

CMA Matters

CHAMBER MUSIC AMERICA

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Conversation with a College Presenter

Ellis Finger has been director of the Williams Center for the Arts— at Lafayette College, in Easton, Pennsylvania—for twenty-five years. A former member of CMA's board of directors, he received APAP's William Dawson Award for Programmatic Excellence in 2002 and the NAPAMA Award for Excellence in Presenting the Performing Arts in 2006.

Finger recently spoke with *CMA Matters* about what he looks for in an ensemble and how he programs for the multiple audiences served by colleges and universities.

CMA: Almost every ensemble— whether starting out or in mid-career— wants to maximize its appearances and reach new audiences. What does an ensemble need to know about the work of a presenter?

EF: The first thing to understand is that today's presenter is tasked with wooing a much more diverse audience than ever before—the loyal music series subscriber of old is giving way to a more diverse group of multi-taskers with increasingly more options at their fingertips.

As a college presenter, I am always balancing the needs of three audiences—students, faculty and the general public. Naturally, while valuing tradition, I also have to be adaptable. Every four years, the entire student body

Ellis Finger

changes, and while the faculty and surrounding community change more slowly, they, too, are evolving. That means I have to think about engaging musicians that fit into this changing picture.

One cannot serve all masters at all times, but I have found that there are creative ways of programming to reach people on many levels.

CMA: When you plan your series, how do you target your audience and decide what it will respond to?

EF: I keep in mind that many (if not most) of my student ticket-buyers are probably first-time arts attendees. With an educational mission in mind, I am always thinking of building the audience for the future. My donors are similarly

compelled in considering their contributions to help ensure tomorrow's audience.

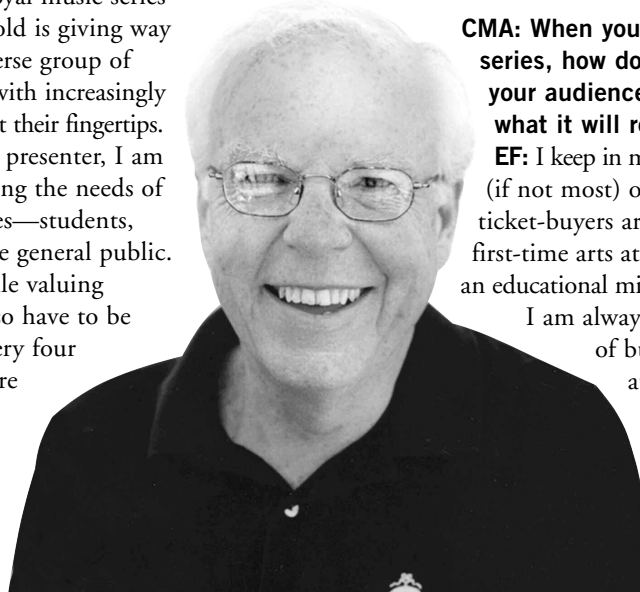
To fulfill that mission, I must ask, Will this ensemble inspire young arts attendees to come back for more? And, at the same time, will the performance (and residency activities, if included) engender loyalty among subscribers, patrons, and donors, for the future of our presenting program and ultimately a stronger future for a particular art form?

CMA: How do you attract the younger audience?

EF: I realize that it takes some time for student audiences to acclimate to the concert protocol. They are used to going to clubs, not concert halls. Going to concerts in this "discovery phase" needs to be cultivated carefully. To this end, I look at what ensembles are doing in alternative venues, such as clubs, as it helps me to connect to the students that will be attending our concerts. It is great to take younger, emerging groups to the commons areas of student residence halls as they are more open to entertaining this type of activity.

CMA: So, how does that translate into actually choosing groups?

EF: First of all, I am an audience member, too! I make programming decisions as if I were the audience member and patron. If a particular ensemble sparks enthusiasm in me, chances are they will work for the larger presenting program, which—in the case of the arts center I work for—



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encompasses classical and world music, jazz, dance, and theater.

We presenters must appeal not only to the aficionado, but also to chamber music and jazz neophytes who may have a wider range of musical sensibilities and tastes.

CMA: What does this mean for the ensemble?

EF: All presenters look for certain common features when booking an ensemble—skilled playing is the bottom line, obviously—but we also look for passion and musicality, a distinct musical character, and audience appeal in terms of appearance, communication, and deportment.

CMA: How do you “scout” for talent?

EF: I develop seasons two to three years in advance and am, therefore, constantly searching for new artists in a variety of ways. I look at what’s working in the current year, gauging the audience’s enthusiasm, while putting together the season for subsequent years. I also discover groups by word of mouth. Getting a recommendation from a fellow presenter who has had a positive experience with an ensemble is more likely to pique my interest than is a cold call from someone I am not familiar with.

Senior artists with whom I’ve work in the past are often mentoring up-and-coming artists. Chances are the groups they are mentoring will have some appeal for me and my audience. And it’s always interesting to know what is coming down the pike. A younger group may not be right for my series at the moment, but I might keep my eye on them for the future.

CMA: How do you find emerging talents?

EF: I value the work done by Concert Artists Guild, Young Concert Artists, and the Young Professional Career Advancement participants at the Arts Presenters Conference. These give me a glimpse at younger, emerging talent that will connect well with my student audience.

CMA: If a group is not part of these rosters, however, can they still find a way to attract your attention?

EF: If a group believes it is ready for active touring, it’s always good to perform in showcases. Networks and conferences I attend every year are invaluable in identifying groups. Showcases at Chamber Music America, Arts Presenters, the International Association for Jazz Education and regional booking conferences are a great source of information about who is doing what these days. Attending showcases and sessions gives me the opportunity to see the artists in action and sample their work. Looking at someone’s print materials or electronic press kit or even listening to or viewing a DVD is one thing; but there’s no substitute for seeing the work live. This way, I can get a sense of how they might look on my stage, see how others in the audience are responding, and even meet the artists.

CMA: What attracts you when considering a group for potential booking?

EF: I look for an ensemble’s preparedness—well-rehearsed programs, of course, but also having a grasp on the repertory that gets the players’ “eyes out of the score” and displays the ensemble in “of the moment” eye communication with one another and with their audience.

CMA: So, how can an ensemble communicate this to you if you haven’t heard them?

EF: I often watch DVDs, or even Web clips.

CMA: You mentioned alternative methods of finding artists. Can you give some examples?

EF: YouTube.com clips are a new and creative way of sampling a group’s work. Managers often send me clips or their artists, and I often peruse websites looking for YouTube links.

CMA: Are these new-media methods something that you employ in your marketing as well?

EF: College presenters trying to connect to the 18- to 22-year-old crowd are increasingly turning to viral marketing and I-Pod/MP3 tools to communicate with this new generation of uninitiated listeners.

If an ensemble’s website (or its management’s) includes four or five video clips of the ensemble, handsomely shot with adequate audio fidelity (and crisp performances), these clips help us sell the merits of the concert experience to our student audiences. Excerpting Schubert and Bartók in three- or four-minute sound bytes is not as desirable as the full piece; however, many younger-generation ensembles respond well to this approach. MP3 music sharing and using Cyberspace can’t reinvent the real and enduring pleasures of concert hall vitality, but they might help in enticing audience members.

Odd as it may sound, many presenters can exploit a three-minute YouTube.com clip to great advantage. These clips can be easily communicated in e-mail blasts; however, it is important to get the endorsement and the written permission of the ensemble.

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CMA: Are there other things that an ensemble needs to know in order to help the presenter?

EF: Most presenters enjoy dialogue with ensembles they’ve booked, and well in advance of the concert, either through management or, preferably, with a member of the ensemble. Here the many imponderables of the engagement can be talked through—the make-up of the audience, levels of prior history (what ensembles played for you last year and what repertory did they perform and even smallish issues, such as dress code,

or degrees of formality in stage manners).

Marketing and community engagement prior to the performance is done in a number of ways. Press coverage that is put into circulation well ahead of the concert is important; however, pre-engagement residency visits or “pump-priming” activities such as phone-in radio interviews—usually held around the day of the concert—are the most successful for drawing in the audience.

CMA: What else helps in making an engaging presentation?

EF: For some groups (and for some presenters), spoken communication from artists to audience works well. Ensembles need to prepare their comments well and know the level of sophistication of the potential audience (professionals, laity, seasoned veterans, and youth—both pre-college and college-age).

When spoken commentary is not part of the presenter’s protocol—which is unusual these days—or if the artists are uncomfortable with spoken communication, good written program notes can strengthen the engagement and provide rationale for programming choices. In this case, I try to take it beyond discrete paragraphs about three unrelated compositions and speak to the larger context of how the pieces resonate with each other as a whole.

I have also found that students respond well to an ensemble’s request to bring work-in-progress to a workshop or residency forum—a new work they’re just learning, for which students can observe them in the rehearsal studio, hearing them discuss the work’s structural features, theme development, unusual sonorities, etc. Also, if an ensemble is working on new repertoire from “The Canon,” these “open rehearsal” settings, in which the ensemble debates various readings of a passage, are very useful.

CMA: How do you attract audiences on campus and in the off-campus general public to try new things?

EF: I schedule pre-concert talks geared toward the general audience. These are quite effective.

CMA: What additional small ensemble presenting strategies have you used to draw audience participation?

EF: In the past few seasons, I have been working to dissolve the boundary between

classical chamber music and jazz. I’ve been programming a series of jazz duos and other pairings to help my audience get closer to the essence of chamber music. These presentations have produced some interesting work through such collaborations as the guitarist Jim Hall with pianist Geoffrey Keezer, and jazz pianist Billy Childs with the American Brass Quintet, to name

a couple. The musicians have a chance to read each other’s artistry and the audience feels more closely engaged. This sentiment was nicely articulated to our audience by jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton in his recent performance with Chick Corea: “A duo is a true dialogue.” This idea is at the heart of chamber music.

Interactive Performance Skills for Ensemble Musicians

A CMA Education & Residency Institute

Through interdisciplinary exercises and demonstrations, New Triad for Collaborative Arts will work with participants to enhance presentation skills and enliven performances.

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Pianist **Adam Marks** leads audience-engagement seminars and coaches performers. **Debra Wiley** is an acting teacher/coach and voice specialist.

REGISTRATION FEES

(including continental breakfast and lunch)

CMA Members: \$50

(\$40/ea. for 2 or more members of an ensemble)

Non-members: \$65, and Students: \$25

To register or for more information, please visit
www.chamber-music.org/events/education.htm

or contact Nick Iovanna: niovanna@chamber-music.org.

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Events

CMA Education and Residency Institute: Interactive Performance Skills for Ensemble Musicians—One-day professional development session designed to enhance ensemble musicians' skills as speakers and performers. Led by New Triad for Collaborative Arts. New York University's Kimmel Center, New York NY. **May 3, 2008.**
FMI: www.chamber-music.org.

National Performing Arts Convention (NPAC): Taking Action Together—NPAC will lay the foundation for future cross-disciplinary collaborations, cooperative programs and effective advocacy. **June 10–14, 2008.** Denver, CO.
FMI: www.performingartsconvention.org.

Grant Opportunities

Global Connections—Support for travel abroad by U.S.-based composers for live performance of their works or research and development. Covered items may include appearance/residency fee, travel, accommodation, and travel-related per-diem costs. **DEADLINE: June 2, 2008.**
FMI: www.nea.gov.

Challenge America: Reaching Every Community Fast-Track Review Grants—Support for projects that extend the reach of the arts to underserved populations. **DEADLINE: June 2, 2008.** FMI: www.nea.gov.

Learning in the Arts for Children and Youth—Funding to advance arts education for children and youth in school-based or community-based settings. **DEADLINE: June 9, 2008.** FMI: www.nea.gov.

The Aaron Copland Fund for Music Performing Ensembles Program—General-operating or project support to professional performing ensembles that have demonstrated a substantial commitment to contemporary American music. **DEADLINE: June 30, 2008.**
FMI: www.coplandfund.org.

Trust for Mutual Understanding—Grants to non-profits conducting cultural exchanges with institutions and individuals in Russia and Eastern/Central Europe. Letter of inquiry required prior to application. **DEADLINE: August 1, 2008.** FMI: www.tmuny.org.

Access to Artistic Excellence—Funding to encourage and support artistic excellence, preserve American cultural heritage, and provide access to the arts for all Americans. **DEADLINE: August 11, 2008.**
FMI: www.nea.gov.