

EL SISTEMA USA

ORGANIZATIONAL CASE STUDY

CITYMUSIC CLEVELAND

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OVERVIEW

CityMusic Cleveland is a professional chamber orchestra presenting in Northeast Ohio. Incorporated in 2004, the orchestra presented five programs in six regional venues during the 2009-2010 season, not including further contract touring activity. Although compensation meets American Federation of Musician guidelines, the ensemble is non-union and non-contract with a nominal roster of 42 musicians. The orchestra is currently without conventional artistic leadership: former Music Director James Gaffigan continues to be involved in programming and conducting in the capacity of Artistic Advisor, and conductor Joel Smirnoff of the Cleveland Institute of Music maintains a regular presence on the podium. The artistic stewardship of the organization has been described by the Executive Director, Eugenia Strauss, as undergoing migration to a model resembling that of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

The annual budget of the orchestra, as presented in audited reports for FY 2008-2009, is approximately \$375,000. Concert revenues and foundation support account for roughly two fifths of that sum each, with the remained fifth coming through government funding. Corporate support and CD sales contribute a statistically insignificant amount towards operating income. The financial model of the orchestra is extremely unusual in that all performances in the greater Cleveland area are presented free of charge. Concert revenue then is exclusively in the form of site donations, which average \$5 per attendee. Anecdotal reports of venue overcrowding suggests that performances are extremely well-attended, with current annual attendance ranging between 14,000 and 20,000 individuals in total, although without concrete ticket sales these numbers are estimations, and unique visitors cannot be reasonably determined.

The six performances of each program are a fundamental element of the orchestra's strategy of enhanced social integration, but are also noteworthy in that they allow the orchestra to achieve economies of scale, greatly increasing the revenue to cost ratio of concerts against rehearsals. By presenting in venues throughout the city, the orchestra attempts to effect localized economic and community revitalization. The unusually high proportion of municipal funding generated suggests that the civic governance of the recipient communities considers the orchestra's ongoing presence to be of value. The orchestra has recently announced plans for another series of "intergenerational concerts" under the same community integration model, with performances centered around a commissioned work by prominent composer Margaret Brouwer. In an unusual and innovative

arrangement, the responsibility for marketing the events will fall to the host municipalities, with the explicit intention that a very broad cross-section of the local populace be represented.

CityMusic Cleveland has only one full-time administrator, Executive Director Eugenia Strauss. With the exception of the educational initiatives, Strauss oversees all aspects of the organization's operations, including fundraising, marketing, programming, and production. The responsibility for education programs up to 2010 lay primarily with Rebecca Mayhew, principal oboe of the ensemble.

LOCAL ECONOMY

The state of Ohio, with its heavy dependence on manufacturing and the auto industry in particular, has been especially hard hit by the recession. Unemployment in Ohio exceeds 10%, placing it within the worst ten states for jobless rates. Specific neighbourhoods in the Cleveland area, such as Slavic Village, have the further dubious distinction of being described as the “epicenter” of the mortgage foreclosure crisis. The eviction of homeowners or the abandonment of property in some neighbourhoods has compounded social problems. Deserted homes are stripped of all materials of value, and are so damaged in the process that the cost of repairs frequently exceeds the value of the property as a whole. Communities lack the resources to demolish the ruined husks, so the properties become staging grounds for gangs and attendant problems such as further vandalism, thefts, drugs, and in some cases, violence. The crime index for Cleveland, a relative measure of the frequency and severity of unlawful activity, is currently at over three times the national average.

LOCAL CULTURAL ECONOMY

The classical music industry in Cleveland is perforce dominated by the Cleveland Orchestra, as an ensemble of international prestige and reputation. The current educational initiatives under its umbrella are conventional, consisting primarily of specialized concerts and musician residencies. The orchestra also maintains an affiliated youth orchestra, the primary function of which is high-level young musician training. A member of the Cleveland Orchestra and recently announced Abreu Fellow (2010-2011), Isabel Trautwein, has developed an independent initiative named *The Awesome Children's Orchestra (TACO)*, with the intent of creating further parallel opportunities for young musicians to play. This group has collaborated with the Cleveland Orchestra, but there is currently no formal relationship. The Contemporary Youth Orchestra focuses on modern music

in three presentations per year, but under a similar mission as the associated youth group of the Cleveland Orchestra. The Broadway School of Music and the Arts, a typical community school with faculty primarily in keyboards, conical brass, guitar and violin, maintains a modest outreach program described on their website as “free weekly private Suzuki violin lessons and a group class to kindergarten students.” A neighbouring community organization, Jones Road Church, maintains a small wind ensemble that meets and rehearses weekly. The Cleveland Institute of Music boasts a typical preparatory division with orchestras of varying levels open to students based on auditions and tuition, and a secondary conservatory called The Music Settlement offers similar programs at relatively comparable costs. Outreach at the latter consists of financial aid awarded to individuals for on the basis of musical merit. Finally, the Cleveland School for the Arts offers the highest level of artistic training available within the public secondary school system. Anecdotal reports reasonably suggest there are other organizations or individuals engaged in comparable areas, but at the time of writing no concrete documentation such as websites or media coverage had been found.

There appears to be very little partnership or collaboration between these organizations. Aside from normal political and artificial territorial tensions, most of the musical institutions within the city are focused entirely on traditional models of cultivating musical excellence, relying on talent self-identification / self-presentation or tuition-funded operations.

SOCIAL ACTIVITY THROUGH MUSIC

CityMusic Cleveland operates a fledgling musical education programs, described in their materials as “inspired by *el Sistema*.” The initiative provides twice-weekly ensemble instruction at St. Stanislaus School in the Slavic Village neighbourhood, one of the worst-hit communities in the mortgage foreclosure crisis. Although the program is housed at a Catholic primary institution, it is open to all children between grades 1-5 without restriction or charge, but for reasons of proximity the majority of program participants are drawn from the host school.

Extract from CMC publicity materials: Of the 69 participants in 2009-2010, the genders were almost equally represented with 33 boys and 36 girls in grades 1-5, and between ages 7-12. Based on data collected by program leadership, approximately 40% of participants came from a background that included behavioral disorders, learning delays, depression, attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), family issues, and individual education plans for bipolar disorder (IEP).

The current program has two phases running in parallel. There is a ten-week induction period at the start of every semester in which the incoming participants convene twice a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) to learn the rudiments of music and ensemble playing on recorder. After completion of the first phase, the students select a string instrument and join in mid-session the string orchestra, which started rehearsals at the same time and in the same time periods. An academic component created by program designer Regina Giraldo complements the practical elements. The curriculum for this integrates basic elements of musicology and music theory and is designed to conform to state guidelines. Formal classroom instruction in these areas had concluded at the time of the site visit and all activities were focused on preparation for the final concert, so no direct observations were possible.

The orchestra class follows the same schedule each program day. The students convene at 2:45, collect their instruments, and present them to the instructors for tuning. The tuned instruments are then returned to the cases and a snack is distributed, normally a juice box and a packet of chips or cookies. Students are expected to wash their hands following the snack, then return to the room, retrieve their instruments, and the rehearsal begins. After approximately an hour, the students disperse into sectional by experience level, not by instrument. Sectionals last roughly thirty minutes, at which point the students reconvene for the remainder of the session after a short break.

The orchestra is directed by Amitai Vardi, clarinetist for CityMusic Cleveland and the Cleveland Opera Orchestra. He is normally supported by one or two assistants from a small rotating pool of high and low-string specialists. The current assistants are either graduate-level students at the Cleveland Institute of Music, or have recently completed studies. They assist with tuning, provide some degree of supervision during the rehearsals, and generally take a leadership role in the sectionals as well. Other staff frequently on-site includes Program Designer Regina Giraldo, a PhD student in Urban Education at Cleveland State University and a graduate of *el Sistema* in Venezuela, and Rebecca Mayhew, the Director of Education for CityMusic Cleveland and its principal oboe.

An exceptional feature of the program is the inclusion of local touring, which in many ways mirrors the activities of the parent orchestra on a smaller scale. During the third week of May 2010 the orchestra played at two local schools for their peers, and in the lobby of a supporting financial institution. The presentations were short, no more than 20 minutes, but offered CMC the opportunity to provide new and diverse performing experiences for participants, showcase the program to the community, and create recruitment opportunities.

All musical materials, including printed music, stands and instruments, are provided by CityMusic Cleveland. The organization maintains a substantial musical instrument bank, acquired through donation or direct purchase, which includes wind and brass instruments. Since CMC's program is strings-only, apart from the recorder induction phase, the wind and brass instruments in the bank are loaned to nearby Jones Road Church, which maintains the aforementioned young person's wind ensemble. This is the one significant partnership currently maintained by CMC, allowing them to focus their efforts in their area of expertise and ensure all donated instruments are put to good use. As importantly, the partnership was undertaken with the long strategic view of uniting the performing forces in the future when the string program is sufficiently developed to handle conventional symphonic repertoire.

Repertoire for the orchestra appears to be compiled from several sources: existing published materials, and music custom-developed internally by CityMusic faculty and externally by volunteers. Arrangements or reductions of classical mainstays are the norm, although the orchestra has read through some original didactic compositions from local music teachers.

Program Evaluation and assessment is managed internally by Regina Giraldo. The work was undertaken as part of her Masters studies, and was supervised by a senior faculty member in Educational Research at Cleveland State University. At the time of writing, the initial assessment was incomplete and unavailable for inclusion.

GENERAL IMPLICATIONS / ANALYSIS

In keeping with the Venezuelan ethos, CMC's program is in a state of constant evolution. CityMusic intends to expand the activities to four to five days a week in the fall of 2010 to reflect and reinforce its mandate of social intervention. Funding activities for this expansion are in

progress at the time of writing and it appears likely that the effort will succeed. It should be noted then that the following analysis may not reflect current practice or operations.

It should be acknowledged from the outset that CityMusic Cleveland has accomplished a great deal in the three semesters the program has been operating. The explicit social orientation of the program, the use of the ensemble experience, the inclusiveness and non-selectiveness, and the frequency of activity, are in combination very strongly aligned with the philosophical practices of Venezuela's *el Sistema*. The twice-weekly frequency of orchestra rehearsal is particularly noteworthy as exceeding that of many other better-known programs, and if the expansion to four to five days a week is successful, will place the program in a league of its own on that basis alone.

CMC's program, being so strongly influenced by Venezuela's *el Sistema*, is in practical terms a merger between two divergent pedagogical cultures and traditions. As such, assimilation or adaptation is at times incomplete or uncomfortable in areas of greatest cultural contrast. The most striking example of this is the role of the assistants in the rehearsal milieu. These individuals are inarguably highly qualified, with an excellent understand of string pedagogy, yet appeared very passive in orchestral rehearsal, generally limiting their involvement to playing alongside the children. This appears to be a North American/Western European concept of support, one that essentially acknowledges that responsibility and authority for instruction lies with the conductor alone. This approach works best in an orchestra of uniform ability when an instruction to one is applicable to all, but given the different levels of ability created by the parallel induction and orchestra programs, a much more active approach on the part of the assistants would be beneficial. The Venezuelan practice in this regard is one of immediate, direct intervention by supporting faculty, with the general guidelines rooted in practicality. There the faculty members intervene when they may be do so without speaking (to correct a bow hold, etc.), at the start of the rehearsal process to help keep the musicians together, or when the student is so far behind the curve that any general instruction from the podium will be meaningless. Overcoming the innate, culturally pre-programmed abdication of authority to the conductor may be a challenge for the assistants, and require some degree of advance orientation or on-site coaching, preferably both.

The parallel induction and ensemble programs, while typifying *el Sistema* practice, create further challenges in terms of repertoire. Quality and availability of suitable repertoire remains an ongoing frustration for the faculty, particularly in terms of finding works that accommodate multiple levels of experience and ability. At the time of writing, the orchestra is not sufficiently

advanced to play any works from the classical canon unabridged or unaltered. Works rehearsed during the observation period included an original composition by a volunteer, and arrangements effected internally that included open-string alongside first or first and second position parts. Notation for the observed repertoire was inconsistent, and in one case incomprehensible, and many students resorted to learning the music by rote. This by itself is not necessarily negative, but the children who aren't able to make the correlation between what they play and what they see on the printed page have significantly greater challenges learning independently. If the program expansion to four or five days a week is successful, it will be even easier for children to avoid the hurdle of musical literacy. This isn't speculation: the exact same problem has emerged in Venezuela and is perhaps the most significant pedagogical challenge facing *el Sistema* right now, having prompted higher investment in teacher development by program leadership. By the same token, the Venezuela experience also demonstrates how universal this issue is, so no criticism of CMC should be inferred.

Unsurprisingly, the most pressing challenges facing the program relate to finance and sustainability. Changing the vocabulary they used to describe the program in their promotional materials was a major cultural shift for the organization. Despite CMC's clear social objectives, the program support documentation described their activities in the same terminology of conventional professional orchestra education programs without emphasizing the interventionist, community-building impetus. The change in vocabulary will hopefully facilitate a change in funding approach to go far beyond the very limited pool of foundations supporting the performing arts to those funding a plethora of health, education and social initiatives.

Further concerns relate to levels of compensation. Hourly rates for instructors are set uncommonly high, as a direct expression on the part of management of the valuation of the services, and to promote consistency of faculty as benefitting the participants. As the program expands to 2 or 2 ½ times its original scope, these rates may be unsustainable, and alternate models of remuneration will have to be explored with consequences yet to be determined. The program being intrinsically linked with the professional orchestra, the issues and challenges of long-term sustainability start with the parent organization and its management in particular. The driving force behind the professional ensemble is its founder and Executive Director, Eugenia Strauss, who created the ensemble after a highly distinguished career in fundraising for the arts. Her stewardship of the group has been uncommonly innovative and competent, but the question remains whether the organization as a whole could survive without her leadership. This

situation, although near-universal in fledgling arts organizations, in turn creates funder-anxiety and may account in part for the limited success experienced with foundations based in Cleveland, despite the uncommon worthiness of the group's activities. The ticketless model also makes it very difficult to track attendance and market penetration beyond the anecdotal, which subsequently makes attracting corporate support even more difficult. And naturally, the minimal staff has zero-capacity to address these without neglecting other duties.

CONCLUSION

There is extraordinary potential within CityMusic Cleveland, with implications reaching far beyond its education program. CMC is on the verge of developing a new model for orchestras, in which social relevance, via a real relationship with its community, replaces the current transactional "you pay we play" formula. The educational activities will play a major role in this, which, if successful in Cleveland, will render the conventional model obsolete and provide a new paradigm from which orchestras will design similar programs as a key element of their own long-term viability. Much will depend on the next two to three years, but CMC is deserving of attention as much for its innovative spirit as for its fidelity to Venezuelan values.