



## TALKING ABOUT COMMUNITY

### Spotlight Conversation #2 Transcript

Steven Winn, arts journalist and critic, San Francisco  
Afa Sadykhly Dworkin, VP/Artistic Director, Sphinx Organization  
Amos Yang, Assistant Principal Cello, San Francisco Symphony

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Steven Winn: Well, good afternoon, again, and, again, thank you all for being here. It's kind of thrilling to be able to command the stage without any music for a couple of hours, so thank you for joining us. It's been a great start. Just to reintroduce our two guests here, to my immediate left is Afa Sadykhly Dworkin, and she is associated with an organization called the Sphinx Organization in Detroit, and we'll ask her to tell us a little bit more about that shortly. And Amos Yang, who many of you know is the assistant principal cellist of the San Francisco Symphony and indeed has deep San Francisco roots, having attended Lowell High School and studied at the San Francisco Conservatory when it was out on Ortega Street, and a member of the San Francisco Boys Chorus, as well, and San Francisco Youth Symphony.

Amos Yang: Right, that's right.

Steven Winn: So lots of roots here. Afa, let me ask you just to start us off by telling us what your organization is. It's sort of the quintessence of this conversation about how orchestras and music can be a real force in the community.

Afa Dworkin: Sure. The Sphinx Organization is essentially the national organization that's focused on diversity in classical music as well as youth development through music education. Nationally approximately 4.2 percent of our American orchestras are comprised of blacks and Hispanics. Of course that's in great disbalance to our population representation, so one of the key things that Sphinx does is it addresses that issue of lack of participation from every level, from grassroots education to secondary education as well as colleges and universities, and, then, again, professional

orchestras. We do have a very strong network of national orchestral partners. About 30 orchestras across the country work with us, are likeminded on this issue, and join forces with us on increasing the diversity.

Steven Winn: And you -- that 4.2 number that you site is actually largely a result of your lobbying efforts. That when you started this organization back in the mid-90s, you and Aaron Dworkin, that the numbers were lower than that, at that point.

Afa Dworkin: The numbers were indeed lower. It was approximately 1.5 percent, each for blacks and Hispanics. The numbers have grown. It is a result of a joint effort, really a fundamental recognition that there needs to be a growth in the area of participation and recognizing that diversity is a key to the success of our orchestras and having communities -- and the diversity inherent in our communities -- really be represented onstage in terms of what we play and in terms of who performs, be a priority.

Steven Winn: Now, what do you know about audiences in terms of those statistics?

Afa Dworkin: Audience -- the diversity in the audiences is also a key challenge for us, not just for orchestras, but really that's true for the arts field in general. The numbers are quite similar, although with some of the recent studies done it seems that the projected growth in the audiences is really going to be a lot reflective of our growth in the

population. So it seems that the projected growth in the audience is going to come from the Hispanic population. So, with that, of course, many orchestras, along with the Sphinx organization, are looking at ways to increase participation on the audience member level, so that members of the community really feel vested, coming to the concerts and participating on an active level.

Steven Winn: You know, to get to these sort of results that we all are hoping for and to enlarge the sense of what an orchestra can do and what the community can -- how it can participate, it really starts in a very, you know, local, immediate level, and I wanted to turn sort of to beginnings. Amos, you have a great story about the way that you actually -- there was a 10-second encounter in your life that changed things for you. I wonder if you'd tell that story a bit.

Amos Yang: Right. Well, I'm the youngest of three kids. My older brother and sister are a pianist and a violinist. My brother actually is still a violinist in the Rochester Philharmonic in New York. But we got our start here with the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. I had been studying violin, Suzuki violin, for about two weeks when it was apparent that my older brother and sister needed to begin their studies at the Conservatory. So on our way to go sign up for violin lessons we bumped into an old friend of my mother's and her young daughter who was also at that time about 4 and a half or 5 years old. And they were very excited, they had just come from an audition -- and I put that in quotes because what kind of an audition can you have with a 4 and a half year old?

For this, you know, wonderful cello teacher, Irene Sharp. And the friend's mom said to my mom, oh, you should have Amos audition for her. And my mom hadn't thought of that, but she realized, well, maybe we don't need two violinists in the family. Maybe Amos can study the cello. She looked at me and as the story goes she said do you want to study the cello and I just shrugged my shoulders, as any 4 and a half year old would probably do, and that was that.

And my audition then consisted of putting my arms around the cello, giving it a bear hug, which is the way that my old teacher Irene Sharp used to start us and still begins her students, and that was the audition. But, literally, without that 10-second interval, I probably would've signed up for violin lessons. And, although the violin is my second favorite musical instrument in the world, it's a distant second to the cello, so I have a theory that I would not have become a musician, frankly, had I not started on the cello, because I'm so fond of the cello.

Steven Winn: I mean, community really does begin with things like that, those kind of chance encounters and that kind of bonding experience that you have -- you were just saying just before we stepped up here that one of your children is now studying with her as well, is that right?

Amos Yang: Right. I have a 7-year-old daughter, Isabel, who plays the violin and a little bit of piano, and my son Noah has been asking to start on the cello, so we started him just a couple months ago with this very

same teacher, Irene Sharp, who is still teaching and is still excelling at beginning these children at this age.

Steven Winn: Did he get to hug the cello, also?

Amos Yang: He did. That was actually the very first thing he did, and he's doing okay.

Steven Winn: She could create an army of cellists from --

AY : Well, she pretty much has. Actually, it's funny, in this visiting orchestra series that's happening this year, you'll see the Philadelphia Orchestra when they come in, the principle cellist of that, Hian Ni, is an ex-student of Irene Sharp's. The second chair of the New York Philharmonic is an ex-student of Irene Sharp's. I, of course, studied with her for many years. So she's filled the ranks of many orchestras, both professional and amateur, with many players.

Steven Winn: Amazing how someone out there in the community that we don't even know about can be so important in, you know, sending those threads, those spider web threads out there into the world.

Amos Yang: That's right.

Steven Winn: [Into the world -- into our world.] Afa, let me ask you about sort of the same question. I don't know, such a story about either for you or maybe some of the people -- some of the young musicians that

you've encountered and trained and worked with at Sphinx, about those kind of beginning experiences that become so crucial and that can trigger, you know, a life in music and beyond.

Afa Dworkin:

Sure. Well, for me, personally, I grew up in the former Soviet Union, in a country called Azerbaijan, which is directly north of Iran and south of Chechnya, how it's better known. I was fortunate to grow up under a system where classical music and access to it was not an issue of resources, class, or being fortunate enough or privileged. It was a public privilege that everyone had. And with that we had a classical music channel, which was there all the time until 9 o'clock in the evening, so my parents often had it on, and I was able to hear a lot of classical music. And for me it was very simple. I saw the Moscow Virtuosi perform, and their lead conductor and violinist, Vladimir Spivakov, was performing. And I saw him play the *Seasons*. I looked at the fiddle and I thought that's something that's fun, I'd like to do it.

So I asked my parents, and they laughed it off. I asked them again, they laughed it off. I asked for a while and they said sure, we'll take you to the [community, the school], you can get measured, and if you're any good you can study. So it was very simple. I was taken to a community school, which each district had, and the education was free, so it was not an issue. I met my first teacher, and I fell in love with the violin, and there I was. And there are many stories like that with the young people that I have the privilege to work with through Sphinx because of course what Sphinx does year-

round is a lot of grassroots educational programs, our Preparatory Institute, which works with young people in Detroit.

The Overture Program is a feeder program to it, so it starts young people in underserved, underprivileged communities on string instruments. With them I think a lot of the magic that I'm able to witness is bringing in one of our older alumni and being able to perform for them, letting them pluck the string, understand what the sound does once they produce it, and seeing that magic. So I think it's really critical, creating these opportunities for young people.

Steven Winn: Great. I mean, another way in which I think community begins, again, in small, sort of grassroots-level ways, and that's where it really starts to grow, and I wonder, for you, Amos, having been in a family where music was very much in the bloodstream of your family all along, if you or if other people that you know who had similar kinds of experiences with family found those -- that culture to be both encouraging and nurturing or maybe sometimes something that you wanted to rebel against because the expectations were there that you would be a musician. Did you ever feel any of that kind of push/pull or . . .

Amos Yang: I feel really fortunate not to have had any of that push/pull actually, because my parents -- just a little bit about their background. They're both immigrants. My mother was raised in Gulangyu, which is the island just off of the coast from Xiamen, and Gulangyu is an island that was very famous for having a -- they're very proud



of this -- a piano and music in every house. And so my grandfather, who I never met, was a terrific musician evidently, was even sponsored by a missionary to study voice at Columbia's Teacher's College and went back to China to teach. My father came to the States to study at Calvin Seminary. He's actually a Christian reformed pastor. So there weren't any serious, serious expectations, on the one hand, because neither were professional musicians. My mom became a registered nurse, after going to Cornell Nursing School.

So their expectations of us were just to study and have a well-rounded education. It just happened that two of us wound up considering it seriously enough to go into it. But I have to say I was not a very serious student for a good long time. In fact, it wasn't until I was a junior in high school -- you know, here I was studying for the last 11 years, and I -- there were definitely times when I wanted to quit, and during those times my mom would look at me and say, all right, Amos, you can quit, but you have to call Irene Sharp and you have to tell her.

Afa Dworkin: [That's great.]

Amos Yang: And that was always the end of it. I would just turn around and go, "Oh, she got me again." Because you have to meet Irene Sharp to know what a complete force she is in order to be able to work with all these young kids and have the energy and the drive -- I mean, she's a really remarkable woman that we're all so indebted to. In

fact, when I was 11 years old -- it's funny -- I just did the math -- and it was 30 years ago that I first stepped on the stage of Davies Symphony Hall. And I would've been the very last cellist sharing a stand, actually, with another 11-year-old cellist, who's now a very successful solo cello performer and a professor, I believe, in Massachusetts somewhere, Matty -- or as I called him then -- Matty Haimovitz. And we were the last stand.

And we were goofing off pretty much the entire first season of the Youth Orchestra here, and I was actually, at the end, asked to re-audition. And basically that meant I was kicked out of the Youth Orchestra. And I was the happiest 11-year-old ever at that point because I really wanted to be playing sports and outside. But I went to my next lesson with Irene Sharp, and she said, "No, I'm sorry, you're re-auditioning for the Youth Orchestra," and that was it. And I'm so glad she did because I stayed with the Youth Orchestra another four years, and it was a really remarkable experience. But, again, getting back to your question about the pull and push -- I see that now. Oftentimes the students that come to me are under a lot of pressure, both from school and from parents, to excel at their instruments.

So there is a bit of that. And I think a little bit of pushing is okay, where we all need a little bit of goal setting and sometimes we're not great at setting those goals. But, these kids, they are so much better equipped at preparing themselves for what's ahead. A lot of them know all the teachers out there at different -- various schools.

They take tours of different cities and different schools to determine what's the best teacher for them. When I graduated my preparation for that basically consisted of asking Irene Sharp do you think I'm really good enough to do this?

Her answer was definitely, which I was surprised at. And the second was who are the teachers you'd recommend? And she suggested two. And I auditioned for both schools, got into both, and that was my preparation. But it's very different now. The students now have such an awareness and they know even which faculty at which school might be a better fit for them. And it's just a matter of asking my advice of which way they should go.

Steven Winn:

I mean, when you were coming up and, you know, growing into your life as a musician, there was such a context here for music -- the Youth Symphony and the Boys Chorus, and all of these things that were going on. I turn to you, Afa, to ask you -- I'm guessing that a lot of the young musicians you deal with in Sphinx, many of them are turning to music -- they'd be the first person in their family to maybe take up an instrument or that it's often a very different kind of context. And I wonder if you could talk about what that is like, to have a community that -- at least an immediate sort of family or [immediate] culture that maybe doesn't have music in its bloodstream to the extent that Amos's family did, and how that plays out in some of these same dynamics.

Afa Dworkin: Sure. The vast majority of the young people that we encounter and work with directly through our educational programming really come from a situation where music is not a commodity. It's not really a value. So in many cases -- particularly -- so the [year-round] programming in Detroit, we work with communities where survival skills perhaps are more key to the development of these young people. Music is definitely considered a luxury and a foreign value. So part of what we do is we bring music to them. Since transportation is an issue, resources are issues, we work with many families of single parent households or where they're being brought up by their grandparents.

So in many cases -- most cases -- we introduce music for the first time. So what we do is we try to introduce music as a value that aids their youth development, that improves their quality of life, that inspires their creativity, and aids their scholastic achievement in schools as well. So we work very closely with school districts to see how the kids that really do sustain themselves in a program that we've launched do in schools. Is there really an improvement? Is there really a difference? And we see a huge difference. We do work very much with measurables, and what's interesting is this one particular case comes to mind all the time -- we had a 12-year-old enrolled in the beginning violin program, who was very gifted and very much predisposed to studying music and it was pretty apparent early on. She's one of four siblings from a family that's being raised by a grandmother, so transportation is an issue, resource is an issue.

She was provided with a violin and she wanted to quit three times. So, unfortunately, she doesn't come from a family where there would be encouragement or where she could call a teacher to own up to it and say I'm quitting. So we've had to have our instructors get involved and really encourage her to understand why staying in the program would be a benefit. And it takes a lot of kind of out-of-the-box kind of thinking, really honing in on the approach, how to speak to the family, how to convince them that staying in music is worth it. It does not necessarily guarantee you're going to become a -- it likely doesn't guarantee that you're going to become a concert violinist, but it does make you exposed to a discipline that's really essential to your personal development.

Steven Winn: I mean, in a way, you have to sort of create the community around, you know, the young person who's interested.

Afa Dworkin: That's absolutely true. And we started our grassroots programming in Detroit, for example, just in 2004, so fairly recently, and at that point it was literally like pulling teeth. It was difficult to go into schools, to convince the principals. It was difficult to talk [with] the families. It was difficult to really get the kids to stick with it longer than for three lessons. And now we see such a dramatic difference in community involvement and parental involvement. Now they have families and neighbors coming to the concerts --

Steven Winn: Yeah, [I mean], when the kid buys into it, then it draws the family in as well.

Afa Dworkin: Absolutely. And we have so many cases where it's a multi-sibling family and all siblings are involved because now there's traction, and they see that there's an improvement -- it's a fun thing to do. We also work a lot with tailoring and honing in on a curriculum that would be engaging for kids who have nothing to do with music, generally.

Steven Winn: Is there a sense that you have to get over the idea that, you know, music isn't cool and that it isn't, you know, for a 12-year-old, it wouldn't be -- particularly one who doesn't come from a context where that's, you know, in the air -- is that something that you have to get past? And let me ask you another -- before you answer -- the other side of it is that sometimes -- does it sometimes provide a kind of zone of specialness, like this is someplace where I can go to feel safe and this is where I can blossom, in a way?

Afa Dworkin: Absolutely. I think, to backtrack to your initial question, the sense of classical music not being cool does not seem to come into play until the kids are in their teenage years. So when we start them early, in lower elementary and mid-elementary school, it seems like it's a cool thing. Wow, I get to play an instrument and make a sound that really carries into a hall. I get to work with other people who look like me, resemble me, and have similar talent or similar interests. So I would say it's not a challenge early on. As you get into teenage years and older, that becomes an issue because their peers are largely not involved in the arts, they're not involved in

classical music, so bringing them for their first orchestral concert takes a little bit of preparation time and really convincing that this is something that's interesting.

But I think what everyone -- every kid of any age responds to is a sense of achievement. So we do work a lot with goal setting and really trying to set a goal for each individual student. And once they achieve their goal, I think, they get a chance to share it with their parents, with their community, and I think that means something. It stimulates them. On the other hand, I would say that with our competition alumni, for example, and members of the Sphinx Virtuosi that tours nationally, when we go into schools to do outreach, they're essentially always greeted as rock stars. You'd think it's Jay-Z or someone else coming in. I think there is this -- there is a sense of coolness when the music actually happens, because it's -- and part of it is wow, that's something -- I wish I could do that, because it -- we do -- and, as Jesse said, we do think music is quite beautiful, and it resonates with people.

Steven Winn: Yeah. Amos, the sense of community that musicians have with each other is important too, not just how it goes across the footlights here but what goes on back here. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about when you first started to feel that and that became something that was a real, you know, a kind of excitement for you.

Amos Yang: Sure. Okay. Before I get to that, maybe I could echo --

Steven Winn: Of course, please.

Amos Yang: . . . the same sentiments about -- my daughter is now in elementary school, and my wife is a violinist. She volunteers a good deal of her time to providing a very brief but significant introduction to the violin and music classes. She's gathered shakers and different musical instruments to sort of start the kids. And I think one of the few byproducts of the shrinking arts budgets and smaller amounts for orchestras and things like that is that it is all of a sudden a very unique thing to be playing one of these instruments. So the kids are very much interested in playing, actually, and she's already had to actually turn down, unfortunately, kids for private lessons and things like that because of the schedule. And I think it's a real opportunity, actually, for -- in these instances.

And another thing that we do, and we've actually talked to other friends in other schools, is providing for usually a school auction -- a performance of solo cello music and things like that, where we'll raise money. And the first year it was in our living room we had about 15, 20 people, and another parent donated the catering. The next year, there was so much interested, we were able to borrow actually a brewing company's area -- of course, the alcohol was a nice plus to coming to the evening, but mainly the music. And I can't stress enough that -- we were mentioning in the previous discussion, live music.



You just can't mimic the fact that -- each time that I go out I try and show people this experiment -- basically what we're doing when we're playing a stringed instrument -- not just the woodwinds and brasses -- we're moving air. There is a live motion, a physical sensation. And if I had my cello here and I asked someone to put their hand in front of the F holes on the cello and I bowed like this, you would feel this rush of air actually coming out of the instrument. And so it's this live sensation and motion that is unbelievable. And it's really addicting. And I hope this year, when we have this -- and I'm pretty confident we're even going to have a larger concert, when we present it for the school. Now, getting to your question about community --

Steven Winn: The community you feel [as] --

Amos Yang: Right. And that started very early on, even in youth orchestra. In fact, last night, I was speaking to a friend who attended Yale, but continued studying cello, even though he was an electrical engineer major. He still plays in numerous orchestras in the area, freelancing when he can. I'm just floored at his dedication. He plays in the chamber music seminars that the St. Lawrence Quartet runs at Stanford. Any chance he gets, basically, he'll find a way to play the cello. And I asked him, you know, what have you gotten out of music that keeps you so connected? And, basically, he said, well, I don't know why this is, but my most deep and lasting friendships have been my fellow musicians that I've met along the way, whether it's youth orchestra, all the way through his days at Yale.

And there's a real sense of community that way, that's been built up. And, likewise, my friend from my middle school orchestra, who I -- you see, I conducted my own little interviews, to see if I had some material -- but he's also a biologist and working hard, but he is also an amateur musician who plays in different orchestras also in the area. And he said, similarly, just the people that you meet along the way, you're passionate about the same thing, and you're able to network in this way that you're describing.

And really important -- and these are -- you know, we were the same kids that pulled pranks on teachers, like if we had a substitute teacher at Hoover, we would all switch instruments. Of course, the substitute teacher has no idea that I actually play the cello, so there I was playing concertmaster, and the substitute had to wonder why in the world is this orchestra that's supposed to be so good sound so terrible? And, yet, these friendships had such a long-lasting [effect on] . . .

Steven Winn: If a community can play pranks on itself and each other, that's a real sign it's working, I guess. Afa, let me ask you about that, about -- I mean, practice is hard. Working at home is hard. It's discipline. And yet -- is the payoff really, for the kids and the young people that you're working with, what they discover with each other? And how important is that to . . .

Afa Dworkin: I think it's essential -- I very much -- I think what Amos said resonates very much with my experience. I think we did a little -- a short film based on the experience of our young people that go through the summer programs that Sphinx hosts at the Roosevelt University in Chicago as well as Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio. And I think the threading line, the common sort of sentiment from everyone, was that they came in and they recognized there are people like them, that look like them, that are their age and have common values. And what they have in common, regardless of background, is really music.

I think developing that peer network and sense of community is probably one of the most essential, long-lasting values and factors for these young people getting involved. I think that's partly why we see a tremendous increase in the interest in our educational programs. Whereas it was pulling teeth starting, now we have 20 kids easily signed up for a group violin lesson.

Steven Winn: It builds on itself.

Afa Dworkin: It builds on itself because they go and tell their classmates. The classmates watch the group performance at the end of the year, and they say I want to do that. I want to be up onstage doing it.

Steven Winn: Peers are always the most powerful force in the community, no matter what, for good or bad, I guess.

Afa Dworkin: For good or bad, that's true. So we try to increase the good.

Steven Winn: Exactly.

Afa Dworkin: By giving them hands-on creativity experience.

Steven Winn: Fabulous. Well, listen, I feel like we're just getting started with both of these panels, and, indeed, we are. We're going to be back after a 15-minute break. So you're free to go out in the lobby and get some refreshment, and hope you'll be back. We're going to start pretty much straight up in 15 minutes, so please join us. Thank you.

[End of recorded material.]