

BPO amplifies commitment to diversity, inclusion, community engagement in 2023

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BPO Composer Diversity Fellow Fernanda Lastra.
Buffalo News file photo

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American symphony orchestras have long struggled with a lack of diversity, both in terms of programming and repertoire, and among the musicians themselves. Across the country, despite increased efforts in recent years, orchestras have largely failed to fully represent the communities they serve.

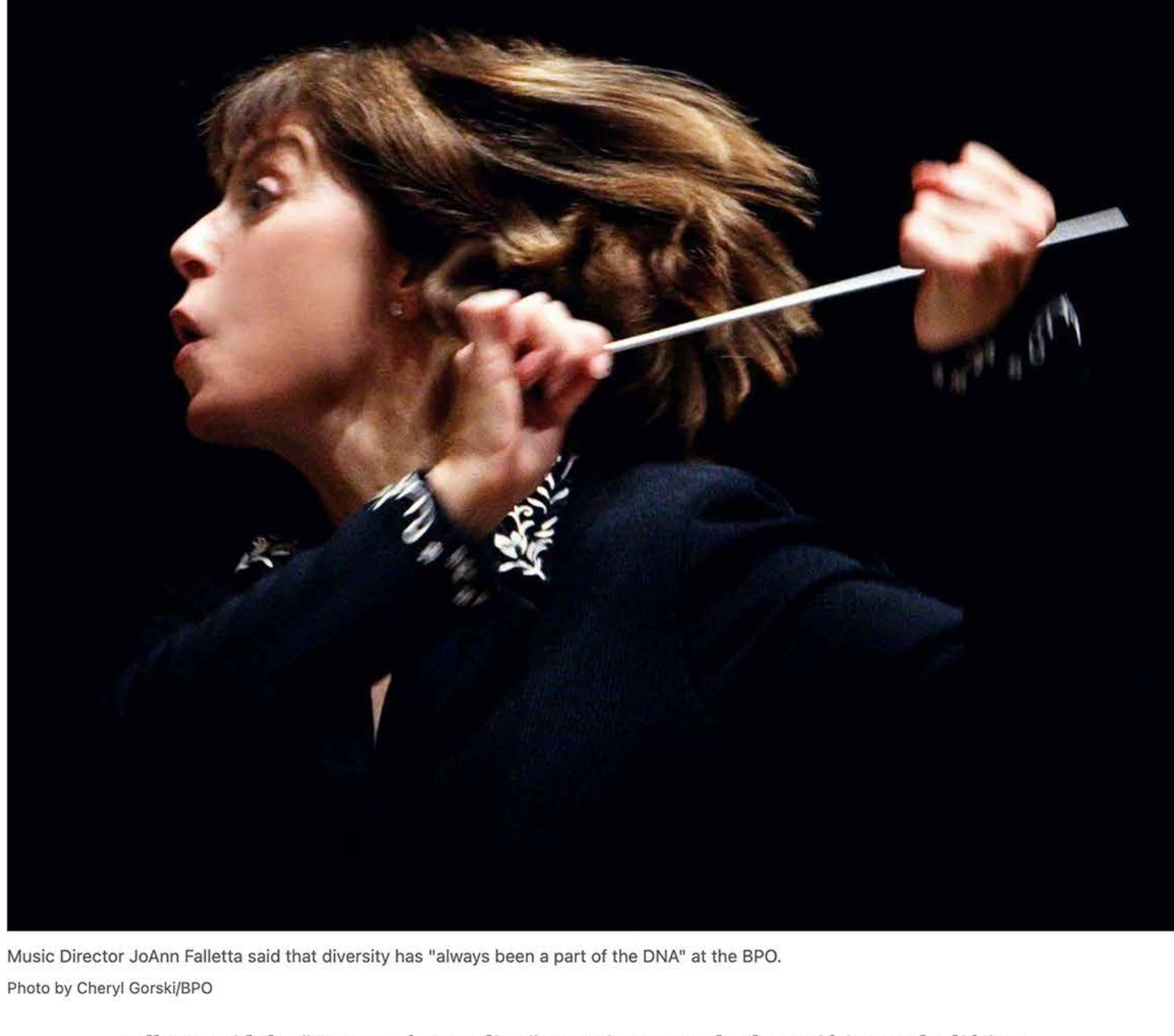
But Buffalo has always been a bit different in that regard, according to BPO Music Director JoAnn Falletta.

“It really hasn’t been difficult to embrace diversity and inclusion in our programming,” she says. “It’s actually been very exciting. Because it’s always been a part of the DNA here.”

On Jan. 26 when the BPO kicks off 2023 with a six-concert run aimed at renewing the organization’s commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity and access “IDEA,” in the BPO’s parlance – Falletta and Executive Director Dan Hart said they hope that the DNA of diversity will be in full evidence.

The six concerts – which feature a variety of genres, multiethnic guest artists and musicians and choristers from across the region – are meant to underscore the orchestra’s goals under the banner “Music For One and All.” Those goals include diverse programming, support for artists of color, and active engagement with often overlooked segments of the Buffalo community.

“Our diversity efforts are really connected to the community,” Hart said. “For example, following the tragedy of May 14, we responded with the ‘Concert for Healing’ during the summer, and that was based on us asking what the people in the community were looking for from us, in terms of a response. So we feel that we’re making inroads into the community and creating a dialogue.”



Music Director JoAnn Falletta said that diversity has “always been a part of the DNA” at the BPO.
Photo by Cheryl Gorski/BPO

Falletta said the “Concert for Healing” experience was both gratifying and edifying.

“We approached the community through the leadership immediately after the tragedy, and they told us, ‘Please wait. Let us heal for a while. And once we do, we’d love to have a concert with you.’ So we listened, and we waited.”

The concert was slated for Johnnie B. Wiley Pavilion on Jefferson Avenue, but inclement weather forced a last-minute relocation to Kleinhans, where Falletta says, “We weren’t sure if people would still come.” But they did, as it turns out. In droves.

A concert designed to raise funds for Ukraine was also a major draw over the summer.

Connecting these community-based events to a broader strategy of diversity and inclusion would seem to have particular challenges in classical music, where much of the canon celebrates the work of white, European male composers. But Falletta said that the BPO’s experience during the pandemic amplified policies the orchestra had already been employing, by creating a blank slate in terms of programming and reaffirming the “People’s Orchestra” mandate.

“The whole experience during the pandemic underscored how unique our situation is here, in that the orchestra feels so close to the people, and vice versa,” Falletta said. “I really don’t see that in other cities. And I think there are a variety of reasons for that. One is just how proud Buffalo is of Buffalo. And another is the history of the orchestra, the fact that we’ve been here such a long time, through the good and the bad. It’s apparent that the people feel an actual, genuine connection to the musicians.”

Falletta also cites the BPO’s history as an orchestra eager to embrace new music, and the enduring influence of her forward-thinking predecessors – among them, Lukas Foss, Michael Tilson Thomas and Maximiano Valdes – as evidence of a long-standing commitment to diversity in programming.

An ‘IDEA’ whose time has come

The BPO signed Mayor Byron Brown’s Opportunity Pledge in 2016, committing to the program’s emphasis on diversity in businesses, and simultaneously formed its own Diversity Council, comprised of community leaders, BPO staff and musicians. For Hart, these steps represented a deepening of an already existing interest in community-wide inclusivity.

“We had worked with members of the Black community closely in 2013, for the ‘Underground Railroad: An Evening of Spirituals’ program with Kathleen Battle, and we’ve worked with the Hispanic Heritage Council for a decade, celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month with concerts,” Hart said. “But in 2016, everything really coalesced, and we started to reach out to the communities and say, ‘It’s not about what we want – it’s about what *you* want, and you have to help us and guide us.’ And that’s when the Diversity Council started to set goals for us, with the ‘IDEA’ program.”

Some of these goals have already been achieved.



Nikki Chooi, BPO Concertmaster, will perform as part of the “Mozart Masterpieces” program on Jan. 28-29.
Photo by Den Sweeney/BPO

In 2016, the BPO partnered with the Sphinx Organization, which focuses on increasing representation of Black and Latinx artists in classical music nationally, and participated in the inaugural Sphinx Orchestral Partners Auditions (SOPA), which provide Black and Latinx orchestral musicians the opportunity to audition for a panel representing several orchestras. They’ve participated in SOPA every year since.

Between the 2017-18 season and the present, further Diversity Council initiatives have included participation the New York State Council for the Arts’ annual Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in New York Orchestras and Classical Music conventions; annual anti-racism training for staff and musicians through the Race Matters Institute; Town Hall meetings between board members, staff and musicians on diversity and inclusion; the hiring of Jaman E. Dunn in the newly created position of Community Engagement Conductor; participation in the Greater Buffalo Racial Equity Roundtable; a partnership with the Institute for Composer Diversity; and in 2022, the hiring of Composer Diversity Fellow Fernanda Lastra for a two-year term.



Caroline Gilbert, principal viola, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra.
Photo by Dario Acosta/BPO



BPO Community Engagement Conductor Jaman Dunn.
Buffalo News file photo

Increasing diversity within the orchestra and the organization also remains an ongoing concern, Hart and Falletta said. The BPO was given an 8.8 out of 10 rating in a [2022 study by Zippia](#), a data company that conducts diversity studies and verifies results against Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census and current job openings information. The study found that 57% of BPO employees are female, 43% are male, 65% are white, 12% are Black, 8.5% are Hispanic or Latino, and 9% are Asian.

“Dan and I have had parallel careers here, and we both always believed that the orchestra was here for the community, and that it should both serve and directly reflect that community,” Falletta said.

“We weren’t aspiring to be the next Boston Symphony – we work here, for Western New York. You only have to come to a youth concert here to see who we really are, as an extremely diverse population.

“Diversity has been built into what we play, who we are, and who we invite, all along. And our goal now is to continue to amplify that.”