

MARKETING SYMPHONY TO COLLEGE STUDENTS

Introduction to the Symphony: The Keys to Success

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Each semester since 2006 my Humanistic Studies 202 class at the University of Wisconsin—Green Bay has successfully partnered with the Green Bay Symphony to reach out to college students and provide a positive introduction to the orchestra. Students represent all four years of college and may be either traditional or non-traditional students, students who are beyond typical college age. The experience has taught some surprising lessons to all of us involved, not only to the four-hundred fifty students who have attended the concerts. This commentary defines those experiences and should provide guidelines to expanding the opportunity to other college students as well as to provide the Symphony with marketing guidelines for young adult audiences.

Key to the success of the program is understanding that in marketing to college students, we have only one opportunity to make this an exciting and meaningful experience, one that will hopefully be a life-long habit. More importantly, if this is a bad experience, they will not give it a second chance. For some, the Symphony is simply not to their taste and for them, they are free to make that statement when they can back it up with first-hand experience. Like broccoli, you won't know whether you like it unless you try it. But for most, it becomes a momentous event which they look forward to repeating.

RELEVANCE

For professors, the Symphony tucks nicely into general Humanities classes covering the Baroque to the Modern since that is a timeframe which matches Symphonic development. This also keeps the experience manageable and because Humanistic Studies is a required course at the University of Wisconsin—Green Bay, it is a systematic way to effectively reach students with a quality experience over a long period of time. It seamlessly fits into the subject material of a Humanistic Studies class and gives added value to course materials. To be most effective, the program should remain within the context of the course work and treated academically. Varied programming provides real life experience for students with samplings from a variety of eras and takes them far beyond the text book or a CD version played in the classroom. It also provides an independent foray into the life of an educated adult world. Statistically, sixty-five percent of our students are first-generation college students, many from small towns in northeast Wisconsin, and they have had little or no background in classical music or in the concert experience. Therefore, it also provides an important societal component.

Among the readings my students are assigned during the semester are two essays which deconstruct the live performance experience, Walter Benjamin's essay *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and Charles Moffat's essay *Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction*. What's the difference between live and copied art? The Symphony experience makes a dramatic difference. These give them a new appreciation of a live classical performance.

For students, the live symphony experience changes their relationship to classical music. As a group, although many students enjoy a broad range of popular music, they resist the classics believing them to be boring and old-fashioned. Further, they often assign class stigma to concert-goers seeing this as an event frequented by white, "stuck-up," rich, old people. A significant part of this learning

experience is that they find these beliefs to be incorrect which carries over to open their minds to other new experiences. Often they ponder, “What else have I been missing because I thought I might not like it?” Their fresh young faces and eager attitude does the same for concert-goers as well.

Although students may have taken music lessons, been in high school band or orchestra or attended a classical concert with a school group, they most often pack that experience away with their childhood. I have been surprised that there is virtually no carry-over and this regularly comes through in their response papers. This also counters an assumption that if we expose elementary and secondary students to the Symphony, it will carry on into adulthood. While enriching and important to a broad primary and secondary education, reintroducing the Symphony as an adult activity is far more productive in bringing in a college-aged audience.

For the Symphony, this program is a ground-breaking, systematic way to not only reach students, but to cast a broader net than we first thought with this project. Students who come as a part of the class assignment rarely come alone, sometimes they come with classmates but most frequently share their experience with first-time ticket buyers outside of the University community. They arrive with parents and grandparents, dates or spouses, siblings and friends, most of whom are sharing this as a first-time experience and all of whom have purchased a ticket. An added benefit is that students are pleased to have an opportunity to share their new expertise as they are well-prepared for the experience which adds value to their education as they instruct their seatmates in the basics of the concert experience.

DEVELOPING A COMFORT ZONE: PREPARATION

The Symphony is an intimidating experience for most students and they believe they will be awkward, stand out as not belonging and will not know what to do. Preparation allays these fears. It is also important that they know exactly what will happen during the time before, at the intermission and after the concert. Good preparation makes a first concert meaningful and something more likely to be repeated. Alleviating student anxiety and developing a comfort zone is easily achieved by a brief explanation of the evening. Students then confidently come to concerts with an air of excitement and feeling of glamour once they are comfortable. Sometimes they liken the experience to attending the Academy Awards or say they never dreamed they would ever enter a place as elegant as the Weidner Center and that it was one of the most exciting experiences of their lives.

Here is what they are told. . .

PRIOR TO THE CONCERT

- When you go to the ticket office, ask to see the seating chart and what is available to you. The Weidner has no bad seats. Higher seats have a more blended sound, closer seats let you see the musicians.
- What to wear. Something nice, perhaps what you’d wear on an important date or to a nice restaurant. For the men, a shirt and sweater or sport coat, shirt and tie; a suit is not necessary. **T-shirts and jeans are not appropriate but this is not a formal affair so prom-wear is not appropriate either.** [Dress often appears in papers after the concert noting that they had picked just the right outfit or that someone had appeared in jeans and that this was inappropriate. Fitting in is extremely important to them.]
- Arrive about 20 minutes before the concert. This is a social time and you’ll see people greeting and chatting with friends. Look for classmates and share your experience. (Look for me, I love to see my students at concerts.)
- Check out the venue. Often performances are held in art centers with beautiful art throughout the hall. Talk about it and tell them what to look for. It puts them in touch and makes this a comprehensive experience. In Green Bay, the beautiful Gallery at the Weidner Center for the Performing Arts has a Chihuly

chandelier so they are given detailed information about the artist (www.chuihuly.com). It is important for them to know that another Chihuly hangs in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It is world-class art and it is right here on their campus.

- The ushers at the door to the hall will direct you and help you find your seat.
- Turn off your CELL and DO NOT text message. It's distracting as is talking.
- The concert will be about two hours with an intermission at about half way through. You're a grown-up, you can sit through this.
- Take care of your personal needs before you take your seat; it's live and not a movie
- At intermission, look for others to chat with. The Weidner will ring chimes when it's time to return to the hall.
- At intermission, soft drink and wine are available at bars on each floor.

DURING THE CONCERT

- At the door to the hall an usher will give you a program. This will tell you a great deal about the concert including:
- The evening's program, what is being played and the number of movements. This also tells you when to applaud. Many works are divided into "movements," shifts in tone and tempo and these are spelled out in the program. Applause comes only at the end of the piece, not at the end of a movement although you may hear some in the audience applaud incorrectly. [This small notation makes students feel very much the insider and the often flaunt their knowledge of what is proper.]
- Concert notes in the program are a guide to the composer, the era in which a work is written and the work itself. You will find these notes helpful in understanding the music.
- The conductor and any soloists' biographies are included.
- The orchestra members are listed by name. You may even find one of your music teachers on stage.

CONCERT PROTOCOL: UNDERSTANDING THE FORMALITIES

- The Concertmaster will come out first. Essentially he is the manager of the musicians. He "prepares" the orchestra for the Conductor "tuning" the group.
- After the Concertmaster's work is completed, the Conductor enters, bows to the audience, shakes hands with the Concertmaster and the concert begins.
- After each work is completed and the conductor takes her/his bow, then extends his arm toward the orchestra for the audience to express his thanks to them. The Conductor then leaves the stage only to reappear for a second round of applause and perhaps a third. This extends the celebration of the work. Then the next piece begins, if there is one.

Traditionally, the Symphony has invited concert patrons to a post-concert reception. I tell students that this includes them and that this is an opportunity to congratulate the Maestro, and in some cases the composer and to meet the orchestra. While most are intimidated by the party, those students who have come have found it enjoyable. Again it is an independent step into an adult world. I also reassure them that I will be there so they should feel (somewhat) comfortable. Something that they learn is that their expression of gratitude is very important and meaningful to all concerned.

SEEING STARS

For students, meeting the Conductor is akin to meeting a movie star. In the intimacy of the classroom, they form a relationship with the Conductor which makes the performance a very personal event for them. The Conductor's visit, scheduled for the class closest to the concert, builds excitement and when the

Conductor, a person they personally know, walks out on that stage they are ready to burst. This also adds to the student's cultural currency with those who accompany them to the concert. The idea of personally knowing the star of the show is one of the most powerful tools in the success of this program. Students are both thrilled and honored by the visit and visitors are equally enthralled by it.

For the class visit, I request that the Conductor explain:

- how they hire an orchestra
- how they rehearse (Students are amazed at the short rehearsal schedule.)
- where the musicians come from and a little about the structure of their lives
- how a season is chosen
- the evening's program
- his/her career path

Students are to bring a question for the Conductor. After a brief introduction, class is turned over to the Conductor. (Note: We supply bottled water for all speakers.) Students are reminded to be on time as a courtesy and, should they be late, to enter through the back door of the classroom. The visit by the Conductor puts students at ease before the concert and they spread the information to those who come with them.

In some cases, we have had composers whose works were being premiered at the concert come to class as well. In this situation, the class time is divided equally between the two speakers with the conductor first on the agenda. Students bring a question for the composer as well. Prior to the visit, students are told of the excitement to be the very first to hear a composition and the fact that most of our guest composers have been under 35 connects the students with the artist. New music is important to them and the idea that this is not just "old stuff" engages them.

WHERE IN THE HALL SHALL WE PUT THEM?!: TICKETING

The best way to distribute tickets is to give each student a voucher good for any classical concert during the semester. Attendance for this class is mandatory and it is helpful to students to have alternatives in case of conflicts. The voucher also assures them that they will be seated with others in their party who are purchasing tickets. For the symphony, the voucher saves the cost of ticket-cutting until it is required.

This is an adult activity and for some students, their first independent experience into a sophisticated adult world. Seating them together turns this into "a class trip", undermines the adult experience and will not produce the long-lasting results we would all prefer. The hall has significant seating holes in the orchestra section. Filling the hall, especially the orchestra section, increases the energy level of the concert for both the orchestra members and the audience. The impression of success and ticket volume, especially in this section, builds future ticket sales across the board: popular begets popular. For younger students, the upper balcony is a good option. The feedback from college students over the past three years often notes the squirminess of younger audience members.

In the case of college students, ticket buyers in the immediate future, a different approach is suggested, especially since this is a make-or-break impression that is currently paying off in student rush ticket sales: give them the option of sitting in any vacant seat in the hall. Since we have established that perceived class issues are a barrier to students, this will help break that perception. As well, it gives students an opportunity to experience the hall differently, makes them feel and act like adults, and brings them in contact with regular symphony patrons. A repeated comment from students is how nice and helpful our audience is and many times students recount that patrons share their own first symphony experiences. For the current audience, these exchanges underscore the educational endeavors of the symphony and encourage their financial support.

Another comment I have heard from students is that they are relieved to see other younger people at the concert. They seem to believe that they will be at sea in a geriatric unit and this makes them uncomfortable. Finding a substantial number of younger people sells the experience along with seeing people who are not so richly dressed. Again and again they report back, "What I learned is that Symphony is for everyone, young, old, rich and not rich" and this is a monumental statement and important lesson.

At the beginning of the performance the class is welcomed by the pre-concert announcer. This is very meaningful to students and makes them feel both welcome and important. As well, it underscores the Symphony's educational outreach and encourages financial support from audience members, especially when a student may be in the seat next to a donor.

LIFE-LONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

The importance of expressing gratitude in written form is new to many students. It is a thoughtful act which will take them far in life. The acknowledgement of the gracious gift of speakers and tickets is mandatory in this class and produces something for all concerned, not just for the students. In addition to learning a life-skill, students come to understand that their thank you is powerful and highly important to the recipient. Students are required to write a thank you letter to each speaker after their visit and to the Symphony Board of Directors for their ticket after they attend a concert. These heart-warming letters give a comprehensive insight into the learning experience and into the effectiveness of the program. Speaking to 55-70 college students can be daunting for a speaker and they really don't know what impression or knowledge they have left behind.

The letters spell that out quite clearly. Students share what they have learned and sometimes share very personal information because they feel a connection. Often they comment that they once played an instrument and gave it up but now intend to begin playing again. For the Professor, thank you letters give a reading of the depth of learning students have received from the program and may also provide keys to enhanced teaching methods.

For the Symphony, the thank you letters are profoundly important. First, student responses form the basis for marketing to college students. What do they like? What do they hate? What will make them regular concert-goers? The data collected from their letters, their extemporaneous responses, are far more valuable than any survey you could conduct and come at minimal cost.

A current trend for some Symphony Orchestras is to move the concert venue to a night club. This undermines the essence of a symphony and it is doubtful that this will effectively convert this audience to a symphony audience and in a way, undermines the symphony experience. Across the nation, the burning question in symphony circles is, "How do we get the twenty-something audience?" and these students provide the answers. For example, they underscore the importance of a broad range of programming and are especially keen on new symphonic music by young composers, an encouragement to groups such as the GBSO Commission Club and certainly a mandate for supporting young composers who appear to be a leading edge in the continuation of the symphonic format. New music "turns on" young adults to the Symphony; it represents them, something they have never felt before or considered possible. It is not unusual to read comments such as, "I loved the Mozart but didn't care for Beethoven" stated with great confidence. Or, in the case of a Jennifer Higdon work, "Who would have thought of green as scary?"

Excerpts from thank you letters or copies of entire letters are powerful tools in grant writing and fund raising. The inclusion of a cover letter from the Professor with a commentary on the academic outcome strengthens fundraising efforts as it lends professional academic credence to the program. It is a fundamental fact that reaching young people is a trigger in successfully bringing in funding and a first-person response is a powerful closer. Certainly, the engagement of outside sources to cover unpaid seating inventory is an off-setting economic fringe benefit.

RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS: THE RESPONSE

As a part of their Symphony attendance, an activity carrying a ten-point value for their grade, students are required to write a two-page response paper on the event. This must include commentary on the entire concert. The paper serves not only as a way in which to measure student learning but provides valuable feedback on their learning experience. Because they know they will be responsible for writing a paper, they are much more sensitive to their surroundings and the concert. In addition to writing about the performance, they are free to write about anything they found meaningful that evening. This also gives the Professor an opportunity to clarify anything that may have puzzled students. In fact, their responses have provided many in the insights for this paper and have defined what is important in reaching them.

In some cases, response papers have been so powerful that I have asked students for permission to pass a copy on to the Symphony. Students are very flattered by this but when a student tells you that going to the Symphony was “like being touched by God”, it must be shared!

REACHING THE TIPPING POINT: BECOMING THE “IN” THING

Last season I began to notice something new. Not only was I seeing current students coming to a second performance of the symphony, past students were stopping to chat and they were there with friends and dates. Now they see that Symphony attendance has become affordable because they’ve discovered rush tickets, accessible because preconceived incorrect ideas had been replaced by experience and knowledge, and convenient because the Weidner Center is on campus. The increase in repeat attendance offers the Symphony a ripe opportunity to reach to students, inviting a new habit.

Many students tell me that it has never occurred to them to consider the Symphony. No amount of advertising or marketing will reach them because, without a first-hand introduction, the Symphony will never be on their radar screen. Once they are introduced and feel comfortable, they bring others.

Future marketing endeavors are now appropriate because the we have reached a broad enough student audience making this a softer sell. It will not require much more than a little planning. The Fourth Estate, the University’s student paper, is well-read and an excellent vehicle for keeping students in the loop for concert dates, an invitation to the pre-talk and information on programming. Young composers may make good feature articles and an on-campus visit open to the campus community at-large may encourage increased student participation. The University also sends a weekly e-mail to students noting activities of interest which would be useful.

Each of us involved in this program has learned much from one another. Assumptions prevent us from connecting. We have all wrongly assumed there is no young adult interest in the Symphony but for different reasons. What we find is that once the communications begin, the investment is well-worth the effort and the lasting effect is nothing short of amazing. For all we may do to teach and cultivate talent, we have accomplished nothing unless and until we teach and cultivate audience.