



EXCLUSIVE

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra increases diversity in 2025-26 season



Music Director Nathalie Stutzmann conducts the ASO during season-opening concert. (Handout file photo)

By Jon Ross – For the AJC

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The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra will perform a broad series of works for its 81st season, presenting concerts anchored by commissions and compositions by nonwhite, living composers. The programming stands in contrast to the current orchestra season, [which has been dominated by the six-concert Beethoven Project](#) and frequent performances of more traditional orchestral repertoire.

“There’s a lot more diversity next season just by the nature of the fact that we’re not playing so many works by three composers, basically Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven,” ASO executive director Jennifer Barlament said, also noting that “it would not be an orchestral season without Beethoven.”

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In its current season, the orchestra only performed four works by living composers. In 2025-26, that number will balloon to 12, with 10 compositions from women and nonwhite composers. Two of those 10 compositions are ASO commissions.

The 2025-26 season features a 32-concert series that includes family shows, annual holiday celebrations and a one-night-only recital by pianist Alexandre Kantorow, in his Atlanta debut. Through it all, the ASO will keep expanding its musical family.

Of the 34 guest artists to take the Symphony Hall stage, 15 will do so for the first time. Eight of the 13 guest conductors are also new.



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The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra will feature Valerie Coleman's "Concerto for Orchestra (Renaissance)" in a February 2026 program. (Courtesy of Kia Caldwell)

The season opens Sept. 19 with guest conductor Gemma New leading superstar pianist Lang Lang in Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto during a one-night concert. Rounding out that opening program are two pieces by Mozart. Music director Nathalie Stutzmann makes her season debut in the first concert series (Oct. 3-5), welcoming cellist Alisa Weilerstein for the titanic Edward Elgar cello concerto.



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Across the season, Stutzmann will give 10 weekends of performances in Symphony Hall. Those concerts include four performances with the ASO Chorus and Chamber Chorus; after completing the Beethoven Project with his ninth symphony (Nov. 13-16), she brings the chorus back in 2026 for Schubert Mass No. 2 (Jan. 15-16) and Bach's "Mass in B Minor" (March 12-15) before ending the season June 4-7 with Mahler's "Resurrection" symphony.

The first of the season's commissions is Valerie Coleman's "Concerto for Orchestra (Renaissance)," which carries with it echoes from the Harlem Renaissance. Guest conductor Teddy Abrams will unite the new work Feb. 12 and 14 with clarinet concertos by Artie Shaw and Aaron Copland, featuring guest artist Martin Frost, and Leonard Bernstein's "Symphonic Dances from 'West Side Story.'"



Credit: (Courtesy of Rand Lines)

Nathalie Stutzmann leads the ASO in its initial Beethoven Project concert in January. The 2025-26 season features the conclusion of the project, Beethoven's ninth symphony. Courtesy of Rand Lines

Nicky Sohn, a native of South Korea who moved to the U.S. at 14, produced the other new work. The composer won the Rapido! competition contest in 2024 with a jazz-tinged take on “Home on the Range” for piano quartet, receiving an ASO commission as part of her prize. Conductor Jerry Hou, who served as resident conductor of the ASO until 2023, will lead the program on April 9 and 10, marking his return to Symphony Hall. That concert also features violinist Jennifer Koh performing Philip Glass’ first violin concerto and Rachmaninoff’s first symphony.

A diversity of voices and viewpoints continues to crop up on orchestral programs nationwide.

According to the Institute for Composer Diversity, the 2023-24 season stood out for the highest percentage of living composers programmed since the group started surveying U.S. orchestras in 2015. That first season, works by white men dominated 95% of the programming; now it's down to just more than 75%.

“As societal pressures subside,” the institute reported, “orchestras must establish clear priorities and policies to ensure diverse programming becomes standard practice, not a response to external forces.”

Musical diversity is also part of the ASO's celebration of the 250th anniversary of the United States' Declaration of Independence.

In October, the ASO will spotlight Diwali by welcoming conductor Vinay Parameswaran and Hindustani violinist Kala Ramnath to perform “The Voice of Nature” by Reena Esmail. Also on the program is Nina Shekhar's “Lumina.”

Guest conductor Giancarlo Guerrero comes to Atlanta in April with trumpeter Pacho Flores for an evening of Latin American sounds, placing the latter's “Morocota” alongside works by the contemporary composers Roberto Sierra and Arturo Marquez.

Music director laureate Robert Spano will also return for two concert series in May, bringing with him works by Christopher Theofanidis, Bernstein, Rachmaninoff and Hector Berlioz. His two concert series are the final pieces of the ASO's birthday party, a musical fete that includes works by Bernstein and Duke Ellington.

“We looked at (the celebration) as an opportunity to incorporate different, specific segments of the Atlanta community,” Barlament said. “We constantly want to be reaching out to people who maybe haven’t been before or haven’t been in a while, and we want to create a sense of welcome but also just a sense of adventure.”

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