as an opportunity to grow the orchestra by bringing in new talent and creating space for feedback and learning. Fostering a mindset of continuous improvement and artistic growth enables feedback and support that benefits both the musician being evaluated and the orchestra as a whole.

Set up non-tenured musicians and orchestras for tenure success through mentoring and direct support. The orchestra makes a significant investment when it chooses a new member after a competitive audition process. Having a

probationary musician fail to receive tenure because of poor communication, unclear expectations, or trivial concerns fails to honor that investment. Such a waste of time and resources calls into question the orchestra's ability to make thoughtful, long-term, strategic decisions about its talent. Orchestras can provide mentoring and guidance for musicians as they join orchestras, approach tenure, and go through the tenure process.

Apply best practices for giving and receiving feedback. Requiring committees to provide feedback formally and based on job-related criteria will make it far more constructive. In addition, how that feedback is shared matters. We recommend orchestras establish written procedures to provide feedback either directly in person to the candidate during tenure meetings, or if in writing, to transparently share it with the candidate and bar anonymous feedback. Finally, the process should provide all participants clear agency to share their honest assessment and an ability to speak without being unduly influenced by the Music Director, Principals, or others.

Make the tenure process transparent to candidates for tenure. Commit to a meeting at hire that includes information about the tenure process and timeline. The NAAS guidelines provide some useful recommendations about establishing a more transparent tenure process.

Harness the debiasing power of collective decision-making. In some orchestras, tenure committees are advisory or in name only, with tenure decisions in the sole discretion of the Music Director. This is contrary to best practices for equity in hiring and promotion decisions, which encourage group decision-making based on multiple perspectives.

Create protections against conflicts of interest. Committee procedures should clearly address potential conflicts and provide mechanisms to avoid them. Examples include:

- a rule that the committee should not include anyone who auditioned for the position in the last 5 years, anyone whose students or family members auditioned for the position in that timeframe, or anyone who could be offered the position if the musician is denied tenure.

- a rule that the committee should not solicit feedback from individuals who are not a permanent part of the orchestra.
- a process to ensure committee members are aware of potential conflicts of interest for individuals providing feedback.

Provide training for audition and tenure committees. Committee members can significantly benefit from learning how to be aware of potential biases, including with respect to Black musicians in leadership roles.

Establish stronger protections from discrimination, harassment, and abuse for non-tenured musicians - and all musicians. Orchestras should require that non-tenured musicians are provided support and resources for addressing areas of concern, including ensuring that collective bargaining agreements allow the union to fully protect non-tenured musicians. Further, orchestras need a pathway to enable non-tenured musicians to raise concerns about discrimination, harassment, mistreatment, and abuses of power by members of the orchestral community, including orchestra members, management, funders, and audience members; to provide a mechanism to address inappropriate behavior or misconduct by tenured musicians against any member of the orchestral community; and allow tenure candidates to raise concerns and provide feedback on their experiences in a way that is (and feels) safe and free from retribution. This pathway is necessary for the safety and well-being of all orchestra members.

Create better accountability for equity in tenure decisions. Under current practice, the vast majority of orchestral musicians receive tenure. In the continued absence of a disciplined and rigorous tenure process, orchestras should carefully consider cases that are on track towards tenure and ensure that tenure decisions contrary to what is standard and expected reflect an exceptional situation. Orchestras should also have a process in place to evaluate the contracts of tenured musicians who are causing harm or abuse and require tracking and disaggregation of data and information on the tenure process and results.

We Commit to Build an Expansive Future for American Classical Music

Current tenure practices are causing harm to Black musicians and to orchestras. We can no longer endure and protect a status quo that does not protect us.

Over the past few years, we have witnessed the beginnings of broader change and growth; change that engages all stakeholders within the American orchestral community in an expansive, rich, and inclusive vision of American orchestras. The seeds planted now need to take root and be tended to by the orchestral community: from funders and trustees, who can lead the way on setting up a fair and generative ecosystem; to unions, who can fully represent musicians at all stages of their journey and growth; to audiences, who can call for, show up, and help build an inclusive future for American classical music. And of course, with our fellow musicians and artists; together, we can learn from each other, strengthen and sustain ourselves, and generate music that moves and reflects us all.

Ten Steps Toward Equity in the Tenure Process

1. **Ground tenure evaluation practices and decisions in relevant, job-related criteria contained in written position descriptions.** Create a formal rubric based on that to guide the committee's feedback and evaluation.
2. **Re-orient the tenure process toward growth for individual musicians and the orchestral community.** Set clear, objective, and meaningful goals for the tenure process, including fostering a mindset of continuous improvement and artistic growth.
3. **Set up non-tenured musicians and orchestras for tenure success through mentoring and direct support.** Provide mentoring and guidance as they approach tenure and go through the tenure process.
4. **Apply best practices for giving and receiving feedback.** Committees should provide feedback formally and based on job-related criteria, should reject anonymous feedback, and should establish multiple feedback channels that account for power differentials to reduce bias and improve feedback quality.
5. **Make the tenure process transparent to candidates for tenure.** Ensure information about the tenure process and timeline is provided when a candidate is hired.

6. **Harness the debiasing power of collective decision-making.** Best practices encourage group decision-making based on multiple perspectives.
7. **Create protections against conflicts of interests.** Committee procedures should clearly address potential conflicts and provide a process to ensure committee members are aware of potential conflicts of interest for individuals providing feedback.
8. **Provide training for audition and tenure committees.** Committee members can significantly benefit from learning how to be aware of potential biases, including with respect to Black musicians in leadership roles.
9. **Establish stronger protections from discrimination, harassment, and abuse for non-tenured musicians - and all musicians.** All musicians must be able to raise concerns about discrimination, harassment, and abuse – and non-tenured musicians are uniquely vulnerable. All need pathways to raise concerns and provide feedback on their experiences in a way that is (and feels) safe and free from retribution.
10. **Create better accountability for equity in tenure decisions.** Provide review of decisions, evaluate the contracts of any tenured musicians reported for inflicting harm or abuse, and require tracking and disaggregation of data and information on the tenure process and results.