



What is the issue?

Chicago Sinfonietta has transitioned from a founder-led organization and expanded its staff. This has been true for many arts organizations rooted in communities of color founded during the latter half of the twentieth century. Preserving the history of these organizations and their founders who formed them can help new staff maintain the rich cultural and artistic legacy as they move into the future.

What is the research context?

Chicago Sinfonietta is a 75-piece orchestra founded in 1987 by composer Paul Freeman. To this day the company reflects Freeman's experiences and response to the exclusion of Black people in classical music. Freeman was succeeded by music director Mei-Ann Chen, who remains at the conductor's podium today. In this time, there have also been two leaders in the top staff position, which has shifted from executive director to president and CEO as the nonprofit grew.

What are the research findings?

Gedar's case study points to how the racialized experiences of Black founders and their efforts to circumvent or minimize marginalization in the arts world may shape the foundation and form of Black-led arts organizations.

Research Approach

Researcher Timnet Gedar reviewed archival documents, performance reviews in historically Black periodicals, such as the *Chicago Defender*, and conducted oral histories of current staff members. All direct quotes that appear here are pulled from Gedar's case study.

Advancing "Local" Talent

From 1970 to 1979, Freeman was the associate conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. In the same decade, Detroit became a majority Black city, but Freeman noted that Black people were underrepresented or missing from the orchestra's board of trustees, junior board, and women's association. He shored up community involvement, and by the end of his tenure, the orchestra had added eight Black board members. Freeman's next appointment took him to Canada, where he was the music director of the Victoria Symphony

Brief based on "The Last Bastion of Elitism": The Chicago Sinfonietta and New Inroads in Classical Music by Timnet Gedar

in Victoria, Canada. At the time, Canadian public arts funding was provided with the stipulation that at least 10 percent of orchestra offerings be music by Canadian composers. After leaving Victoria, Freeman used this model to advance local talent in his native U.S., where homegrown composers had been historically overlooked in favor of Europeans. “We must give strong considerations to native talent, and Blacks in America are native talent,” Freeman noted in a 1986 interview with WNIB, Classical 97 in Chicago.

Raising the Profile of Black Composers

Early in his career Freeman co-conducted a special concert series at Spelman College, a historically Black college/university (HBCU), citing the experience as an especially impactful moment in his career because it was his “first real experience meeting composers of that stature from [his] own race.” Later, when he was appointed to the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, he pulled from that same trove of Black composers to produce a nationally broadcast concert for PBS. In collaboration with American musicologist Dominique-René de Lerma, Freeman developed a nine-album Black Composer Series with Columbia Records, which traced the history of Black composers as far back as the mid-18th century. In 1986, he made his Chicago debut, conducting the Grant Park Symphony Orchestra in a concert of music by Black composers. Later that year, he conducted a “Symphony

in Black” at the Orchestra Hall in downtown Chicago, and continued uplifting the contributions of Black composers as founding music director of the Chicago Sinfonietta.

Leveraging Relationships in the Cultural Sector

Getting the Chicago Sinfonietta off the ground was no easy feat, but early success came thanks to the sponsorship of local investors, including notable Black-Chicagoans, as well as Canadian investors. As it grew under Freeman’s care, the orchestra garnered the support of prominent members of Chicago’s Black cultural elite. The Friends of Chicago Sinfonietta hosted preseason benefit galas for the organization early on, and the Sinfonietta’s first concert was attended by Black community leaders, many of whom went on to become major sponsors and board members. With the high-profile Freeman at the helm, Chicago Sinfonietta helped to bring classical music to the city’s chronically underserved communities.

Suggested Brief Citation

The Wallace Foundation. (2026). *The Legacy of the Founder: A Case Study of Chicago Sinfonietta*, a research brief describing a case study by Timnet Gedar. The Wallace Foundation, New York. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-04306.001>

Why does this matter?

Reconstructing the history of Sinfonietta’s founding relied on archives containing founding and current staff oral histories. Such archives are key assets for arts organizations of color that are navigating leadership succession and organizational expansion. By preserving institutional history, achievements, and milestones, archives can be leveraged to several ends, including: documenting the founding context and legacy; fundraising; strategy and policy development; and community engagement.

Funders and patrons of these organizations might consider providing resources to support archive development and management, such as funding digitization of physical archives, creation of online portals for public access, and staff and volunteer training on archival management.

The study this brief is based on was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The original research and findings summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.