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## **Blake-Anthony Johnson, 32**

CEO  
*Chicago Sinfonietta*

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You cannot miss the diversity at a Chicago Sinfonietta concert. The orchestra, run by Blake-Anthony Johnson, was founded on principles of inclusivity 35 years ago and has successfully brought diversity to every aspect of the symphonic world where it is possible to express it:

among the instrumentalists, the composers on the program and, most strikingly, in the audience, where other classical-music organizations have struggled.

Only a year ago, however, did Johnson institute a program to increase economic diversity, a less obvious narrowness in the classical-music sphere. The Pay What You Can program offers tickets for as little as \$5, where they normally go for as much as \$105.

Johnson came into arts administration from the performance side—he calls himself a "cellist by training, CEO by circumstance." He credits renowned musician Michael Tilson Thomas, his mentor at Miami-based young-players ensemble New World Symphony, for conducting him in this direction.

"People like to get linear descriptions of their career, and mine has not been like that. It's been far more geometric," he says. Tasks leading projects as a player led to administrative roles within his orchestra, then to consulting, and then to full-time administration. Even now, he keeps his bow hand active teaching at Roosevelt University.



**He's kind of a magical unicorn in a lot of different ways."**

-Erin Harkey, commissioner of DCASE

He took over as CEO of the Sinfonietta in early 2020, when he was still 29. He added the title of president this year, in recognition of the increase in his administrative duties as the organization grows. The budget has doubled since Johnson started, the staff has significantly expanded and the Chicago Sinfonietta will be the resident orchestra of the Auditorium Theatre next season.

Johnson serves on numerous boards and councils, including the Cultural Advisory Council at the city's Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events, providing perspectives as a member of the classical-music industry, an arts practitioner and a person of color, a rare combination.

"He's kind of a magical unicorn in a lot of different ways," says Erin Harkey, commissioner of DCASE. "Men of color leading arts organizations in the city—there are not a lot of them."

Johnson says when he introduced himself as the CEO of the Chicago Sinfonietta in Portland, Ore., a music lover was moved to tears by what the orchestra's history of inclusion has meant. "I want everyone in the city to feel that," he says. "(The Sinfonietta) is not just a place to celebrate, but also a refuge for access to the world through the arts."

*By Graham Meyer*

*Photo by John R. Boehm*