

Jeff Melanson, ‘Arts and culture community should reflect diverse population.’

Yanni Thomas August 17, 2016



Jeff Melanson, former Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) President, speaks about diversity in the arts and why it should be celebrated with inclusivity and opportunity.

([Newswire.net](#) -- August 17, 2016) -- While diversity in the arts world has always been an issue that was spoke of but never seriously addressed, it became a major headline earlier this year after the Academy Awards released their list of 2016 Oscar nominees.

Suspiciously missing were this year’s actors of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds.

The lack of diversity was so blatant, it quickly spawned the infamous hashtag [#OscarsSoWhite](#), which quickly became a trending topic on Twitter.

Popular Canadian musician of Ethiopian descent, The Weeknd, weighed in on the topic when asked by the LA Times: “Every movie you see now is inspired by diversity. So it’s unfortunate.... but I think it’s much deeper than the academy or deeper than the film or music industry. It’s an issue that the nation has been dealing with, and I’m glad this has sparked a conversation,” the Grammy winning artist [said](#).

The controversy forced the Academy to release a statement outlining how they would address the lack of diversity in coming years and an ongoing dialogue around the systematic inclusion of artists, collaborators and administrators of all ethnicities and backgrounds was further sparked in both America and Canada.

Ironically on the heels of the [#OscarsSoWhite](#) debacle, a beacon for the future of diversity and inclusion began receiving critical acclaim. *Hamilton*, the musical written and starring Lin Manuel Miranda, has become this year’s breakthrough Broadway hit, featuring one of the most diverse casts in history with a sold out run until 2017.

Hamilton disproves the antiquate notion that diverse casts can’t bring the same box office numbers as white-centric casts and has opened the door for a generation of young actors to pursue their dreams freely.

The lack of diversity on stages, screens and in the movies is often a byproduct of the institutions and organizations within the art world that are led by predominantly white teams. A recent study out of the U.S. highlights the lack of diversity in upper management positions in museums and galleries. “While people of colour represent 38% of the country’s population, they make up only 9% of museum boards and 16% of the administrators, curators, conservators and educators who make decisions about what is exhibited and preserved as culturally important,” notes [the Art Newspaper](#).

These numbers are also representative of studio heads, as well as network and music executives. The situation isn’t unique to America either -- in Canada, there is a notable lack of diversity on boards, admin groups and other organizations that dictate the cultural relevance of various art forms.

Recognizing the need for diversity in all aspects of arts, The Canada Council for the Arts [announced](#) earlier this year that in order to be eligible for government funding, programs, organizations and institutes must exhibit an ongoing commitment to diversity with measurable results.

“It’s clearly an assessment criteria – it’s no longer a wish,” [said Simon Brault](#), director and CEO of the Canada Council. “The companies that are performing the most will get more money – it’s a real incentive.”

The spring announcement was music to the ears of former Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) President, [Jeff Melanson](#), who has been an outspoken advocate for inclusion and diversity throughout Canada’s many arts communities.

During his time heading TSO, Melanson shifted the orchestra’s mandate to reflect a focus on inclusivity. The new mantra “the world’s most innovative orchestra in the world’s most ethnically diverse city,” isn’t merely lip service - it’s a goal the organization is committed in working towards.

As part of the commitment, [Jeff Melanson](#) hired a diversity consultant and gave him “carte blanche” to figure out how to fulfill the new mission statement, while introducing the orchestra to a wider audience.

“Toronto and Canada for that matter is full of diverse artists, creators and musicians who are eager to share their passion with the country and the rest of the world,” said Melanson. “It’s time that the arts and culture leaders across the country recognize and celebrate this with inclusivity and opportunity.”

Despite the best efforts, a country-wide shift will take time, but knowing that there is a ground swell of support and artists wishing to express their cultural diversity is reassuring and promising.

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