

If It Ain't Broke, Break It

What 10 Years of Research and Experimentation Tells Us about
Audiences, Creativity, and the Future of Orchestras

Closing Keynote, 2014 National Conference
League of American Orchestras

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It's truly an honor to be with you today at the closing session of the 2014 annual conference. I've enjoyed meeting so many of you over the years.

As a classically trained musician, I share your love of great music and believe fundamentally in the power of music to transform lives and communities. My favorite course in college was Shenkerian analysis of atonal music. It took 10 years to figure out that statistics was my destiny, and market research my passion, and here we are.

Jesse asked if I would take stock of progress in the orchestra field over the past 10 years, looking through the lens of market research.

Since you all run orchestras, I don't need to remind you of the many ways in which the landscape of music consumption has changed so vastly over the past decade. Public tastes in music have diversified and fragmented, driven by deep and profound demographic and cultural shifts. Younger adults' tastes in music are **wildly eclectic**, and music is now a visual experience for those who grew up with music videos and now YouTube. With the migration of consumption from physical media to streaming audio, we've witnessed an unprecedented **proliferation of choice**. As of today there are 293 classical music streams on iTunes radio, and consumers (and some orchestras) are now curating their own channels on Spotify, Pandora and other services.

Downloading music and making playlists is **by far** the dominant modality of music participation in the US. And billions of people worldwide have grown accustomed to listening to music in random order, with an algorithm as their DJ.

And, thankfully, people are still showing up for live concerts.

The external environment in which orchestras operate is an **oil slick** of changing consumer behaviors, changing musical tastes, and changing music. We come to this conference year after year to try to grasp what's happening to the world we thought we knew, to question assumptions, and, perhaps even to rethink what it means to be a music organization in contemporary society.

Claire Chase gave us a tantalizing glimpse of an alternative universe in her speech on Wednesday. But I've been wrestling mightily over the last 48 hours to reconcile Claire's call to "widen the space of our imagination" with the realities of the conversations I'm hearing in breakout sessions and in the hallways.

In hopes of building a bridge between where we are, and where we need to go as a field, I'd like to share with you a framework for thinking about the creative health of an orchestra – drawing on a study I've just completed for Arts Council England. Over the past few months, my colleague John Carnwath and I have taken a deep dive into scholarly research on the impacts of arts experiences, and the characteristics of organizations that present and produce meaningful, impactful arts programs.

[SLIDE] The product of this research is a 120-page literature review called "Understanding the Value and Impacts of Cultural Experiences" which Arts Council England will release next month. I heartily commend it to those of you in need of a strong **sleep aid**.

What makes arts organizations financially healthy is reasonably well understood – although this, too, is changing. But there is no similar consensus on what makes an arts organisation healthy in an **artistic or creative sense**. This is a challenge we can and must face down. Perhaps more than anything else, the vitality of the arts sector as a whole, and certainly the orchestra field, depends on the collective ability of our **creative leaders** to continually produce interesting, fun, educational, surprising and imaginative programs.

Six Elements of Creative Capacity

[SLIDE] The term that emerged from our study is "**creative capacity**." This refers to an organization's ability to conceptualize and present programs that engage audiences and communities in meaningful, impactful experiences. That's a mouthful, so I'll repeat it. An orchestra's "creative capacity" is its ability to conceptualize and present programs that engage audiences and communities in meaningful, impactful experiences. Research tells us that there are **six elements of creative capacity**, which I'll describe briefly.

[SLIDE] The first of these elements is **clarity of intent and commitment to risk-taking**.

Open and frank dialogue about artistic matters amongst board and staff is a core element of an orchestra's creative capacity. To what **ends** does your orchestra offer programs? What do you hope to accomplish in terms of participant outcomes and community outcomes?

The degree of intentionality underlying programming **is** one of the areas where the orchestra field has advanced significantly in the past 10 years. We've moved from a

place of believing that the value of what we do is self-evident to working within a much more defined value framework. This is, perhaps, one of the biggest paradigm shifts in the field – seeing ourselves not just as curators of concerts but as **architects of impact**. In the months after 9/11, we learned how to help communities grieve in times of great need. We’ve become adept at designing socially engaging experiences. We’ve learned how create programs that bring families closer together. As the video we saw a few minutes ago illustrates so well, we’ve learned how to approach and engage diverse communities as partners in music-making.

This is a **major** change in how we understand our jobs. And it signals an important change in how our communities see us.

The starting point of an orchestra’s creative capacity, therefore, is **clarity and consensus on the desired outcomes of programming** – and a clear statement about what risks you’re willing to take – indeed, what risks you **must** take – in order to remain true to your artistic commitment.

[SLIDE] The second element of an orchestra’s creative capacity is its **community relevance**.

The research literature suggests that an arts organisation’s responsiveness to its community is a core element of its creative capacity. But community relevance **cannot** be achieved through advocacy or branding. Fundamentally, community relevance is a way of thinking, and a way of acting, that respects and acknowledges the hopes, needs and aspirations of the community as a guidepost in all that the organization does.

Certainly we’ve seen enormous growth in the orchestra field in this area. Community engagement has moved from the periphery to the center of dialogue in the field. Many orchestras have stepped into the void of music education and stepped out into their communities in ways that could never be contemplated 10 years ago, working in hospital and prison settings, and animating entire communities through crowd-sourced and co-created programs.

At the core of this sea change is a new sensibility of what it means to be embedded in a community. Jesse spoke about this with great clarity earlier today. In order to be relevant in its community, an orchestra must first be **aware** of its community’s needs – its challenges, and its aspirations. This requires a certain diagnostic capacity. And it also requires accepting that we **do not** live in a cookie cutter world, and that one orchestra need **not** look **anything** like another orchestra in a different community.

[SLIDE] So, I ask, **how do you know what your community needs from you?** What conversations that are happening in your community would you like to be a part of? Where can music be injected into civic discourse?

Community relevance is **not** about asking people what music they **want** us to play, but about listening, **deep listening**, and filtering that information through the lens of your unique artistic assets, and considering how **your orchestra** can make a difference. And everyone in an orchestra organization, I would argue – staff, board, audiences and musicians – **can and must** play an active role in the necessary work of diagnosing the community.

[SLIDE] Just last month the Australia Council for the Arts released a new website focused exclusively on Community Relevance, which I highly recommend. You can find it at cr.australiacouncil.gov.au.

[SLIDE] The third element of an orchestra's creative capacity is **excellence in curating and a capacity to innovate**.

At the very heart of every arts organisation is a process of conceptualizing and curating imaginative programs. This element of creative capacity addresses the health of the **creative process** – the process of conceiving, designing and developing public programs. It draws not only on the artistic talents of music directors and artistic administrators, but on an organizational culture that values and supports **creativity in programming**.

[SLIDE] What are the inputs to your programming decisions? Are the right artistic voices at the table? Who can suggest ideas for programs? What process is used for vetting them? Are alternative settings and formats considered? Why or why not?

Here researchers make a critical distinction in suggesting that new works of art are not necessarily innovative, while imaginative presentations of old works may be highly innovative. We must **not** mistake the programming of contemporary repertoire for creativity in programming.

Over the past 10 years, we've witnessed a tidal wave of programming experiments, so extensive, in fact, that no one really knows the full extent of it. Interdisciplinary work is at the center of this movement – weaving together classical music with dance, theatre, film, spoken word, circus arts, and numerous other artistic forms, and exploring the intersections between classical music and other genres of music. The greatest hope for engaging a new generation of young people in classical music, I believe, lies in the artistic frontier of **music visualization**. A **number** of orchestras **right now** are exploring this frontier, but there's an entirely new hybrid form of artistic expression yet to be discovered.

This is a time of fitful, even frantic, innovation in the orchestra field. Take, for example, the proliferation of alternative concert formats in recent years, some with educational goals, other thematic in nature; some designed as trial experiences for newcomers, and others designed to blur the line between socializing and concert-going. This is not just the province of the large orchestras. In a survey of Group 5

and 6 orchestras just before this conference, **half** reported offering concerts in alternative formats. Admittedly, much of this experimentation is happening around the fringe of core classical programming. But it **is**, slowly, moving towards the core.

This represents a **big** shift in thinking – moving away from a mindset of programming as a series of one-off concerts that never repeat, to a mindset of programming as a portfolio of branded formats and product lines – renewable artistic assets that pay dividends well into the future. As time goes on and the musical tastes of Americans continue to diversify, it's **inevitable** that orchestras will need to offer a wider selection of concerts, formats and settings that engage the public in different ways. We will survive as a field by giving audiences choices to make, and guiding them towards the concert experiences that map to their preferences and life experiences.

The **one idea** I'm taking home from this conference is that the creative process itself must change and adapt. We know so little how artistic decisions are made, yet this is undoubtedly the most essential process at work in the industry.

What is your creative process? How well does it serve you? Whose job is it to imagine the next product line, or the next format, or to get out in the community and explore spaces that you might bring alive with great music?

[SLIDE] The fourth element of creative capacity is **technical proficiency, skill and artistry**. It goes without saying, but nevertheless it must be said. Artistically vibrant orchestras execute their programs with a high degree of **skill and artistry**. To strive for artistic excellence is a given, just as one strives for excellence in management and excellence in governance. Excellence is not a brand attribute, or a core value, or a strategy, because excellence is not a choice. Just as no one shows up to work and commits to mediocrity. Striving to achieve a high quality of artistry is a basic minimum institutional commitment to making the most of your talents and resources.

The emphasis placed on technical proficiency in the orchestra field accords the professional artist with a privileged place in the field's conceptualization of quality. This value is evident in our organizational structures, our collective bargaining agreements, our audition processes, and in the very DNA of the field. But of course, an orchestra's creative capacity does **not** hinge solely on its ability to employ virtuosic musicians.

By obsessing over technical proficiency we risk losing sight of the larger idea of **value**. What matters to consumers more than quality is value. And the value represented in a concert experience goes well beyond the quality of playing, and includes the comfort and ambience of the setting, the format and other aspects of program design, the quality of interpretive assistance provided to the audience, the quality of the visual experience, the quality of customer service, and so on.

What is your standard for quality? What aspects of quality matter most to your constituents? What trade-offs in quality are you willing to make in order to serve a broader cross-section of the public?

[SLIDE] An orchestra's **capacity to engage audiences** is the fifth element of its creative capacity. This speaks to the organisation's ability to contextualize and animate the work, and to help audiences and participants make meaning from it.

A great deal of research points to correlations between knowledge of the art form and frequency of attendance and donation. Audiences who have deeper experiences, and who engage critically with the artistic work, are more likely to attend frequently and support the organization.

Some musical works are more engaging than others, so engagement is not solely the provenance of education, but also a reflection of programming choices. So, I would argue that audience engagement starts with season planning.

In fact, audience engagement has become a significant focus of practice in the orchestra field. Offering interpretive assistance from the stage is now the norm. A majority of small orchestras report that some amount taking from the stage is integrated into all or nearly all of their core classical programs. Many orchestras have **significantly** beefed up efforts to distribute program information in advance of concerts. Orchestra musicians are being coached on their speaking skills. Program books are being re-considered as vehicles for engagement. And the field continues to experiment with mobile technologies that deliver musical insights to audience members in real time.

We have come **so far** with engagement, but of course there is much work yet to be done. So, I ask, what is your plan for engaging a larger proportion of your audience in the music, and in the creative process of your organization? As knowledge and engagement rises, so will loyalty and repeat attendance. But the **real** reason to engage audiences is to magnify the impact of your artistic work.

Sending someone home with the experience of great music is one thing. But sending someone home better able to appreciate great music is an investment in their lifetime journey through the arts, and an investment in the sustainability of your orchestra.

[SLIDE] The sixth and final aspect of an orchestra's creative capacity is welcoming **critical feedback on your artistic work and making a commitment to continuous improvement**. The hallmark of a professional in any field is welcoming critical feedback on your work. It's never easy. But it's the only way we can learn and grow.

Honestly, I don't know how the field is doing on this front. I **am** aware that orchestras are surveying audiences more frequently, and, in some cases, inviting

feedback on the artistic work. But I don't know that we've had enough discourse as a field as to the role of feedback in an artistically-driven enterprise.

In the management sciences field, study after study finds that organizations with strong feedback mechanisms **across all levels of the organization** are more adaptive and more successful. Why would **anyone** in an arts organization be exempt from evaluation or immune to feedback, especially resident artists, but also board members?

The museum field has a long history of formative evaluation and refining exhibit design based on visitor feedback, but the performing arts lacks a similar mechanism. The great irony is that most audience members, **for a cookie**, would be **thrilled** to sit down and give you feedback on programming ideas or anything else.

It seems apparent from the research literature that the **process** of offering feedback **can be** a growth experience for audiences, in that they learn to formulate critical reactions to artistic work. In other words, audience feedback – **done well** – is part of the engagement cycle.

So I ask you to reflect on how your orchestra is vulnerable to critical feedback on artistic work – not just the quality of playing, but the quality of the creative process, and the quality of community engagement.

Closing Thoughts

[SLIDE] In closing, I invite you to start a new conversation in your orchestra about creative capacity. I've outlined six elements, but you may have others. In my wildest dreams, each of you might take this framework and adapt it to your own situation, and begin to hold yourselves accountable – **willingly hold yourselves accountable** - not only to a high standard of financial management but also to a high standard of creative capacity.

I'd be remiss not to mention the essential role that good capitalization plays in fulfilling an orchestra's creative capacity. Without the necessary capital, all the greatest programming ideas in world amount to vaporware. The conversation about capitalization therefore is really a conversation about the creative capacity of the field. We cannot afford another 10 years of one-site, one-off programming experiments that rise and fall with the whims of funders.

[BLACK OUT] I would like to assert that audience development is not a marketing problem. Rather, building the next generation of concertgoers is, first and foremost, a programming challenge. Focusing our talents and energies on building the creative capacity of our orchestras, I believe, is the single most important frontier of work in the field.

While the challenges facing the orchestra field may seem as daunting as ever, it is also true that real progress has been made – real innovation **is** happening, and we **are** adapting and even flourishing under very difficult circumstances.

The audience does not know what its not getting. They only know what they've seen, and they most certainly love what they know. But I can tell you from many years of researching audiences that the public responds to creative programming. Public tastes in music are malleable. In fact, tastes in music are changing every day at the speed of light. And, because of this, the creative possibilities in front of us now are greater then ever.

So, if it ain't broke, break it. Imagine something new and unexpected. Invent something that no one thought you could! Create new rituals that involve tens of thousands of people in making music, and capture the imagination of the public in ways that no one would have thought possible.

This is not in any way to diminish the core repertoire that we, and so many of our patrons and donors treasure and support. Not all of them will come with us on this journey to a wider imagination, but there **will** be others, and **they** are waiting for us.

If the audience is a reflection of what's on stage, then a commitment to building the **creative capacity** of your orchestra is the single most important commitment you can make.

Congratulations to all of you for all that you **have** done, and all that you **will** do, to ensure a brilliant creative future for us all.