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How Did We Get Here? A Look at Orchestral Leaders



PROTESTRA

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6 min read

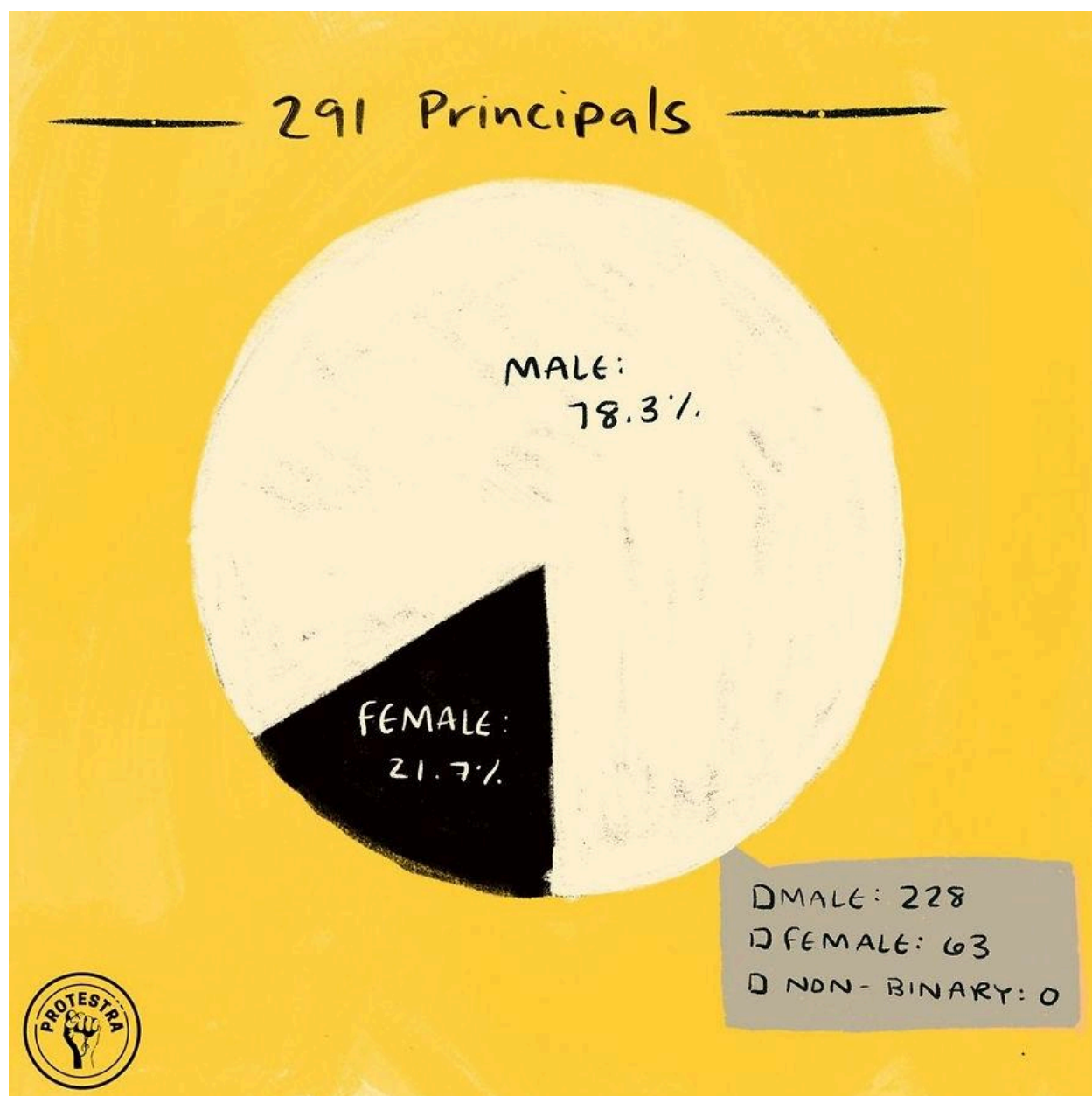
We know that the system of orchestral auditions is fundamentally broken. We spent the last several weeks looking at principal players in 20 of the top U.S. orchestras to get a sense of what their artistic leadership looks like. The results were shocking in terms of diversity, inclusion, and representation, and although we are quite well acquainted with the failings of the classical music industry, we were discouraged by what we found.

By taking the time to look at how we got where we are and exploring options more conducive to a fairer audition system, perhaps we can move forward

towards a more inclusive future for classical music faster than previously believed. By breaking down and examining how the internal structures of orchestras actually work, we can rebuild them more equitably from the ground up so that they truly exist to serve the people they claim to serve: The residents of the cities these orchestras call home.

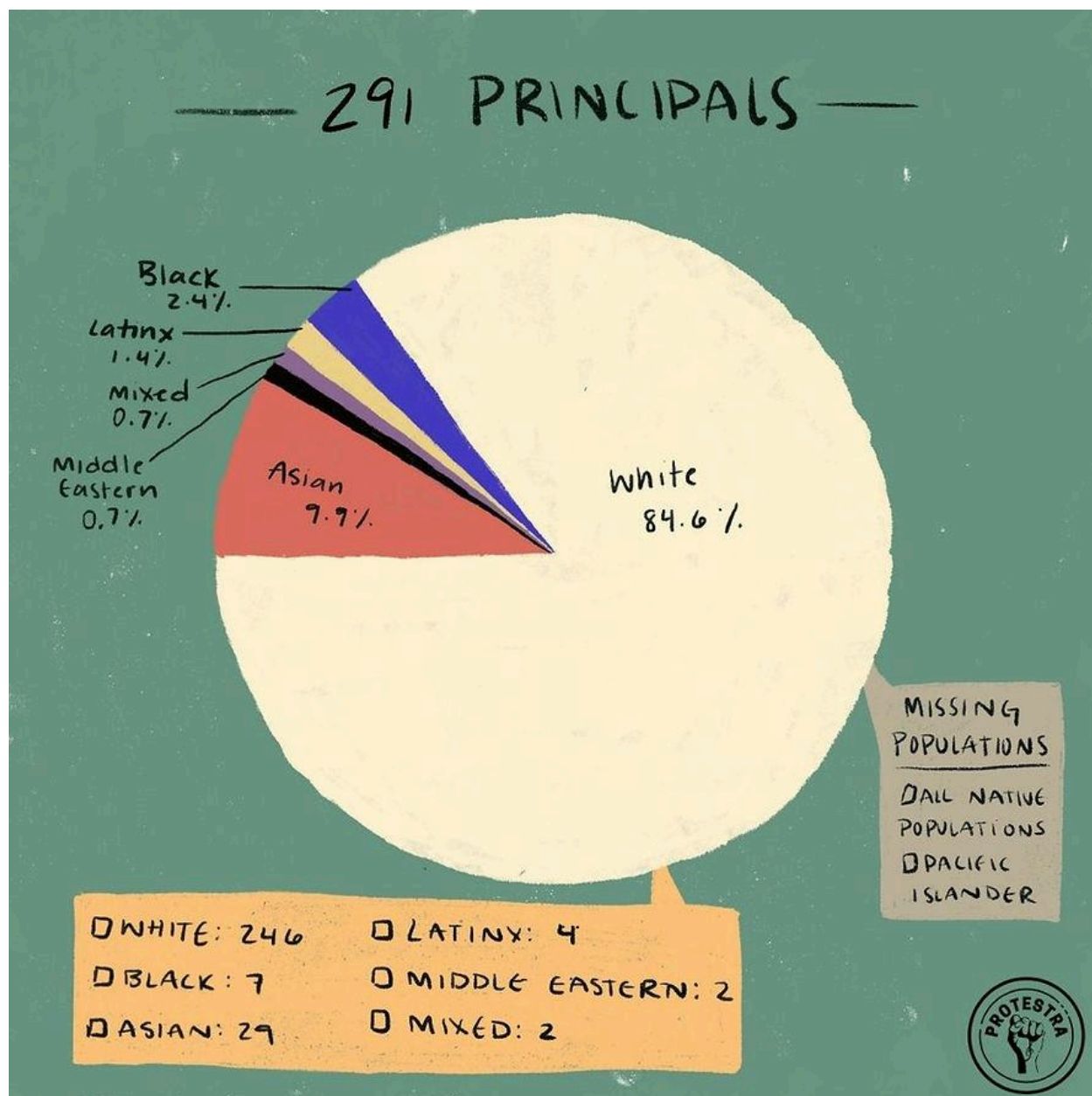
Methodology and A Look at the Numbers

In order to learn more about artistic leadership in major U.S. orchestras, we independently examined the principal players of 20 of the largest symphony orchestras* in the U.S. (by annual budget)** across three key variables: race, ethnicity, and gender. We used information made publicly available by these orchestras on their websites—including musicians' names, photos, and biographies—to determine each principal player's race, ethnicity, and gender. Because we did not directly survey musicians to allow them to self-identify, we omitted any musicians*** whose race, ethnicity, and/or gender was not easily determined using the information available to us. This resulted in a final sample of 291 principal players.



Of these 291 principal players, 228 are men and only 63 are women (78.3% vs. 21.7%). **Many orchestras boast that a third of their musicians are women, and roster data from the League of American Orchestras show**

that the national average across all American orchestras is about a 50/50 split between men and women. However, when we zoom in on the leadership of major American orchestras, we see that when it comes to who holds the title of “principal”—who leads their section, plays solos, and receives the highest compensation—men outnumber women by a factor of nearly four to one. Out of these 291 principal players, none used non-binary pronouns or publicly identified as non-binary or gender-nonconforming.



An examination of race and ethnicity is equally dismaying. On the whole, BIPOC are vastly underrepresented in principal roles: The players in our sample are 84.6% White, 9.9% Asian, 2.4% Black, 1.8% Latinx, 0.7% Middle

Eastern, and 0.7% multiracial. We note that Asian is used as a catch-all term for anyone from the entire continent of Asia, but that East Asian musicians are generally overrepresented in orchestras, while South, Southeast, Central, and West Asian musicians are underrepresented. None of the principal players in the 20 biggest orchestras publicly identifies as Indigenous (either Native American or Alaska Native) or as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

As a reminder, this is how the population of the U.S. breaks down by race/ethnicity according to the 2020 Census:

White alone: 61.6%

Hispanic or Latinx: 18.7%

Black or African American alone: 12.4%

Asian alone: 6.0%

American Indian and Alaska Native alone: 1.1%

Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone: 0.2%

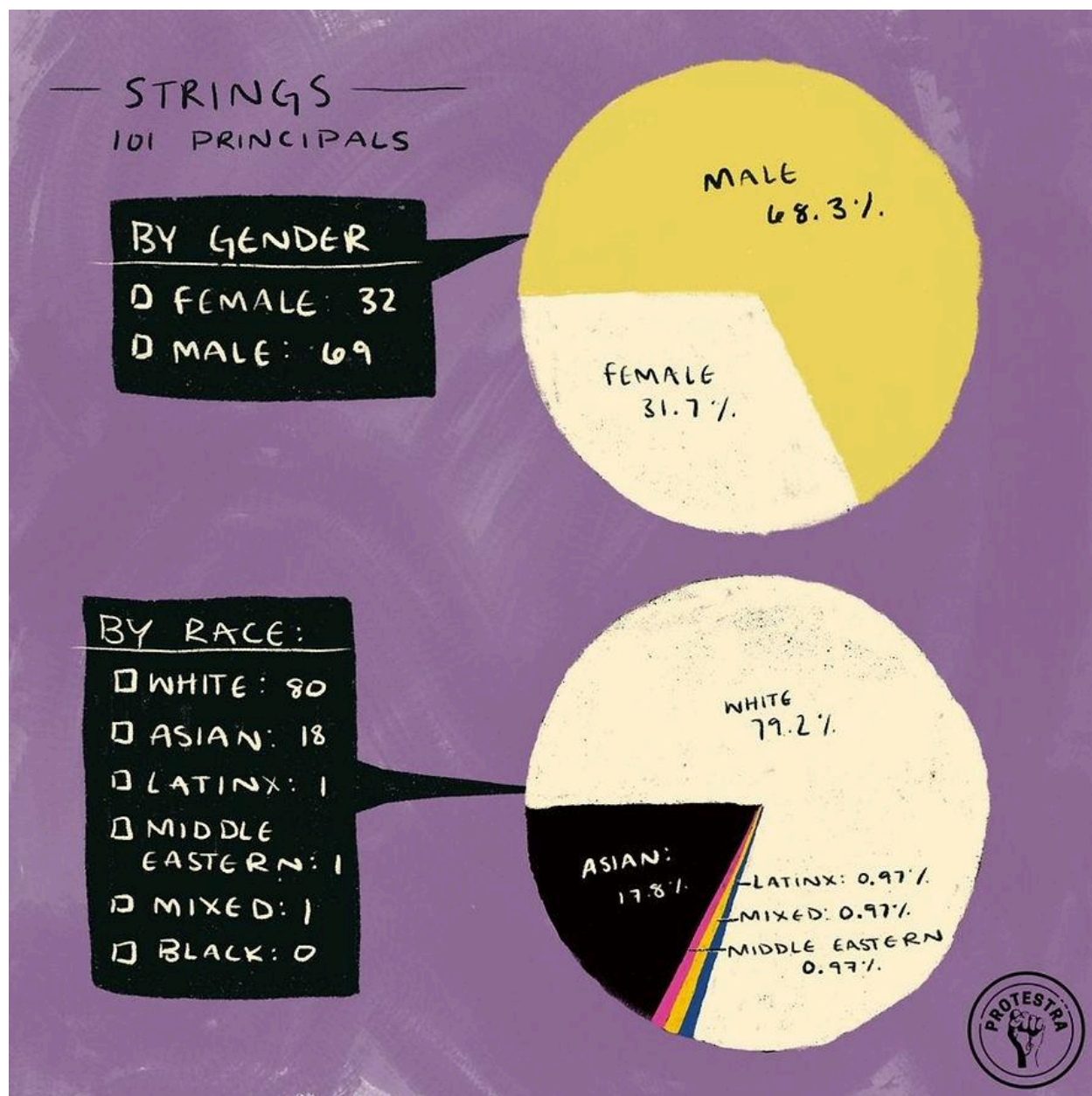
Some other race alone: 8.4%

Two or More Races: 10.2%

Breakdown by Section and Instrument Family

Clearly the leaders of our nation's orchestras do not look like the national population in general. When we examine the next layer—specific instrument families and sections—we can see that the numbers skew more or less male and White depending on the section of the orchestra.

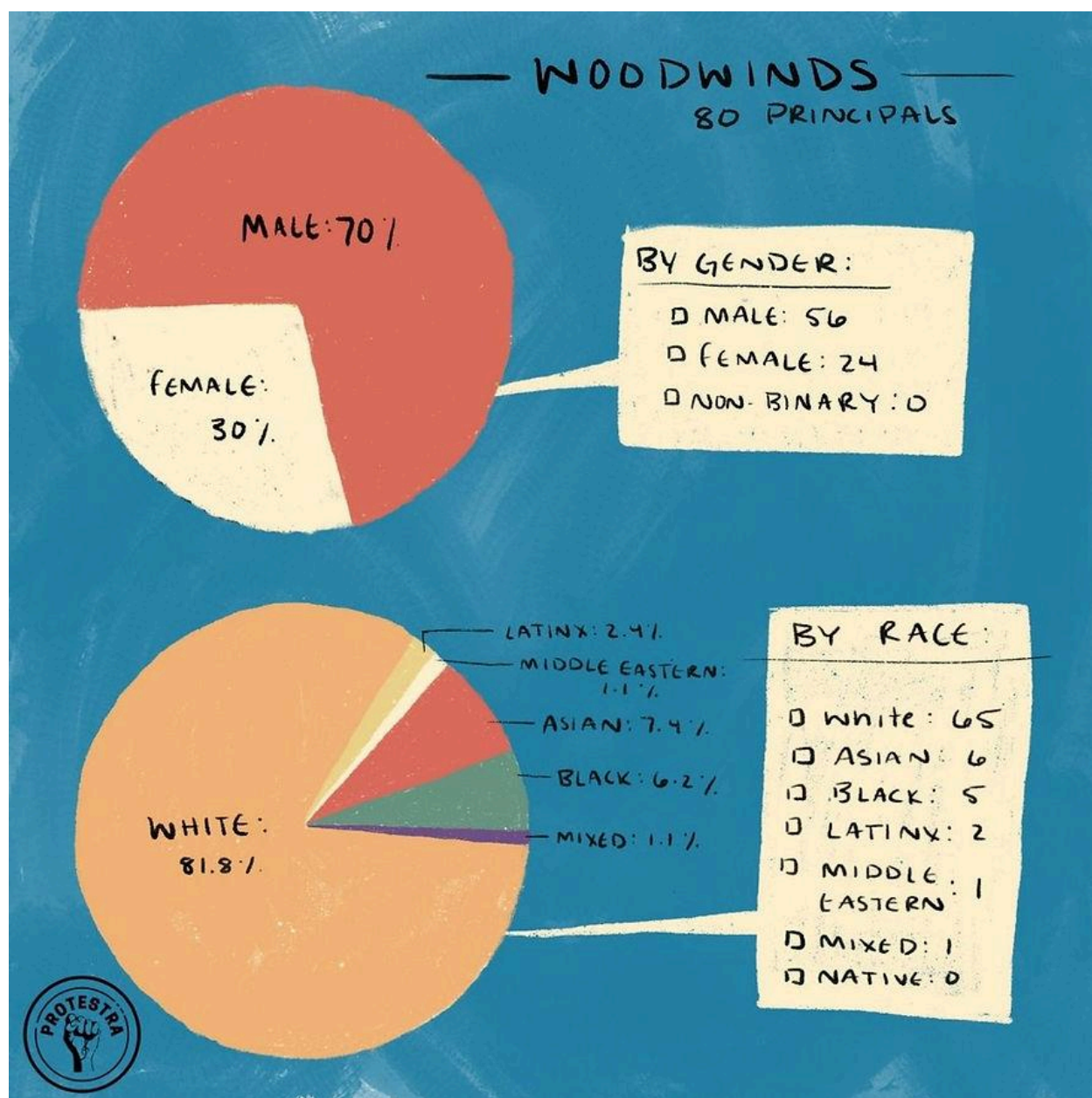
Strings



Principal strings are the most gender-equal and least White instrument family, but this does not mean they are the most diverse. Of the 101 Principal strings, 79.2% are White, 17.8% Asian, 0.9% Latinx, 0.9% Middle Eastern, and 0.9%

multiracial. Violins (both firsts and seconds) and violas are three of the least White sections and most closely mirror the national White-alone population of 61.6%, while cellos and basses have a higher percentage of White principals, around 85% for cellos and 95% for basses. There is also still a clear gender disparity: Principal strings are 68.3% male and 31.7% female. These percentages are skewed by cellos and especially basses, which are both highly male-gendered in terms of leadership; upper strings are more gender-equal. Still, we wonder why principal string players have become relatively more diverse while, as we will see, the other sections of the orchestra lag behind.

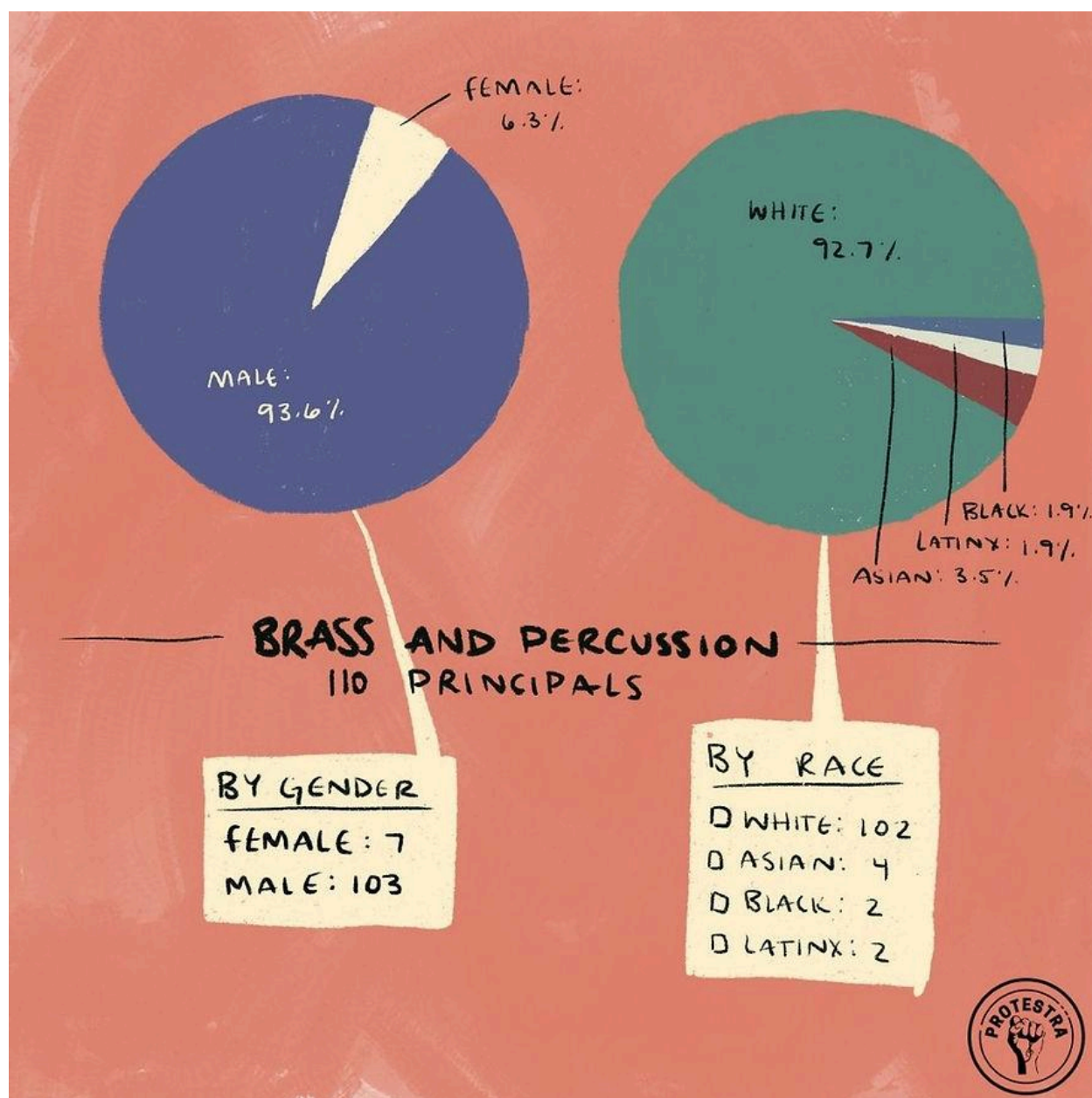
Woodwinds



Principal woodwinds are not the least White, but they are the most diverse. Relative to other instrument families, woodwind sections feature the greatest number of underrepresented players as principals. Out of our sample of 291

principal players, the only Black woman who holds a principal seat is a flautist. Of the 80 principal woodwind players, 81.8% are White, 7.4% are Asian, 6.2% are Black, 2.4% are Latinx, 1.1% are Middle Eastern, and 1.1% are multiracial. These numbers more closely mirror national demographics, but not closely enough to make woodwind sections truly representative. Moreover, many of these players are one of the only BIPOC players in their respective orchestras, which can make their leadership duties that much more difficult. Principal woodwinds also skew mostly male (70% vs. 30% female). This is largely due to principal clarinetists, who are the most racially diverse of the principal woodwinds, but 90% of whom are men (vs. roughly 65% men in the other woodwind sections)

Brass and Percussion



Brass and percussion are the Whitest and most gendered sections of the orchestra. This is also where we find the greatest number of an orchestra's

principal players, meaning that much of an orchestra's musical leadership is found at the back of the ensemble.

There are 110 principal players in the brass and percussion sections, which break down to an astounding 93.6% male and only 6.4% female. These percentages skew heavily male because of percussionists: Out of 33 principal percussionists (including principal timpanists), zero are women. Principal brass are only slightly less male: Out of the 77 brass principals, only seven are women (91% male vs. 9% female). The most gender-equal section in terms of principal players is the horn section (79% male vs. 21% female), roughly the same ratio as principal players overall.

Brass and percussion principals are by far the least racially diverse instrument families in these orchestras. They are 92.7% White, 3.5% Asian, 1.9% Latinx, and 1.9% Black, and the majority of these diverse principal players are percussionists. Brass principals are about 95% White, while principal percussionists are about 88% White. Although principal horns are the most gender-equal group of section leaders, they are also the Whitest (100% White).

How Did We Get Here - What About Blind Auditions?

Now that we better understand these demographics, we have to face the hard facts: Orchestral leadership is still predominantly White and male. Orchestras have long patted themselves on the back for the invention of anonymous auditions, which greatly increased female and BIPOC representation within these professional ensembles. However, we must now acknowledge that this is a blunt tool—the first of its kind and an important step forward, yes, but an aging tool that has clearly reached its limits. These numbers demonstrate that anonymous auditions have indeed helped to diversify orchestra rosters, but only to a certain point.

Seeing these numbers has sparked a lot of questions for us, but we mostly find ourselves asking, **How did we get here?** If orchestra auditions are supposedly so fair and “blind” to gender and race, why do people from the same demographic groups (primarily White cisgender men) continue to win an

outsized share of principal positions? These numbers are all the more concerning because classical music remains a Predominantly White Institution even as the U.S. is rapidly becoming less White. The percentage of the U.S. population that identifies as “White only” has fallen by 8.6% just in the last decade, and the Census Bureau predicts that the U.S. will become “minority White” by 2050. What implications does this demographic shift have for classical music organizations if they refuse to keep up with this trend with regard to their hiring practices?

Anyone who has spent considerable time working in the world of professional classical music can tell you that auditions are not really “blind” or anonymous. So what does the audition process actually look like? And what needs to be changed to make auditions equitable and antiracist? In our next blog post of this series, we will take a deep dive into the audition process and propose some changes that we believe will help build an equity framework for auditions.

Written by Linnea Marchie and Ian Vlahovic, With Editing by Jennifer Jordan

* Does not include opera or ballet orchestras.

** Orchestras Include: New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Symphony Orchestra, Houston Symphony Orchestra, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Seattle Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, San Antonio Symphony Orchestra, Kansas City Symphony Orchestra.

***Only one player was omitted from the final results.

