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Knight Foundation

Issues Brief
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ORCHESTRA & COMMUNITY:

Bridging the Gap

A continuing discussion of issues, practices and changes in symphony orchestra organizations.

This is the first in a series of issues briefs designed to continue the discussion we began a decade ago with partners in the symphony orchestra field in Knight Foundation's Magic of Music initiative.

We encourage you to send reader's comments about these topics, and suggestions for future issues in this series, to *publications@knightfdn.org* or visit *www.knightfdn.org.*

Future issues will explore lessons learned and applied by the orchestras as they worked in partnership with each other, and will delve into new learning gleaned from surveys into classical music and audiences' connection to it conducted by Audience Insight LLP in behalf of Knight Foundation and our 15 participating orchestra partners.

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John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Introduction

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has been among the nation's leading supporters of symphony orchestras, based on a long-standing commitment to help orchestra institutions strengthen, deepen and broaden the relationships with their audiences.

In 1994 the foundation undertook a fieldwide initiative to improve the fortunes of American symphony orchestras. Motivated in part by the grim prospects of orchestras in several of the 26 communities where it serves as a local funder, the foundation sought a way to leverage change. The initial decision to focus on the connection between the art and audiences provided a defining focus – hence the name Magic of Music.[1] The first five-year phase of the program provided $5.4 million in grants supporting innovative multiyear projects at 10 orchestras.

Encouraged by promising results, the foundation in 1999 approved a second phase of the program, which expanded to encompass 15 orchestras. The second phase set a few clear, purposeful goals, grounded in value and impact. These are:

- To support programs that produce a demonstratable increase in the ticket-buying audience;
- To help orchestras develop a stronger sense of connection with new and potential audiences;
- To enhance the relationship between musician and orchestra, audience and community;
- To develop a clearer understanding of the market dynamics in which symphony orchestras seek to develop and nurture audiences.

Knight's symphony orchestra initiative, by now an investment of some $10 million in grant funds, has led to innovative programming and organizational change at many of the participating orchestras, as well as new insights into the nature of symphony organizations and the ways they connect – or fail to connect – with their communities.

Together, the foundation and members of the symphony orchestra community are assessing that change and sharing the insights gained from this venture. In the spring of 2002, Knight hosted its annual retreat for representatives of the 15 participating orchestras. Orchestra administrators, musicians and board members heard clear and forceful comments from Knight Foundation's Vice President and Chief Program Officer Penelope McPhee, who has played a pivotal role in conceiving and developing the orchestra initiative. This article is excerpted from McPhee's comments.

[1] *The name "Magic of Music" is used with permission of The Magic of Music Inc., which creates special moments through music for thousands of critically/terminally ill and handicapped children and adults throughout the United States.*

Magic of Music Retreat
April 19, 2002
Portland, Ore.

I want to speak from a personal perspective about what Knight Foundation has learned over the course of our Magic of Music symphony orchestra initiative. I want to share what I see as successes and talk frankly about our failures. Eight years and $10 million into this initiative, it is time to set ourselves to the difficult task of assessing what we've learned and figuring out how to apply and share those lessons.

My goal here is to look at the big picture – to talk about shared values; about assumptions, right and wrong; and about mission, implicit and explicit.

Knight Foundation brought to the creation of our orchestra program several fundamental values and beliefs that formed the bedrock of the initiative. The first is that symphonic music is a powerful art form with timeless appeal that can bring joy and spiritual renewal to human beings everywhere – and, therefore, its creation, production and dissemination should be supported. Certainly, musicians, other orchestra professionals and volunteers share that value.

The second belief is that to be whole and healthy, a community must have a symphony orchestra. One of Knight Foundation's most firmly held values is the belief in the importance of community. Our orchestra initiative grew out of our deep concern that if we allowed struggling orchestras in our communities to die, the community would be diminished.

The Question of Relevance

Today, I would argue vehemently that communities don't need an orchestra just for the sake of saying they have an orchestra. The mere existence of an orchestra in a community does not contribute to its vitality. Communities need vibrant, *relevant* orchestras that give meaning to people's weary, humdrum lives.

I am increasingly convinced that orchestras that are not relevant to their communities do not contribute to their health and vitality. I'll go even further – the more orchestras peel off 3 to 4 percent of an economically elite, racially segregated fraction of the community, the more they'll be part of the problem instead of part of the solution.

The caliber of the playing, the renown of the conductor, the architecture of the world-class hall mean little or nothing if the sound doesn't resonate throughout the community.

It was these two bedrock values – about the music and about community – that led us to some assumptions 10 years ago when we were first creating this initiative. I'd like to share some of those assumptions with you now, as well as why I believe at least a few of them were flawed.

The most important was a theory of change that inextricably linked our two fundamental values – music and community. The link was the local orchestra. By helping orchestras think simultaneously about the art and the audience, we would both reinvigorate the art form and sustain a valuable institution that contributed to the artistic, social and economic vitality of the community.

What was wrong with that key assumption?

One of the many compelling findings from the orchestra research we conducted this year is the disconnect between classical music listeners and local orchestra patrons. These two variables are far more independent than I ever imagined.

While nearly 60 percent of adults express at least some interest in classical music, and nearly one-third of those fit classical music into their lives regularly, in their autos and at home, less than 5 percent of the adults interviewed in 15 communities are regular patrons of their local orchestras.

The data brought home to me a parallel between orchestras and another industry with which Knight has a long history – newspapers. I think some of the lessons may be transferable.

Content vs. Delivery

Both endeavors are focused on meaningful content that people care about. Both have sets of values and belief systems that transcend that content. And in both, I contend, those closest to the business too often confuse the content with the delivery system.

We all would agree that dissemination of accurate, well-reported news is vital to sustaining a democratic society. But we also must acknowledge that accurate, well-reported news can be found in a newspaper, on NPR, on CNN or on the Internet. Many of us get our news and information from a combination of all of those sources, depending on convenience, what we're specifically looking for, availability and our mood at any given moment.

But newspaper journalists, decrying diminishing subscribers, worry that the democracy is at risk because people aren't getting the news – from them.

Orchestras, being mostly led by tyrants, aren't concerned with the death of democracy. But they do believe the very fabric of western civilization is at risk if people don't get classical music – from them.

Schools aren't doing a good job teaching kids to read, say newspaper journalists, and therefore there's less demand for their product. Sound familiar?

How can you really understand the implications and nuances of the news if you only get it electronically? Does this ring any bells?

They're confusing the content with the delivery system. In fact, people are getting much more news, much more quickly, than ever before. The difference is that the content is coming from many different places, and newspapers no longer own the franchise.

Orchestras – and Knight Foundation when we began this initiative – also confuse the content with the delivery system. The data tell us about orchestras the very thing you would stipulate as obvious about newspapers: Many people are seeking the content; but only a few are picking your delivery system.

So if our assumption about the link was flawed, what does it mean? To me there's a simple answer. We can't just assume the connection to community exists. But if we think it *should* exist – if we believe it's important – we have the information and the power to make it happen. The successes of many individual orchestra projects prove it. But it will not simply occur if we keep doing business as usual.

Newspapers have realized they can't keep marketing to a diminishing subscriber base. They have to radically reinvent their product. If you're a Wall Street Journal reader, you know they have.

Most newspapers have recognized that it's not either/or. They haven't given up delivering a hard copy to a subscriber's doorstep every morning, but they've also put their content on the Internet where large parts of it are available at no cost to nonsubscribers.

And here's another important parallel. They've given up on the crossover idea. They are no longer expecting readers who get their news on the net to decide to subscribe to the traditional paper. The Internet news is not a marketing tool for the "real thing." They have thousands of new readers for the "new thing." If our orchestra experience does nothing else, I hope it will put to rest the idea of crossover and adopt the idea that we can sell multiple products to multiple audiences.

Everything on the Table

One of the promising findings of Knight's recent orchestra research is that it demonstrates there's a vast potential audience of living, breathing individuals with different – but real – connections to the art form and to our orchestras. These aren't uninformed rubes who need us to show them the light. Neither are they look-alike, think-alike mannequins receiving the canon as dictated by us. These are individuals who make purposeful and highly personal decisions. Some of them have actually tested our product and found it wanting. The question is are we listening to the very clear signals they're sending? And, are we willing and able to let go of our prejudices and respond to the message in diverse and innovative ways?

The data tell us unequivocally that whether we want to strengthen, deepen or broaden ties to the orchestra, we need to do something fundamentally different from what we've done before. We need to put everything – repertoire, musical genres, ensemble configurations, venues, performance times, guest artists – *everything* on the table for review and negotiation. The data also make it clearer than ever before that there is no one solution, no magic bullet. Different folks need different strokes. We must be nimble, flexible and open enough to allow for that.

Which brings me to our second assumption. We assumed as part of our theory of change in this initiative that rational people, when faced with deteriorating prospects, would embrace new ideas – even risky ones – to change their future prospects.

But change is hard even when people are well meaning, even when organizations are entrepreneurial, and even when the current model isn't working. It's difficult to find new models, particularly in organizations that, quite frankly, haven't traditionally valued entrepreneurship.

Back at the beginning of our symphony initiative, when Knight Foundation first invited orchestras to propose ways to reinvigorate the concert hall experience, not one of the invitees put forward a major innovative idea. We were more than disappointed. We were shocked. We turned down every proposal and started over. But we learned our first lesson in the initiative.

We learned that transformational change in orchestras does not occur unless all the members of the orchestra family are involved. Lasting change can't be imposed by any single group within the orchestra, and it certainly can't be imposed from the outside by a funder. The music director, trustees, musicians and staff must first buy into and then participate in the planning and implementation of major change.

Over the course of our journey together, things have improved. There is today a greater openness to take on new ideas. I don't mean to claim this is all due to Knight Foundation and our program. Other funders and many voices within the orchestra field have contributed. But I'd argue that we still have further to go than we've come. And until we can stop whispering and start talking out loud about the big structural issues like absentee music directors, intractable musicians' unions, and the confusion between quality and convention, we're not going to make real transformational change.

Trustees, if the music director is not there to help you lead the change, fire him. You need his full cooperation. And I can tell you, it's much more important to your orchestra for him to head the United Way campaign in your town than to be guest conducting around the world.

Musicians, you *are* the union. Make it happen. Otherwise, you're going to be playing *Nearer My God to Thee* as the ship goes down.

The Question of Mission

What makes change especially difficult is that to agree on change strategies, we first have to agree on what the problems are. Often that's harder than coming up with solutions. It requires trust and mutual respect; it requires stakeholders to put aside their own agendas for the sake of the organization; it requires belief in a common mission.

Which brings me from values and assumptions to mission. This is the fundamental conversation.

Unless and until orchestras decide their mission is to serve audiences in the ways audiences want to be served, they will never attract more than the current 3 to 4 percent. And I would argue that as demographics change, they won't even be able to retain that.

How orchestras use the data we now have will very much depend on individual decisions about mission. No two will be the same.

Is the mission to support artists and enable them to hone their talent to the highest level of virtuosity?

Is the mission to become a world-class touring and recording orchestra?

Is the mission to bring classical music to new and diverse audiences in your community?

Is the mission to be the go-to place for music of all kinds in a community?

If you nodded your head to all of these, you're in trouble. Because the data tell us unequivocally that while any of these missions is possible, and while each of them may be valid in its own right, they are often mutually exclusive. Until each individual orchestra examines its mission statement and eliminates the elements that are at cross-purposes, it will be impossible to develop change strategies that work.

Over the years, Knight Foundation has been clear regarding what we think the mission ought to be. Our entire symphony orchestra initiative has been premised on strengthening, deepening and broadening the relationship with audiences in communities. I believe wholeheartedly in that mission, and I do not believe for a minute that listening to audiences is pandering, or that it diminishes quality. It's just good business.

If you agree, and accept this as your mission, you first have to change fundamentally your attitude toward your audience. You have to stop blaming them and start looking inside your institutions for answers.

From my perspective as an outsider who loves the music but is not an expert, I'd argue that for the most part, orchestras have nothing but disdain for their audiences. The whole notion that doing it differently is "dumbing it down" is disdainful. The attitude you communicate to us audience members is that you're doing us a favor by letting us pay you to play what you want to play. You want us to pay our money and eat our spinach because it's good for us.

Not only do you want us to eat the spinach, you want us to choose it over ice cream every time; you want us to eat it in your restaurant at 8 p.m.; you want us to like it the way you've seasoned it. And, God knows, you want us to eat it pure, not in a soufflé or a salad. And oh yes, if we've never eaten spinach before, we're barely worth serving anyway, because if we've gone this long without tasting it, we must be rubes anyway and we'll never appreciate it.

If we're going to be serious about serious change, we first have to get serious about this question of mission.

The Learning, Applied

As we think about the lessons Knight Foundation has learned about our own grant making during the course of Magic of Music, one of the most important is that we rushed straight into making grants for activities before we really had a deep and probing conversation about mission.

We have learned other big picture lessons as well:

- **Lesson 1**: Musicians are essential to making the connection with the audience. If orchestras are to raise the level of engagement, musicians must take the lead. And training at skills other than playing their instruments is essential, so they are better prepared for this role. We need to give them a new job description.

  That also means for the field to change and for musicians to be prepared adequately for their changing roles as ambassadors for classical music, not only orchestras, but also conservatories, must change. Many – Curtis and Juilliard among them – are recognizing the need to rethink training.

- **Lesson 2**: Music directors can be major obstacles to transformational change. In one sense, they are the individual embodiment of the institution from a public perspective and this gives them great power. Yet internally, they often function like absentee landlords. They have many responsibilities and often are not around enough or motivated enough to become members of a team thinking about change.

- **Lesson 3**: Thoughtful, well-crafted programmatic innovation simply cannot happen when an institution is in the midst of a financial crisis. All of its energies are focused on keeping the institution afloat.

  This was a flaw in Knight's theory of change. We hoped by stimulating real structural change in unhealthy orchestras, we would make them healthy. I don't think we had any idea how close to the edge some of the orchestras were when we started. Orchestras struggling to make payroll can't take on transformational change. Orchestras in trouble cling to traditional approaches, which is counterintuitive, since if there is ever a time to try something different, it is when you have little to lose.

- **Lesson 4**: Strategic change cannot happen without strong, consistent leadership. Another flaw in our theory of change is that we did not anticipate the huge amount of turnover within the orchestras. Among the 17 orchestras that have participated in the Knight program, there have been 15 executive director changes in the eight years of the program. Music directors have also turned over and trustees, by their very nature, serve limited terms. Ironically, the greatest continuity appears to be among the musicians, but these individuals are often least involved in planning and implementing new strategic directions for the institution.

- **Lesson 5**: If Knight Foundation were embarking on this initiative again, we would try much harder to articulate from the start what we thought the outcomes should be. We never effectively expressed what we meant by "transformational change," so that orchestras could know when they were hitting the mark. Not wanting to get in the way of good ideas by being too directive, perhaps we erred on the other side by not giving enough guidance.

- **Lesson 6**: Dollars turned out to be only part of what Knight contributed to the orchestras in this venture. All of us take great pride in the ongoing dialogue exemplified by the annual retreats, the convening of so many people willing to think seriously about these issues, the consortium concept that our participating orchestras have taken very seriously, the provision of research capability, evaluation services and general consulting help. These other forms of assistance may have a longer-lasting impact than the dollars themselves. If foundations feel strongly that their dollars should leverage other forms of impact, in this regard the program has been a success.

- **Lesson 7**: And the last lesson I'll mention, though there are many others, is that we were undoubtedly overly ambitious in expecting change quickly. We expected that with relatively large grants and a three-year time frame, we would be able to see significant change right away. The fact that we didn't has been a valuable lesson to Knight and has fed our strategic thinking in our other programs. We are making longer commitments and not expecting miracles.

The 15 orchestras that have been part of Knight's symphony initiative have shown commitment, thoughtfulness and courage. They have put themselves on the front lines of change, and that's a dangerous place to be. They have been more open than ever before with us and with one another, and that's risky. We have come a long way in eight years and have experienced growth and some wonderful insight by many remarkable people. We have come to understand much better the role of musicians and other creative people in orchestral institutions. More than ever, we value their talent and imaginative power.

The orchestras involved in Knight Foundation's symphony initiative include:

Brooklyn Symphony
Charlotte Symphony
Colorado Symphony
Detroit Symphony
Fort Wayne Philharmonic
Kansas City Symphony
Long Beach Symphony
Louisiana Philharmonic
New World Symphony
Oregon Symphony
Philadelphia Orchestra
St. Louis Symphony
St. Paul Chamber Orchestra
San Antonio Symphony
Wichita Symphony

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