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'A hall for all': BSO's new board chair aims to broaden audience

By Brian Shane – Contributor | Dec 31, 2025



Christian Johansson is the new chair of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's Board of Directors. Credit: Jermaine Gibbs

Story Highlights

- Christian Johansson recently became the first African-American chair in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's 109-year history.
- He plans to prioritize expanding diverse audiences and increasing earned revenue sustainability.
- The BSO's OrchKids program serves 1,800 children in disadvantaged Baltimore schools.

Christian Johansson

Title: Chair, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra Board of Directors

Education: Biology degree from Brown University, M.B.A. from Harvard University

Nordic Know-How: Johansson was born in Sweden and speaks fluent Swedish. He's put that skill to use as a pundit and commentator on Swedish television during U.S. presidential elections.

Christian Johansson believes deeply that music can cut across political and social divides. As the new chair of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's Board of Directors, he's serious about bringing new audiences into the BSO's iconic Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall — to be, as he puts it, "a hall for all."

A former Maryland secretary for economic development, the 53-year-old Johansson now helps lead a mid-Atlantic energy and infrastructure firm. He spoke with enthusiasm about bringing a metrics-driven, coalition-building approach to guiding this Baltimore cultural institution into 2026 and beyond.

The Baltimore Business Journal spoke with him about his work. Here are excerpts from the conversation, edited for length and clarity.

You've been on the board of the BSO since 2017. Now that you're the board chair, what feels most urgent?

We really need to have a laser-like focus on welcoming as many diverse communities to our hall as we can, because we need to grow. We need to expand our audience. It's critical on so many levels. Music can't unite us if people can't hear it, right? And so, for us, that's really about making sure that we are inviting people to come in.

When we're talking about audience expansion, the key part that we track is earned revenue. It's very much a part of our long-term sustainability to every year increase earned revenue, and we have very specific targets around that.

We do 150 concert dates a year — that's between our hall at Meyerhoff that we own and (North Bethesda venue) Strathmore. But we have a lot of nights that the hall is dark. We have looked at all kinds of ways that we can leverage the hall when it's dark. So that's a whole new business model for us, if you will, in a focused way. It's called Live at the Meyerhoff.

What responsibility does a flagship cultural institution like the BSO have to the city of Baltimore?

Well, I think we have responsibilities on multiple levels, right? Under the "hall for all," I want that hall to be welcoming to people from all walks of life — race, color, occupation, you name it — I want them all to feel comfortable at the Meyerhoff.

The other piece that I think is very important is that music is instrumental in developing the brain. In Baltimore City, music education has largely — especially in poor, disadvantaged schools — been stripped out of the curriculum.

We can play a role there and we can play a meaningful role. What we do today with our OrchKids program, for example. We have 1,800 kids that are in that program.

And what's fascinating is that this isn't just about music. This is about life skills. This is about helping you to have a structured program that pushes you forward in school, as well.

In the BSO's 109-year history, you're the first African American to be the chairman. What does that milestone mean to you personally?

Well, first off, I just have to say that's too long of a period and, you know, I think it's important we acknowledge that.

We're in a city that's incredibly diverse and has a rich African-American community, embedded in all cultural aspects of the city, and it's too long to have had it take 109 years. Let's just be upfront about that.

When I look to the future, I see a different BSO and I see a much more inclusive BSO. I think of it less about myself and more about the possibility that we can have for engagement.

You headed the state's Department of Business and Economic Development under Governor Martin O'Malley. What lessons from your time in state government translates into leading an institution like the BSO?

Much of success is in coalition building. None of this happens by itself, right? The BSO can't will things into existence. The business model of everything that we do, fundamentally, it's about people. As a board member, if we can create and support an environment where people are going to be passionate about the mission, engaged, understand where we're going, you'd be surprised how much of an effect that has.

You've been quoted as saying that music unites us at a time when so much in our world divides us.

I don't care if you are a politically a Democrat or Republican. I don't care if you're black or white or Asian or all the above. Music has a way of touching a piece of us. It connects to us in ways that, frankly, are hard to articulate for most people, but they know it's there.

You could have a room of folks that are all very different — because our society, frankly, is very different, right? — and play a piece of music and it has a way of connecting everyone in that room. And that's powerful. We need that. And that's something that to me is one of the biggest reasons why, as a symphony orchestra, we're there in this kind of an environment.