

2013

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In Support of the American Symphony:
An Examination of Young People and of Technology

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree: Master of Arts
Eastern Washington University

Melody Fisher

Winter 2013

There can be no doubt that technology affects how humanity relates to the arts. If it had been solely viewed through televisions, the Woodstock festival would not have had the same cultural impact. Clicking through images linked to a Wikipedia page on Impressionism will not enrich a person to the same extent as spending a day wandering through the Museum d'Orsay. In the late 1800s, a Wagner music drama must have more profoundly captivated an audience that had never seen a motion picture. Modern technology and its effects on society present significant challenges to the supporters of live music. Young people are highly susceptible to these challenges. This paper will explore the complexities of the American Symphony, and how young people can benefit this art form.

Young People

For purposes of this paper, let us consider young people to range in age from 18 to the early thirties. Huge variances exist within this age range: schooling and/or occupation, living situations, marital status, and children are all significant aspects of an individual's life and highly variable from young person to young person and from year to year. Young people are dealing with many of life's most significant choices and changes.

In the tumultuous years of schooling, job searching and personal growth, young people desire a sense of belonging. The school systems that the vast majority of Americans experience provide a great deal of structure. Students are surrounded in the comfort of tasks to complete and natural social groups. When an individual moves on from that structure and into the workforce, there is a strong need to find a social group.

Many young people are searching for others with whom they can relax and have a good time. This social need can be seen in the numbers of young people frequenting bars.

A good bar or pub provides many examples of what generally appeals to young people: a casual, open environment, requiring very little effort from the user; a social gathering place where one can meet new people and engage in genuine conversation; potentially a form of entertainment such as music, televisions or pool tables; and, of course, enjoyable yet inexpensive food and drink. It is also important to note that a good bar thrives on word-of-mouth advertising. When young people have a good experience, they want to share it with their friends. Social media allows this sharing to occur rapidly with a wider scope than has ever been possible before.

The cultural rich atmosphere of a symphony concert can provide both a rewarding form of entertainment and a social outlet for a young person. However, there is a myriad of reasons that could prevent a young person, or any individual, from attending a symphony concert. Logistical concerns, stigmas and simple lack of awareness abound. Many young people might feel convinced that they do not like symphonic music, simply because they have yet to be exposed to it. It takes effort; the challenge is to convince newcomers that the experience of a live symphony concert is worth their effort. Knowing the many benefits, it is up to the supporters of live music to attempt to overcome these barriers.

Symphony Structure

Ignorance is perhaps the greatest challenge. The complex structure of a symphony organization is understood and appreciated by few. An understanding of what it takes to

support a symphony is key to convince the public both of its value and its need for support.

The average concertgoer likely does not grasp the cost and amount of organization required to produce quality live music. Not only does a symphony consist of the musicians seen onstage at concerts, but also an entire legal nonprofit organization with 501(c)(3) tax-exemption status. Supporters of a symphony include various staff members, board members and volunteers. These groups are all vital to the success of the symphony.

An audience member may also assume that the price of tickets covers the cost of production, but this is far from true. Sadly, live music is not self-sustainable in American society today. A healthy balance of income for a symphony organization is 50% earned, 50% contributed. Nonprofit arts organizations survive off the generosity of individuals, corporations and government agencies that care enough to make financial contributions. Most nonprofit organizations have a board of trustees for governance. Symphony boards can range widely in membership, but most often consist of financially invested community members who collectively govern the organization.

The typical symphony staff can be broken into four categories: administration, operations, marketing and development. An Artistic Director and Executive Director are at the head of the organization. Administration includes finances, technology and office support. Operations oversee all aspects of programming, from guest artists to auditions to music rentals. Ticket sales and public relations are the main focus of the Marketing Department. Development deals with contributions and donor relationships.

The professional organization for nonprofit symphony organizations in the United States is called the League of American Orchestras. Jesse Rosen is the current president.

The League classifies symphonies in eight tiers by budget, ranging from budgets of less than \$165,000 to budgets over \$15,900,000. Budget size reflects the intensity of background work and staff necessary to the success of the organization. Other classifying factors include whether an orchestra is a youth orchestra; a conservatory, university or college orchestra; if it is international; and whether or not the season includes one or more pops concerts.

Public Support

No matter what budget size a symphony organization falls under, all rely on relationships with the public as the audience, patrons and supporters of the organization. Both marketing and development departments can view the general public in a spectrum, ranging from the stranger to the most committed supporter of the organization. In marketing terms of customers, an individual can range from the nonuser, through the guest and single ticket buyer, to the full subscriber. Typically, symphonies offer various packages and series to which an individual may subscribe. From the development viewpoint, an individual could range from a nonuser, an audience member who does not donate, someone who attends special events, a one-time giver, an annual giver, a major donor (over \$1000 annually), a planned giver, a board member, to a concert sponsor. Development departments also cultivate support from foundations, corporations and government organizations.

Young People Within the Symphony Structure

An individual's relationship with a symphony organization changes over time. A young child can delight in educational programs like instrument petting zoos and interactive daytime field trip concerts. The average classics concert subscriber is about 57 years old, indicating that most are between the ages of 40 and 74. There is an obvious gap between these comparably well-served demographics: the young person.

There is no quick and easy solution to bridge this gap. Perhaps as a target demographic, young people vary too greatly to be approached directly with a single effort. Rather, a wide variety of programming can appeal to different young people in different phases of life. Happy hour concerts suit some; others may prefer family concerts, and still others could enjoy professional development programs and networking events.

In 2012 the League of American Orchestras identified various orchestras with unique programs to set examples for innovation. While admirable, even these new programs seem to be directed at audiences either younger or older than people in their twenties. Educational programs for students abound, including Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute's Link Up program, where elementary school students play recorders from their seats along with a symphony. Innovation in the Memphis Symphony Orchestra includes the "Leading from Every Chair" workshop, where business executives interact and learn from the musicians.¹ Though not geared specifically towards young people, creative programs like these help establish the value of live music and symphonies as vital elements in a thriving community.

¹ Chester Lane, "Team Players," *Symphony* (July/August 2010): 28-34.

How can young people be drawn in to experience all of the benefits a symphony can offer? The first hurdle, as is true for any age group, is awareness. A young person may have attended live music concerts as a child in school, may have been involved with music in school or may have had very minimal previous musical experiences. Young people tend to move often for school, jobs and other reasons. An individual may or may not seek out a symphony when new to a community.

One creative way to raise awareness is the relatively new cultural phenomenon: the flash mob. Public gathering places like mall food courts are a prime venue. This advertising option has many positives: it is a genuine way to bring live music to the masses in a way no expensive commercial can, it breaks down notions of elitism and can establish the symphony as a vital, integral part of local culture, not to mention the surprise element. Also consider the secondary free advertising, as viewers are sure to record the surprise and share it online, exponentially expanding the impact of a single effort. Of course, there are logistics to hurdle, but the potential return is significant, both for the symphony and the venue.

While raising awareness, it is important to keep in mind exactly what you are offering to the potential audience. If symphonies were businesses rather than nonprofit organizations, then the bottom line goal would be to simply sell as many tickets as possible. In his 2011 guest address, Doug McLennan, founder and editor of ArtsJournal, reminded supporters of the Spokane Symphony that great experiences and opportunities to develop relationships are valuable services a symphony can provide, beyond simply performing music. A symphony can help provide a young person with a great place to socialize and feel welcome in a new city.

In recent years the League of American Orchestras has launched a special effort, the Audience Growth Initiative, to study and decrease what has been entitled “churn,” the tendency of an individual to come to a symphony concert once, and, for whatever reason, never return. This initiative challenges the old model of immediately asking newcomers to subscribe or give, as well as elements that detract from the overall experience, such as stressful parking situations or long lines in concessions. In order to grow an audience, individuals should be approached one step at a time, with several levels of engagement before being encouraged to subscribe or make a donation. Brenda Nienhouse, Executive Director of the Spokane Symphony, sums up these efforts with the advice: “You don’t propose after the first date.”

Programming and the overall experience will greatly impact whether or not a newcomer returns, and how the experience will be shared, either positively or negatively. One section of the League’s Audience Motivation Research Project executive summary details how different performing art forms fall in different places on a continuum of pure entertainment and enrichment. Appendix B of this document contains a graphic depiction of this continuum. Obviously, enrichment has less immediate mass appeal than pure entertainment. The Audience Motivation Research Project also illuminates a frequency spiral, where the more an individual attends concerts, the more appreciation and enjoyment that individual experiences. A concert or event closer to the pure entertainment side of the spectrum may initially draw someone in and start him or her on his or her journey through the frequency spiral toward enrichment, and perhaps to becoming a lifelong lover of the symphony.

There are numerous creative ways a symphony experience can appeal to young people. For example, the Spokane Symphony's 2012-2013 season includes three “Symphony with a Splash” Friday night concerts. These evenings will include happy hour specials and shorter programs of more modern music. The Cleveland Orchestra launched a similar program in their 2009-2010 season entitled “Fridays@7,” which included an after party. Programs like these can be creatively marketed, for example with custom designed coasters with a quick response code to quickly link smart phone owners to the website. Young guest artists can draw in more young people, especially if there is an opportunity for interaction before or after the concert. Concerts featuring music from video games and movies can also make the symphony experience more accessible to younger patrons, perhaps helping them discover that they have loved this music all along.

Building Relationships

Once a young person is no longer a stranger to the symphony, the organization should find various ways to welcome newcomers. This aligns with the League’s “churn” studies and the desire to build lasting mutually beneficial relationships. Having board members and staff available to welcome and assist audience members before and after concerts is a great way to begin building genuine relationships. In the week after a concert, an informational email can be sent to newcomers, following up on the new patron’s experience, suggesting future events and possibly including an encouraging deal like a concessions discount at their next visit.

Another way to continue building relationships, presumably after an individual has begun to attend somewhat regularly, is described in Greg Waxberg’s article, “Open

House: When Orchestras Invite the Public to Rehearsals.” Open rehearsals remove some of the mystery and reveal the musicians’ dedication, talent and flexibility, which the average audience member may not otherwise fully appreciate. Additionally, these programs allow audience members to enjoy a sense of special insider treatment, similar to a backstage pass or the “behind the scenes footage” that will entice some people to buy a new version of a DVD they already own. After the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s open rehearsals, patrons enjoy a question and answer session with the conductor and musicians. This open approach to an already existing necessity in all symphonies can have not only audience retention benefits, but financial benefits as well. “The Boston Symphony’s open rehearsals at Symphony Hall generate approximately \$300,000 in revenue each year.”²

Not only young people, but all patrons are looking for an experience they consider valuable. In an age where options abound, individuals must choose what they consider worth their effort. Doug McLennan made this point by referencing sociologist Barry Schwartz and *The Paradox of Choice*. Using examples like buying jeans or a cup of coffee, Schwartz and McLennan claim that people were generally less fatigued and more content back when “one size fit all,” before all of the options raised our expectations to always get precisely what we want.³ This state of society is significantly challenging for arts organizations. How can a single concert appeal specifically to each member of the audience?

² Greg Waxberg, “Open House: When Orchestras Invite the Public to Rehearsals.” *Symphony* (July/August 2010): 36-43.

³ Doug McClennan, “The Share Economy.” (guest address, Spokane Symphony Orchestra Strategic Planning, Spokane, WA, May 2, 2011).

Young people especially are looking for a genuine experience where they feel valued and respected. Younger school students are accustomed to being told what to value and how to behave. While it is true that all arts experiences are educational in some way, the manner of programming specifically for young children is obviously inappropriate for adults. It is suitable to teach children the families of instruments of the orchestra and play familiar simple tunes, but adults prefer to be educated in less pedantic ways: through exposure, personal research (again much more accessible with modern technology) and mutually respectful conversation. Young people are taking steps further into adult society, and thus want the power to draw their own conclusions and decide what is worth their effort. Engaging program notes can greatly aid in enrichment and enjoyment, though they can be challenging to write, given the wide range of musical and historical understanding of an entire audience. Preconcert lectures with conductors and guest artists are a great way to enrich the concert experience for patrons and further welcome them into the symphony family. Post concert receptions, where audience members can meet the musicians, are another option. All of these efforts help to grow relationships and move audience members through the frequency spiral.

More than a Target Audience

It may seem that the only way to support an arts organization is financially, presumably as an older, wealthy philanthropist. We must be careful not to assume money to be the sole form of support. Though dollars are the most easily quantified, other methods of support, including time, perspective, skills and spreading positive information, can yield great returns. In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell describes

instances of social epidemics and how they came about. He uses Hush Puppies shoes as an example, a brand nearly extinct until sudden popularity, initiated in the New York City neighborhoods of Greenwich Village and SoHo, took off in the mid 1990's.⁴ In today's world of sharing opinions online, positive word of mouth is very powerful.

Though the typical young person may not be capable of financially contributing to a symphony organization, there are several ways young people can support a symphony, beyond being a target audience and potential future donor and board member.

The marketing potential of young people is highly significant. In a modern culture of people who would rather gather opinions and information from strangers than be sold something, positive word of mouth is essential. No age group is more socially and technologically connected than young people.

Volunteer Force

One particular subgroup of young people has huge potential to a symphony organization: the college music major. These individuals are interested and already invested in the arts, and a symphony can offer them vital support. Given the tendency of symphony musicians to also teach private lessons and perhaps at local colleges, there may already exist a network of musicians. Music students can greatly benefit from reduced price tickets, open rehearsals and programs like Students-on-Stage, where private students of the symphony's musicians can sit near their teacher and observe during a rehearsal.

⁴ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 2000): 3-5.

In turn, music majors can offer much to a symphony. Though it is doubtful that a college student has spare cash to be a financial supporter, other methods of support can be utilized, helping to build relationships that very well may carry on to when the individual is employed and has the ability to give financially. In the mean time, music majors can make great interns, greeters and ushers. They are knowledgeable, energetic, and often willing to serve as a volunteer, given all of the aforementioned benefits.

Technology: Challenges and Benefits

Modern technology allows, and in some ways encourages, extreme individualization in the act of music appreciation. Every person can now access, transport and listen to whatever music he or she prefers. Enjoying music has become more exclusive; even family members traveling together will likely be plugged in to separate devices. This self-imposed isolation can have many negative effects on the individual and on society as a whole. Isolation can lead to depression and stress.

Loneliness kills, according to research dating back to the 1970s. In one classic study, published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* (Vol. 109, No. 2, pages 186-204), socially isolated people in Alameda County, Calif., were between two and three times more likely to die during the nine-year study than those who had many friends.⁵

Live music offers a significant way to overcome those negative effects. The arts have power to connect people. When people share an experience, their understanding of the world is widened. Many studies have solidified the numerous benefits of music and

⁵ Sadie F. Dingfelder, "Socially Isolated and Sick," *Monitor on Psychology*, 37, no. 10 (November 2006): 18.

culture. The National Endowment for the Arts released some key findings of a study in 2007 titled “The Arts and Civic Engagement: Involved in Arts, Involved in Life.” In his preface to the study, former NEA Chairman Dana Gioia says, “...arts participation overwhelmingly correlates with positive individual and civic behaviors...Arts is not escapism but an invitation to activism.” Not only did the surveys find that arts participants and readers are more likely to be involved in sports and volunteer work, but also the concern that “Arts participation is falling among younger adults and with it most forms of civic and social engagement.”⁶

These and other benefits of arts participation may not occur to the general public. In a world of young people downloading 99-cent files for musical entertainment, why would someone invest a greater amount of time and money to go see a live performance? People who do invest their time and money understand that the benefits are worth that price. It is the great challenge of music supporters to convince everyone else.

Modern technology and its impact on society have created many challenges for the proponents of live music; however, there are also great opportunities. When the Spokane Symphony bought and renovated the Martin Woldson Theater at The Fox, high-speed broadband streaming capabilities called Internet 2 were incorporated into the theater. This allowed for innovative connections between people and art, including culture sharing education activities and streaming concerts into local hospitals. League President Jesse Rosen noted the potential of technology benefiting symphonies in the opening of his address at the 2011 National Conference:

⁶ Dana Gioia, Preface to *The Arts and Civic Engagement: Involved in Arts, Involved in Life* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2007): 1.

History was made this past March 20th in an event that signals profound change—positive change—for our industry and the entire music world. That is when the 101 musicians of the YouTube Symphony Orchestra representing 33 countries played to a combined global online audience of more than 33 million people, with nearly three million of them watching on their mobile phones. The concert shattered the previous record of 11 million set by... a U2 concert. Such an astonishing success clearly shows that when it comes to orchestras, the so-called digital divide *can* be bridged.⁷

In conclusion, any arts organization can easily claim that young people are its future. Young people are more than an elusive target audience. In symphonies and all nonprofit arts, it is clear that the opportunities for mutual benefits are present now. A volunteer workforce can greatly aid an organization while addressing social needs of belonging. The marketing power of positive word of mouth, amplified by social networking, is significant. Developing relationships with young people now will create vital connections that will profit arts organizations financially in the future. Young people and symphonies can greatly benefit each other.

⁷ Jesse Rosen, “Orchestras at the Crossroads.” (Fall 2011): 14-18.

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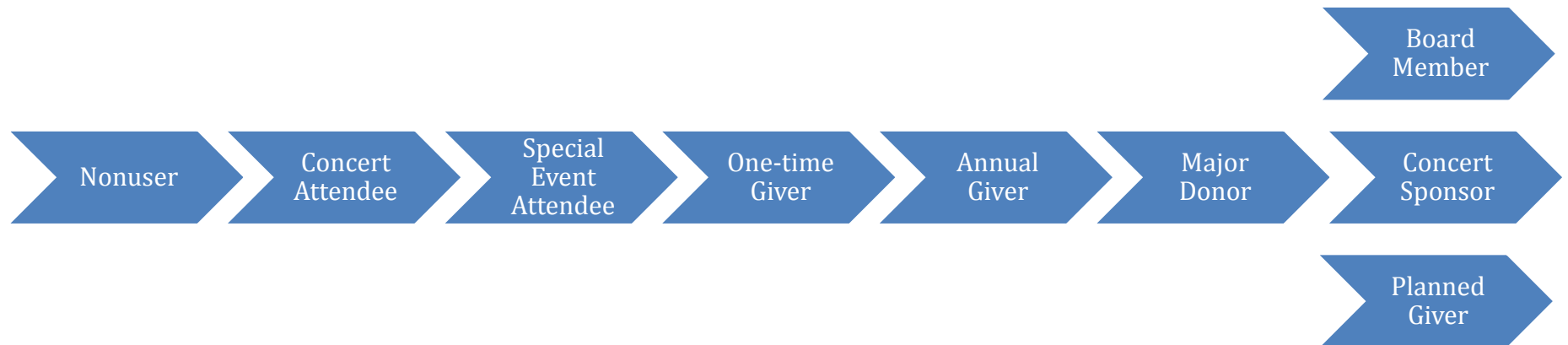
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Appendix A: Spectrum of an Individual

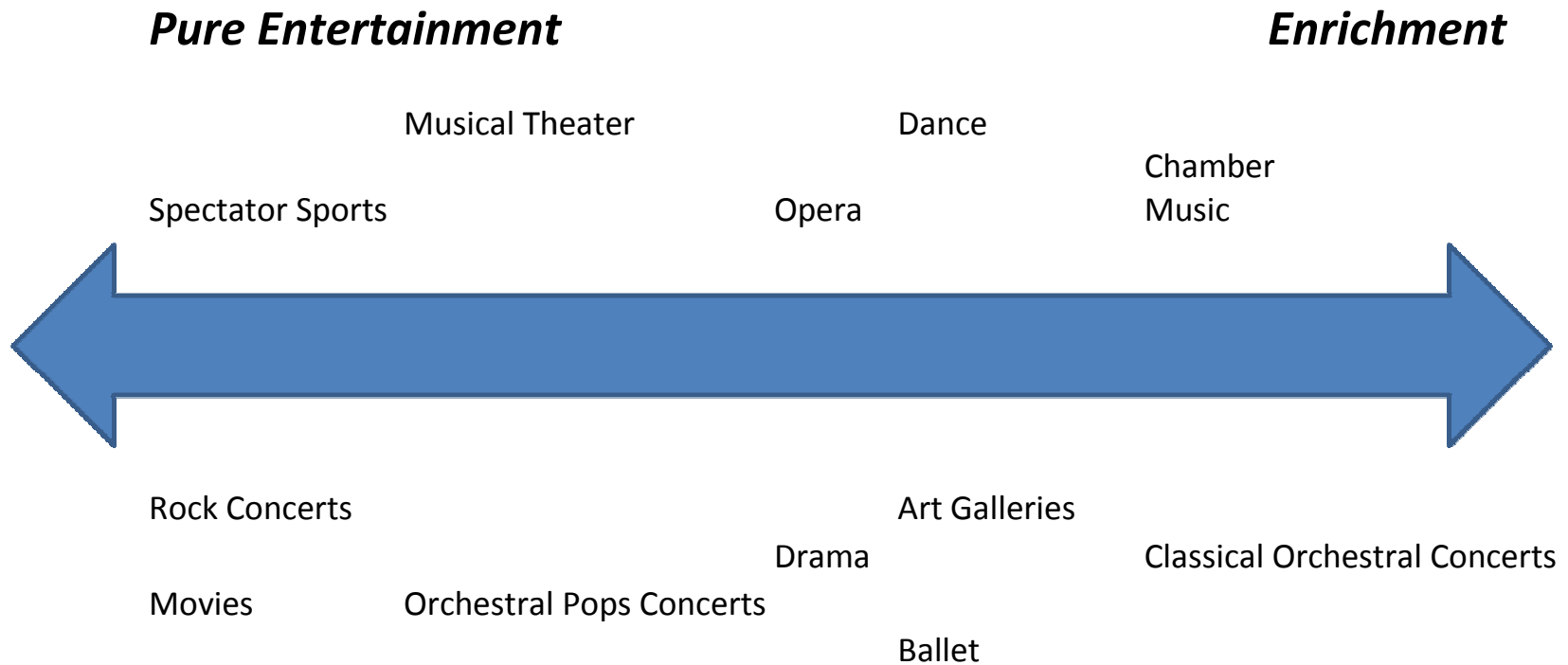
Marketing:



Development:



Appendix B: The Entertainment Continuum



- As described in The Audience Motivation Research Project Executive Summary, League of American Orchestras

Vita

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