

They Were Ahead of the Curve on Diversity in Classical Music

The Sphinx Organization, led by Afa Dworkin, is celebrating 25 years of pressing the field for more diversity in repertory and rosters.



By Zachary Woolfe

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It was the late 1990s, and Afa Sadykhly Dworkin saw a woman crying backstage at a concert hall in Michigan.

Dworkin was there helping to run a competition for young artists started by the Sphinx Organization, a newly founded group devoted to fostering diversity in classical music. When she spied the woman in tears, she assumed that a bow or string had broken. But when she tried to help, the woman waved her off, saying that although her child had lost the competition, her tears were happy ones.

“I’m crying because we thought my daughter was the best,” Dworkin recently recalled the woman telling her. “There’s no one who lives near us who plays at her level, so we came assuming we were going to win. And we didn’t win anything, but she has a family now. She has all these sisters and brothers now.”

Sphinx, which turns 25 this year, has come a long way since that first competition. While the prize-awarding event remains at the core of its activities, the organization, which Dworkin now leads, has also started training programs and ensembles, and has pushed for more diverse repertory and orchestra rosters. It has promoted young soloists and arts administrators, and operates an ever-expanding annual conference. With a burst of new attention to phrases like diversity, equity and inclusion over the past two years, Sphinx’s steady, patient work has come to seem prescient.

“They were raising the profile of the critical importance of diversity in orchestras before almost anybody was,” said Simon Woods, the chief executive of the League of American Orchestras. “And before the League. They were there before everybody.”

But perhaps Sphinx’s most fundamental and meaningful achievement has been its simplest one, the part that crying mother caught onto: creating a community of people who had thought they were the only one of their kind, or close. Forming what those in the Sphinx network call “la familia.”



From left, members of the Sphinx Virtuosi, Hannah White, Alex Gonzalez, Clayton Penrose-Whitmore and Thierry Delucas Neves, at Carnegie. Rafael Rios for The New York Times

“It’s so much more than our life’s work,” Dworkin, 46, the organization’s president and artistic director, said in an interview in October, the morning after Sphinx’s 25th-anniversary gala concert at Carnegie Hall. “It’s a family. It’s a society.”

When Sphinx started, Dworkin was an undergraduate violin student at the University of Michigan. Raised in Baku, Azerbaijan, she had come to the United States as a teenager, when her father feared that political shifts at home might not be friendly to mixed-heritage part-Jews.

Her parents were well educated — her father a chemical engineer and her mother an academic — but music wasn’t on their radar as a career option. Dworkin begged to play an instrument, though, so at 7 she entered the Soviet Union’s tightly organized music education program, and chose the violin. It quickly became her passion.

The move across the Atlantic was a shock; she spoke no English. But with the help of a devoted teacher, she began to piece the language together. Then Aaron Dworkin, a transfer student from Penn State, enrolled in her teacher’s studio at Michigan.

“We started talking immediately,” she said. “He’d zeroed in on something more than his own fiddle playing. He was interested in repertoire.”

The child of a white mother and Black father, Aaron had been adopted by a Jewish family and raised in New York City. He introduced Afa to Black composers like Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, William Grant Still and Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, and told her about the negative assumptions people had made about his artistry as almost always the only person of color in classical music settings. (After a decade as friends, then colleagues, they married in 2005.)

“He had a problem with the world,” she said, “and he was going to do something about it.”

What he had in mind was a competition — with the goal of discovering the musicians of color who were out there, and of building camaraderie among them. He was fearless about fund-raising and asking for assistance, and with the university as a partner and Afa working frenetically on the side of her violin teaching and playing, the inaugural Sphinx Competition took place in Ann Arbor in 1998.

“It was never designed to be an affirmative action mechanism,” Aaron Dworkin said in an interview. “We told our jurors, ‘If you find no one rises to the right level, don’t give it.’ And there have been a couple of years of the competition in which we didn’t give certain awards.”

The organization grew organically as issues presented themselves. “They have been really good at creating programs or initiatives where there is a gap,” said Blake-Anthony Johnson, the chief executive of the Chicago Sinfonietta and an alumnus of Sphinx LEAD, which is aimed at fostering arts administrators of color. “They have found all the crevices of nationwide issues, and tried to home in on them.”

Some parents complained that their children had to play on cheap, borrowed instruments, so Sphinx organized higher-quality loans. Scholarships were arranged with prominent summer programs. Early on, the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington offered performance opportunities for competition winners.

Sphinx began to serve as something of a management firm, and also started a summer program of its own, the Sphinx Performance Academy; a large orchestra; a training structure for young children, Sphinx Overture; an elite touring chamber ensemble, now called the Sphinx Virtuosi; the annual conference, SphinxConnect; Sphinx LEAD; and a regranting program to support others’ projects, the Sphinx Venture Fund.

Deborah Borda, the chief executive of the New York Philharmonic, said: “I’m very positive about Sphinx because they actually do something. Sphinx isn’t theoretical. They provide specific, effective programs.”

What they have not ever wanted to do was create their own edifices. “One option would have been to start a kind of Sphinx Conservatory, but the vision was never separate but equal,” Afa Dworkin said. “It was how do we nurture, empower, lift up and create on-ramps within the existing structure. Aaron knew the talent was out there, so he wanted to find it, nurture it, give it a level playing field. He didn’t want a new Juilliard; he wanted Juilliard to look like New York.”

In 2015, Aaron became the dean of the School of Music, Theater and Dance at the University of Michigan. It was a potentially uncomfortable moment for Sphinx: Finding a successor to an organization’s founder is always delicate, and in this case the most obvious candidate was the founder’s wife.

“I have to give the board credit,” Afa said. “They didn’t just say, ‘Oh, you’ve always been around.’ They looked at other things out there, and took a six- or seven-month process to see if I was the right person.”

She has remained in charge even though, two years after starting, Aaron stepped down as dean, saying in a statement it was “necessary for me to have the opportunity to focus more on my family.” (Afa said that his packed schedule at Michigan had been “taking a toll” on their two children.)

“There are definitely things we disagree on,” she said of her husband. “Direction, choices. We have different aesthetics relative to music. I really love new music, and Aaron has an absolute dedication to the Romantic era. But he has given me plenty of space; I can’t think of one place where he overstepped.”



Xavier Foley, a bassist and composer whose piece "An Ode to Our Times" was performed at the gala. Rafael Rios for The New York Times



Amaryn Olmeda, the winner of the Sphinx Competition's junior division in 2021, rehearsed Carlos Simon's solo "Between Worlds."
Rafael Rios for The New York Times



The Sphinx Virtuosi at Carnegie. The group made its international debut in Brazil, and will perform next year in England. Rafael Rios for The New York Times

Her days in New York last month leading up to the Carnegie gala were a swirl of meetings, coffees and lunches with donors, alumni, staff, musicians and composers. Everyone had advice to give and receive, and logistical challenges to present to her. Most pressing, the Sphinx Virtuosi was then about to make its international debut in Brazil, and has also been planning events next year in England, as well as recording projects. She fielded everything with the calm humor and gentle decisiveness of a den mother.

“She has no vanity about her,” said Victoria Robey, a member of the organization’s board. “She just wants to see Sphinx be the best it can be. And she’s fantastic at fund-raising. She doesn’t do it in an aggressive, transactional way; she does it in an organic way. Donors want to have the mission explained to them; they don’t just want to plo p down their money and disappear. She builds with warm cohesiveness.”

Alexa Smith, an associate vice president at the Manhattan School of Music, said, of her fellow Sphinx LEAD alumni: “One of the things we have all agreed has been impactful has been having the community, having people all over the country, where we can lean on each other. It’s somehow not competitive. And that’s a cultural thing that comes from Afa.”

There have been debates, both within Sphinx and from outside, about the organization’s tactics. The Dworkins’ preference for quietly lobbying legacy institutions has struck some as old-fashioned in a culture dominated by call-outs fueled by social media. And although string players have always had a home at Sphinx, some in the field wish that there were more programs for other types of instrumentalists, too.

The violinist and composer Jessie Montgomery, who has been involved with Sphinx from its early years, said that she has observed the musical level and socioeconomic status of the average Sphinx Performance Academy student steadily rise. Is the program, in that case, truly opening doors for those who would otherwise lack opportunities?

And racial diversity in orchestras, dismal when Sphinx was founded, remains stubbornly low, though there are profound disagreements in the field about how to address the problem. Sphinx, true to its tradition of working within existing institutional bounds, has resisted calling for the elimination of the prevailing system of blind auditions, instead starting the National Alliance for Audition Support to offer financial assistance, coaching and other resources.

Both the pandemic pause on performances and the broad push for racial justice in 2020 brought Sphinx more attention and resources. The mood was celebratory at the Carnegie gala, which featured a spirited performance by Sphinx Virtuosi members and a precociously poised solo from the 14-year-old violinist Amaryn Olmeda, who won the competition's junior division in 2021. Nine years ago, Aaron Dworkin had taken the Carnegie stage for a speech in which he sharply criticized the field's stagnancy; but this year, brought on as the 25th-anniversary honoree, he offered an uplifting, optimistic slam poem.

"I think we owe them a lot," said Woods, from the League of American Orchestras. "Not only for having a vision, but for plugging away at that vision year after year. For me what is really interesting is, it feels like their time has come. The work that they've been doing is now beginning to translate into meaningful change."

Even to the point where its leader can speculate — however hypothetically — about a world in which Sphinx would not be necessary.

"On a practical level, is there enough talent today for that to be true, for Sphinx to become superfluous?" Afa Dworkin said. "Absolutely. Is our society and sector ready for it? No, not totally."

"I just think," she added with a smile, "we have a little ways to go."

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