

Association of Performing Arts Presenters

Classical Music Think Tank 2007

A Summary Report

The Association of Performing Arts Presenters (Arts Presenters) convened 42 professionals from the classical music and presenting field, February 9-10, 2007, in Detroit. This was the second such “think tank” held as an initiative of Arts Presenters’ Classical Connections - an endowed program dedicated to advancing the presentation of and increasing participation in classical music. Among the invited participants were journalists, critics, and a cross-generational group of arts presenters, artist managers, performers, composers, musicologists, funders, and others with related expertise.

The dialogue was facilitated by Richard Kessler, Executive Director of The Center for Arts Education, who also facilitated the first think tank, May 19-21, 2005 in San Francisco. The agenda included a panel presentation, coordinated by Ken Fischer, President, University Musical Society (University of Michigan), about classical music in the local Detroit community. The think tank was scheduled to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the Sphinx Competition, held the same week in Detroit, and participants were provided an opportunity for informal encounters with alumni of the Competition.

The purpose of the think tank was to identify issues, trends and challenges in the classical music field, and develop strategies for taking individual and collective action. This report summarizes the exchange of information, strategies, and resources – as well as observations, critical questions, and ideas – contributed by participants to reach the above goal.

What do we want to achieve?

A somewhat rhetorical question, participants discussed what was to be achieved from the think tank convening within the context of what needs to be achieved in order to advance the field of presenting and touring classical music. What will success feel like?

This is both an exciting and turbulent time to be involved in the arts. Musicians take more responsibility beyond rehearsal and practice schedules to work in management positions and in community development for arts organizations. In an age of multimedia, however, classical music lags behind broader culture. One participant noted: “If we don’t catch up, we could be in trouble.”

Questions beget more questions, and participants wondered:

- How can classical music catch up with broader American culture?
- What are musicians’ assumptions about classical music?
- What are audiences’ assumptions about classical music?
- How can we shift the median age bracket of classical music audiences towards a younger demographic?

- How can classical music interact with the broader culture? How can we convince our more traditional colleagues that this is necessary for classical music’s survival?
- How can we devise ways for arts presenters to learn about and embrace classical music?

Stakeholders in the classical music field need to create synergy in reflecting upon and creating a dialogue around such questions, in order to create change. There is a tendency in the field to focus on idiosyncratic needs without considering the social, political, and economic context of changes that have occurred in this country over the past 10 years. Ideas and strategies need to be framed in the context of a working group that will form ongoing relationships and a firm commitment to taking action. This is necessary to gain and sustain momentum.

Participants in this think tank were asked to identify one word to describe the purpose of the convening. The words included:

Innovation	Collectivity	Meaningful	Evangelize	Perspective	Education
Collaboration	Meditation	Future	Aspiration	Focus	Revolution
Inspiration	Help	Opportunity	Audience	Hope	Transformation
Discovery	Relationships	Relevance	Ambition	Ideas	Clarity
Engagement	Creativity	Momentum	Nurture	Journey	

It was noted that the word “change” was not used, although words like revolution and transformation were used. Participants determined that the greatest need is to think differently and take action.

Mapping the Ecology of the Classical Music World

Is the classical music world a system? Was it ever a system? Is it an ecology? If so, what is the ecology comprised of? These questions guided the process of defining the key components of the classical music field within a contemporary framework. Metaphorically, participants considered the classical music world as many unconnected islands (i.e. no bridges between them). They identified the “islands” as follows:

<i>People:</i>	<i>Places:</i>	<i>Institutions:</i>	<i>Concepts/Ideas:</i>
Audience	Conservatories	Government	Music
Children	Post-secondary Schools	Communities	Performance
Senior Citizens	(non-music programs)	Religious Institutions	Dissemination
Musicians	Venues	American Culture	Media
Donors	Libraries	Orchestras	Other art forms
Students	Community Centers	(ensembles)	(dance, film)
Composers	Community Schools of Art		Promotion/marketing
Music publishers			Outreach
Teaching Artists			Consequential events
Non-participants			(e.g. September 11)
Manufacturers of musical products			American culture
Volunteers			Global culture
Managers			

All rights reserved. No part of this paper may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (includes photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the Association of Performing Arts Presenters.

Technology:

Internet

iPod

Radio (other media outside the internet)

Recording industry

The group then considered the typology of the ecology – the lifelines necessary for each aspect of the ecology to function – and identified the following factors.

- Timeline: what happens next?
- Education and “outreach”
- Feedback loops (this is ultimately a one-to-one connection)
- The need for expressivity (which is the oxygen, CO² in the ecology)
- Social apparatus (entertainment)
- Donors

Reflections

Participants were asked to reflect upon the implications of information and ideas presented in articles written by Alex Ross (*Listen to This*, The New Yorker, February 16/23, 2004); Greg Sandow (*Where We Stand (I,II,III)*, artsjournal.com); and, Peter Gelb (*Current Q & A, Metropolitan Opera’s Peter Gelb*, current.org). Their writings framed an open discussion about issues and changes in the classical music world which is summarized below.

Ross suggests that there is a fundamental difference between the way we listen to music and the way in which the music is classified by arts institutions. Arts institutions tend to define music categorically (e.g. pop, world, vocal, instrumental, and classical – with its many derivatives: baroque, classical, romantic, contemporary, etc.). Labeling music reduces its appeal and value to potential audiences. Discussion focused on the critical need for listeners to have opportunities to hear and respond to music – regardless of how it may be categorized in the end. It is important to reach out to audiences in as many ways as possible to bring them the breadth of musical experience that traverses the “classical world.”

Discussion also included points raised by Sandow that included: aging audiences, failing institutions, and the end of an era of traditional classical music presenting. Listeners are influenced by the latest technology. With access to iTunes libraries and iPods, a growing percentage of music lovers are listening in shuffle mode. We are not often aware that much of what we listen to defies categories. The traditional boundaries of musical fare are fast disappearing. Another major influence on the listening audience is the globalization of the music market – including classical music – and the ability to rapidly communicate with all areas of the world. Future audiences are growing outside of traditional Western markets.

The capacity of technology to provide access to any type or mode of music, and to deliver it on demand, has widened the cultural and generational gap between classical music and the broader music sector. Many believe this gap is the most fundamental problem with the genre today.

All rights reserved. No part of this paper may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (includes photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the Association of Performing Arts Presenters.

Creating dialogue. Greater dialogue needs to be created among all stakeholders in the arts about the role and nature of the arts in contemporary society. Presentations at conferences and convenings across the arts service organizations tend to focus on the business and production aspects of presenting the visual and performing arts. Too little attention and time is set aside to explore creativity, risk-taking, and collaboration that will stimulate new ideas and approaches to bridging the gap between artist and audience.

It is important to look at language and lexicon in how to talk about music, including developing and providing access for artists and presenters to engage in such professional development together. Dialogue among and between artists, presenters, and audience should focus on creating revolutionary ideas and how to put them into action. Such ideas need to include strategies to involve all sectors in the performing arts field that will evolve into a inclusive performing arts community that acts collectively.

Improving training. Many participants agreed that music schools and conservatories perpetuate the divisions and problems in classical music. According to one participant, approximately 40% of music students want orchestra jobs. Music schools often indoctrinate their students to strive for nothing less than orchestra jobs and to view other careers in the arts as second best, rather than to consider entrepreneurial pursuits on one's own. These expectations clash with reality. Musicians today must be able to serve in multiple capacities, change their expectations, and embrace all aspects of classical music's production, from performance to management to community engagement.

Reconsidering the scale of orchestra programs and contractual obligations. Some participants suggested a remedy for the struggling classical music field is to reduce the number of concert programs performed and establish more flexible service contracts with musicians. Have we reached a peak with the number of classical musical performances available to the public in today's highly competitive cultural environment? Although it may be timely to rethink the terrain, discussants concluded that many orchestras and related music organizations provide a range of entry points for participation and interest, and are critical to sustaining and possibly growing new audiences.

Money and good music. Making a profit is the primary goal in business, but the nonprofit arts milieu, money is sometimes seen as a sell-out. Popular music is often deemed inferior, for example, but pops programming provides vital revenue for symphony orchestras. Classical music needs to interact with popular culture, and classical musicians need to focus their passions productively. The field needs to be open to forming new relationships and interacting in innovative ways with other genres of music and art.

Research and development. Many participants felt there is an overall lack of research and development in the arts coupled with an overwhelming fear of failure. In other industries, such as the automotive and pharmaceutical sectors, research and development are vital and failure is accepted. In the arts, however, we often don't allow ourselves to research, fail, or evaluate our shortcomings. Not enough money and time are allotted for research on key issues in classical music's vitality, such as people who listen to classical music but don't attend concerts.

Demographic Shifts in the U.S.

According to Dr. Lisa Neidert, University of Michigan Population Studies Center, the U.S. population is changing as follows:

- Growing older
- Becoming more ethnically diverse
- Experiencing a rise in the middle class population
- Becoming less centered on marriage and child rearing
- Becoming more evenly distributed among the age brackets

In 1950, most U.S. households were family-centered with one primary income center. Today, as marriage is no longer the marker of adulthood, the number of non-family households (men/women living alone or individuals living with non-family) has increased. Family households often have dual-earners where salaries for each partner are comparable.

With respect to demography and the arts, Americans today like to engage in a variety of activities. They are narcissistic about spare time and less intensely interested in specific activities. Neidert believes that classical music stakeholders, if they want the genre to be on American's entertainment card, need to make concerts easier to attend. For example, baseball games used to begin at 8:00pm to allow for the wage earner to come home, eat dinner with the family, and take them to the game. Today, most games begin at 7:00pm with ample food concessions to enable fans to eat at the ballpark. In addition to adjusting the time for concerts, Neidert also recommended providing audiences with brief and informative highlights of the program prior to or throughout the concert – such as background about the composer and the context in which a specific piece was written. She noted that attendance at art exhibitions has been positively affected by the development of educational activities and resources in conjunction with the exhibit.

According to Neidert, it is increasingly common for young adults to travel or “take a year off” upon graduation and prior to beginning their career work. She suggested that young people are likely interested in classical music but have (or believe they have) financial limitations. She also noted a trend where cities are scheduling free concerts or heavily subsidized concerts that are eclectic mixes of genre in a variety of settings that are most likely more appealing to young people than traditional classical music programs.

Classical Music in the Metropolitan Detroit Area

Ken Fischer, President, University Musical Society (University of Michigan) organized a panel of individuals to discuss their role in and observations about classical music programming, and the status of the genre, in Detroit and its environs.

Kendra Whitlock is the director of the Pops program and special performances for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO). The DSO is a 52-week orchestra with a \$30 million budget. They play 26 weeks of classical programming and eight weeks of popular music. Whitlock believes

the DSO is unique because musicians are committed to taking leadership and advising roles that make the orchestra relevant to the needs and support of the community. In her words, “Community partnerships and diverse programming have been the mantra.” The DSO has committed to reaching out to different ethnic communities since the riots of 1967.

Bob Scott directs 90.9 FM WRCJ, a 14-hour/day classical and 10-hour/day jazz radio station. The station began as WQRS, a for-profit, all-classical music station. It was sold in 1997 and played exclusively jazz, after which it was sold in 2005 to its current owner. The listening audience has grown to 130,000 per week and 7,000 contributors. Scott emphasized the importance of the rebirth of Detroit after the 1967 riots, Coleman Young’s contributions to the city, and the need to think cooperatively and collaboratively in Detroit.

Natalie Bruno is the development officer for the Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings (DCWS), and the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival (GLCMF). DCWS produces 14 concerts per year plus educational programming. GLCMF plays for two weeks in June, producing twenty concerts in the summer. DCWS and GLCMF also manage the Eisenhower Dance Ensemble and sell their services to other local arts organizations, such as the Arts, Beats, and Eats festival in Pontiac, MI. Within funding from the NEA, DCWS joined with University of Michigan and Oberlin College to commission three composers to write three pieces over the next three years. They received an overwhelming inflow of applications from composers for the project. GLCMF has partnered with Pontiac schools and three African American churches to promote music making in the local area.

Rick Sperling is CEO and founder of the Mosaic Youth Theatre. Sperling’s goal was to create a world-class youth arts organization and show how the arts transform lives in Detroit – “the most segregated city in the U.S.” Sperling directs an ongoing, structured, and intense program with high levels of artistic integrity in a city where most schools do not have fine arts programs. He targets schools where the drop-out rate is 40-50%, but within the Mosaic group, 95% of the students involved go to college. After Mosaic, students have record contracts, are on TV, involved in film production, in law school, or work as social workers or teachers. Seven graduates are full-time staff members at Mosaic. Sperling says that the key to success is high expectations and excellence, both on stage and in life. He says this contrasts the general trend in society of lowered expectations and standards for teaching academics and fine arts to at-risk students. Mosaic Youth Theatre partnered with the Royal Shakespeare Company the previous fall, and on another occasion, sold out the Detroit Institute of Arts theater for two weekends.

Discussion following the above presentations began with the observation that audiences are segregated in Detroit and they perceive the orchestra as an elitist organization. The greatest successes in the exemplary organizations came from developing relationships and partnerships with other community-based organizations and institutions, targeting cultural activities to the interests and needs (including access) of specific populations, and inviting ethnically diverse soloists to perform. For example, in order to diversify their white upper-middle-class audience, Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings collaborated with African-American churches in Detroit to invite members of their congregations to preview concerts. Grassroots marketing and sponsorship is also important to diversifying audiences. WRCJ’s largest city sponsor is inside of 8-Mile Road, an area that 95% African-American. Strategies like the above contribute to

growing and sustaining audiences who feel that orchestras have something of interest and relevance to offer them.

The group identified four steps to building partnerships:

- Communication
- Cooperation
- Vulnerability (identify and accept your weaknesses as an organization)
- Reciprocity
-

The primary goal for developing and sustaining audiences that are balanced reflections of the local community is engagement – which implies giving and receiving. Organizations too often focus on educational outreach – a more passive activity – as the primary strategy for audience development.