



INDIANAPOLIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

February 15, 2019

Dear supporters, friends, and neighbors of the ISO,

February is Black History Month. For many years, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra has presented a musical celebration of African-American culture in February. We have employed black conductors and soloists, engaged Gospel choirs, and performed selections by African-American composers.

This year, we are putting a pause on the Celebration of Black History Concert. While this performance traditionally offered an occasion to celebrate the accomplishment of black musicians, it became clear in recent years that highlighting artists of color only once a year is simply not doing enough to demonstrate that diversity, equity and inclusion are core values of this institution. In fact, we might be doing a disservice to these ideals by relegating black performers and composers to an occasional concert.

Instead, I have asked the stakeholders of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra – staff, board, and musicians – to engage in learning about systemic racism and unconscious bias; to begin sincere dialogue with members of our community on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion; and to take steps to make the ISO a more inclusive and welcoming place every month of the year.

Our task force of staff, musicians, and board members will examine every aspect of our organization, and determine opportunities to better serve our community and our industry. This team has convened to begin evaluating our programs, communications, and stakeholder interactions. As an organization, we are openly and actively working on the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion – all with the intent to take action. We recognize that conversation without intentional effort can be as unhelpful as no conversation at all.

The places we are looking at include our practices in programming concerts, selecting guest artists and conductors, hiring staff and musicians, recruiting board members and volunteers, offering education and community engagement programs, providing opportunities for young musicians of every background, and welcoming new audience members to Hilbert Circle Theatre and Symphony on the Prairie.

One of the specific concerns I have heard relates to the lack of diversity among the musicians of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. The ISO is not alone among American orchestras in grappling with this challenge. Permanent members of the ISO are selected by blind audition – a practice employed by most U.S. orchestras – to guarantee fairness in the hiring process. Unfortunately, few musicians of color take auditions for the ISO or any other orchestra. The result is that fewer than five percent of positions in American professional orchestras are occupied by musicians of Latin or African-American descent.

Krzysztof Urbanski MUSIC DIRECTOR Jack Everly PRINCIPAL POPS CONDUCTOR James M. Johnson CEO

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Page Two

While we recognize there are no quick fixes, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra is joining with other orchestras in a program to provide support for and enable musicians of color at the beginning of their careers. The National Alliance for Audition Support is an initiative created by the Sphinx Organization, the League of American Orchestras, and the New World Symphony. It is the product of a long-term goal to increase diversity in American orchestras by offering holistic and personalized support to musicians of color. These supports include mentoring, audition preparation, professional development, and networking opportunities.

As Sanford Allen, a black violinist, told the *New York Times* upon his departure from the New York Philharmonic in 1977, the lack of diversity and inclusion in orchestral music is not one single organization's problem, "it's part of a national social problem." More than 40 years later, systemic challenges still exist across the orchestra industry.

As we work on strategies to represent our diverse community in every aspect of our organization, we are taking a look at previous and current efforts to ensure we accomplish our goals and serve our patrons in genuine ways.

As is the case with most important efforts in life, we don't expect to see massive change quickly. That only means we will continuously work to move the needle toward more equity and inclusion in the spaces we can control. We are in this for the long haul. Our staff, musicians, and supporters know that this is merely the beginning.

Thank you for being part of our vibrant community. I welcome you to join us at a concert – and to join in this essential conversation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James M. Johnson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

James M. Johnson
CEO, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra