

CMAAMatters

CHAMBER MUSIC AMERICA

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Survival Guide for Arts Organizations

by MICHAEL SELTZER

Musicians, composers, educators, managers, and small and large ensemble music presenters are all reeling from the effects of the continuing recession. No corner of the arts is immune to the dramatic changes that have been taking place in the U.S. and global economy since early 2008. While cutbacks at some of the larger cultural institutions garner newspaper headlines, most of Chamber Music America's members are suffering in ways that attract little public attention.

Few newspaper and magazine articles have appeared telling small nonprofits how to prevail in these difficult times, but we can take some lessons from cultural institutions whose noteworthy practices helped them survive past downturns, and make note of creative strategies being applied today.

THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR THE ARTS

The argument that the arts are luxuries—and therefore not a priority during hard times—has once again reared its ugly head. To counter this position, we must educate the public on the economic impact of the cultural sector, and about the music industry in particular.

Solid research demonstrates that the arts are a critical economic driver. In late March, Americans for the Arts testified before the House Education and Labor Committee that “America’s nonprofit arts industry generates \$166.2 billion in economic activity annually—supporting 5.7 million full-time equivalent jobs [and] \$104 billion in household income.”

STRATEGY:

Draw on such reports and testimony in making the case for continuing or new support to foundation, corporate, governmental, and individual donors.

RESOURCES:

Americans for the Arts Congressional testimony
<http://edlabor.house.gov/documents/111/pdf/testimony/20090326RobertLynchTestimony.pdf>

Americans for the Arts 22nd Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy
www.artsusa.org/events/2009/aad/nhl09.asp

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE CASE FOR THE ARTS

Another erroneous, yet widely held view is that the arts serve only the elites. Ensembles’ and music presenters’ work in schools and as committed community collaborators is overlooked and rarely acknowledged in public discourse. Yet such efforts, which engage both adults and children from all walks of life, take on greater importance during these economic times.



STRATEGY:

Document your community-outreach activities, as well as the demographics of your audiences. Inform your key constituents and opinion leaders about how your work enhances their community.

MAKING THE CASE TO ELECTED OFFICIALS

Much is at stake as governmental officials on every level look for ways to make serious budget cuts, justified by downturns in tax revenues. Armed with key messages about what you’re doing for their constituents (i.e., voters), reach out to government officials.

STRATEGY:

Contact and/or visit your elected officials and their staff to make the case for sustained government arts-education

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funding. Urge your Congressional representatives to support a funding level of \$53 million for the Arts in Education programs within the U.S. Department of Education. These programs support model arts collaborations with schools, professional development for teachers, and engaging activities for at-risk youth.

RESOURCE:

Americans for the Arts has prepared a helpful toolkit, including talking points. www.artsusa.org/information_services/toolkit/003.asp

'LAYAWAY' GIFTS

Donors do not lose their charitable impulses during periods of belt-tightening. However, immediate cash outflow may be a concern, and donors may be too strapped to maintain their previous level of giving.

STRATEGY:

Explain to your core supporters that they may extend the payment period for their gifts and pledges, and introduce—if you have been in existence for a while and have not already done so—some form of planned-giving program.

RESOURCES:

Nonprofit Expert
www.nonprofitexpert.com
The Foundation Center
www.foundationcenter.org

LIFTING THE SPIRIT, FEEDING THE SOUL

To understand the importance of government support for the arts, one has only to note the effectiveness of the Works Progress Administration, which provided employment for thousands of artists during the Great Depression. WPA projects produced lasting works of art, gardens, and public monuments, enhancing life for millions. Music, perhaps more than any other form of cultural expression, has the power to lift the spirits of the many.

STRATEGY:

Think outside the box to reach new audiences, especially those who are feeling the recession's effects most keenly—the unemployed, the new poor, and the long-standing poor. Extend your thinking to venues as well. The World Bank, for example, supported an effort in Argentina to bring art to supermarkets. For many years, New York City's Transit Authority has enlisted musicians to perform in subway stations.

MARK THE SWEET SPOT

Don't just chase the dollars. Discover your organization's sweet spot, the place where your organization's vision, mission, strengths, and creative and intellectual assets intersect most with the "giving impulses" of your community of individual supporters, foundations, businesses, civic organizations, faith communities.

STRATEGY:

Survey your constituents to gauge what they most value about your work, and use that intelligence to inform your offerings going forward.

RESOURCE:

Survey Monkey
www.surveymonkey.com

"Develop several different revenue and expense scenarios—conservative, steady-state, and worst case."

NETWORK, NETWORK, NETWORK

Networking is crucial now. Local nonprofit associations can provide a great meeting ground to exchange information with peers and colleagues, as well as a path to cost-savings through group-purchasing plans.

STRATEGY:

Band together with other organizations by joining your local or state association of nonprofits.

RESOURCE:

National Council of Nonprofits
www.councilofnonprofits.org

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

Many view collaborations as the most unnatural of acts. However, these are not normal times. Much can be gained from working more closely with local community-based groups.

STRATEGY: Partnerships with human service organizations, such as settlement houses, soup kitchens, nursing homes and community development organizations are win-win opportunities: both private

and public donors like to see prospective grantees collaborating across fields of endeavor, and the collaborators themselves are enriched by the exchange.

MERGERS AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

Leaders and staff of nonprofits may resist mergers with related organizations for reasons that are apparent only to them. But if similar organizations could benefit from joining forces, the time is ripe for their respective boards to consider mergers, or at least strategic alliances.

STRATEGY:

Engage in targeted conversations with your board members and key supporters to gauge the organizational appetite for mergers or alliances, and to identify prospective partners. If you think of a good match, meet with the leadership of the potential partner to discuss your respective talents and competencies. Determine if a local foundation might support such an effort. Minimally, engage an outside facilitator to shepherd the process.

RESOURCE:

Alliance for Nonprofit Management
www.allianceonline.org

PLAN FOR UNCERTAINTY

Sound financial stewardship is needed to forecast the immediate future. A guiding principle is to be conservative in your revenue projections and to seek out any and every way to cut expenses.

STRATEGY:

Develop several different revenue and expense budget scenarios—conservative, steady-state, worst-case—and engage your board in a discussion of all three options.

RESOURCE:

Nonprofit Finance Fund
www.nonprofitfinancefund.org

PROVIDE GREATER VALUE AND COMMUNITY

The pressure to scale back and promise less is real. However, whenever possible, find ways to provide new value to audiences, patrons and supporters. Lambda Legal—the nation's pre-eminent LGBT civil rights organization—recently enclosed in its membership magazine an American Airlines \$100 discount coupon and a brochure for a new, socially

responsible mobile phone company. Major corporate supporters provided both inserts.

STRATEGY:

Find ways to express appreciation to core supporters and to add member/suscriber benefits. Doing so demonstrates value and heightens engagement in the life of your organization.

SHARE OFFICES AND FACILITIES

Cost-saving measures, such as sharing office space or pooling back-office functions play an even more important role in the current belt-tightening period.

STRATEGY:

Check with kindred organizations to see if there is an appetite to secure shared rehearsal, performance, or office space.

RESOURCE:

Tides Shared Spaces
www.tidessharedspaces.org

SHORE UP YOUR GOVERNANCE

The times call for all board members to roll up their sleeves and give generously of their “time, talent and treasure.” No group can afford to have board members who are not pulling their weight and contributing what they can to strengthen and steward the organization.

STRATEGY:

Send board members to school. If some are not fully acquainted with their responsibilities, invite them to take a course at a local university arts-management program or a seminar, such as “Building a Fundraising Board” from the Foundation Center. For those who are not actively engaged, make board retirement an attractive option. At the same time, keep in mind that some retired board members will continue to support you as long as your leadership continues to engage them. One idea: an annual board alumni event—not a fundraiser—at a member's home.

RESOURCES:

The Foundation Center
www.foundationcenter.org
Board Source
www.boardsource.org

“Find material and nonmaterial ways to express appreciation to staff.”

UP YOUR STAFF PERKS

While reducing staff and outsourcing positions may help cut operating deficits, potential consequences include a decline in morale among remaining staff and in overall organizational effectiveness. Find both material and nonmaterial ways to express appreciation to staff throughout this period of economic uncertainty.

STRATEGY:

Above all, take care to be positive with your staff and reinforce to them their value to the organization. You may also help them deal with personal financial issues and manage stress by bringing in experts in both fields.

RESOURCE:

Training Time
<http://training-time.blogspot.com>

No one of these strategies is a panacea in today's troubling times. We will need to make some hard adjustments.

However, if we are prepared to take some bold steps, our organizations will prevail. After all, we survived the end of the Great Society, the Reagan Revolution, and other times of government belt-tightening and market uncertainty, and we can do it again.

Consultant Michael Seltzer is a past president of the New York Regional Association of Grantmakers and chair of the master's degree program in nonprofit management at the New School University. He is currently an advisor to a number of foundations and a trustee of EMpower, a foundation that connects the emerging markets community with innovative grassroots organizations. His book, Securing Your Organization's Future: A Complete Guide to Fund Raising Strategies, received the first Terry McAdam Award from the Alliance for Nonprofit Management. This article is an adaptation of his “A to Z Survival Guide for Uncertain Times,” an October 2008 posting in PhilanTopic, a blog from The Foundation Center, <http://pndblog.typepad.com/pndblog/>.

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CMA Opportunities

2010 CMAcclaim Awards—National recognition for individuals, ensembles, or organizations whose chamber music activities have had a significant cultural impact on a local community or region. Any CMA member may submit a nomination, but the nominee need not be a member. Self-nominations are not accepted.

DEADLINE: September 30, 2009

FMI: www.chamber-music.org/programs

Other Opportunities

Challenge America: Reaching Every Community Fast-Track Review Grants—NEA support for projects that extend the reach of the arts to underserved populations.

DEADLINE: May 28, 2009

FMI: www.nea.gov

Pennsylvania Performing Arts on Tour—Opportunities for Pennsylvania-based performing artists to obtain touring engagements.

DEADLINE: June 1, 2009

FMI: www.pennpat.org

Learning in the Arts for Children and Youth—NEA support for projects that advance arts education for children and youth in school-based or community-based settings.

DEADLINE: June 11, 2009

FMI: www.nea.gov

Aaron Copland Fund for Music/ Performing Ensembles Program

Support for organizations whose performances encourage and improve public appreciation of contemporary American art music.

DEADLINE: June 30, 2009

FMI: www.coplandfund.org

Trust for Mutual Understanding

Grants to nonprofits for cultural exchanges with institutions and individuals in Russia and Eastern/Central Europe. Letter of inquiry required prior to application.

DEADLINE: August 1, 2009

FMI: www.tmuny.org

Access to Artistic Excellence

NEA support to encourage artistic excellence, preserve the U.S. cultural heritage, and provide access to the arts for all Americans.

DEADLINE: August 13, 2009

FMI: www.nea.gov

Amateur Chamber Music Players

Support for adult amateur chamber music workshops, including coaches' salaries, reduced registration fees, and scholarships.

DEADLINE: August 31, 2009

FMI: www.acmp.net