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Shaping Arts in the 21st Century

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Marketing Arts to the 21st Century Audience by Debunking “Concert Etiquette Myths”

1. A brief history of theater etiquette and how today’s norms came to be.

“We are really just perpetuating a form of Victorian snobbery.” (Lee, historytoday.com)

Consider asking someone younger than 40 what comes to mind when imagining a night at the theater. The vision is one of high society; they’ll most likely describe full formal wear, polite applause, sitting in silence for hours, and fancy meals. One uncomfortable evening potentially costs an entire paycheck for the overworked and undervalued younger generations of today’s world. Many of these norms are based in classism and are outdated. Before we decide to up and change decades of traditional etiquette, it’s important to understand how these behaviors came to be so that we can justify reconsidering what it looks like to experience the performing arts in person.

Anyone that has ever taken a music history class will tell you that religion played a huge role in the early development of music. “Church was the music hall...generally, audiences were expected to be reserved and silent in respect for the voice that the music represented” (scena.org). As music moved away from its sacred beginnings, people began to experience the arts in a different manner. For example, Elizabethan audiences in the 16th century ranged from the lowly poor to the most wealthy of patrons, all of whom were expecting “a major social occasion” (Tichenor shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu). They hollered when they wanted and clapped if they liked what they saw or heard. It was up to the performers to captivate their audience enough to make them

listen and pay attention. The first public opera houses in the mid 1600's housed boxes for the rich, and the lower level standing area sufficed for the poor. It was a place "to meet friends, share a drink and gamble" (Lee, historytoday.com). In the early days of theatre, audiences still ranged from the very poor to the very wealthy. The upper class dressed up to catch attention and be admired (thesmithcenter.com). Even "well-bred patrons thought it quite acceptable to chat throughout a performance" into the late 1700's (Lee, historytoday.com).

By the 17th and 18th century, music had made its way to the courts. Composers wrote music for the people they served, whether that was as background noise, for entertainment, or as a part of celebrations and ceremonies. Audience behavior largely depended on the noble in charge (scenea.org). In the 1800s, composers like Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach might be offended if the audience didn't applaud between movements (Lee, historytoday.com) Live performances like opera, theatre, and symphonies were for all classes up until the 1800's. Eventually, through a phenomenon labeled "The Great Sorting", the upper and middle classes sought to distance themselves from the lower class (Tichenor shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu).

The rise of the concert hall in the 1800's left more space between the audience and the unamplified ensembles on stage. It was harder to hear performers on stage over a noisy audience (scenea.org). Music halls in Britain and Vaudeville in America were grown out of the impromptu entertainment put on in saloons and pubs. These venues gained popularity with the lower class in the late 1800's and eventually pulled the rabble rousers away from opera houses and concert halls. In an effort to distance themselves from the rowdy behavior of the poor, middle and upper class patrons continued to dress in their finest and apply a keen sense of control with these newly developed audience norms. Theater became "tied to high culture" in the 20th century, and so the formal dress code has remained (thesmithcenter.com). "Silence, in other words, became what it had never been in the past - a mark of social distinction, of taste and of refinement...in preferring to listen to an opera in silence, we are really just perpetuating a form of Victorian snobbery" (Lee,

historytoday.com). There really is irony in the fact that the upper class were using silence to demonstrate sophistication when silence had been used as a means of control to continue the patterns of racism, patriarchy, classism, and other forms of systemic oppression. One expert “argues that theater etiquette is bound up in sexist, racist, and ableist social norms, designed specifically to produce separations between elite and ‘mass’ audiences” (Tichenor shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu). I think this is fascinating, and could be an entire other paper on it’s own. I’m not going to take the time now to comment on it, though I will acknowledge that it is valid and very intriguing.

It wasn’t until the late 1800’s that audiences were expected to partake in silence. With the emergence of Romanticism, German composers like Wagner began to demand more of the audience by writing complex music with connected storylines. Even in the early 19th century, European composers like Mendelssohn requested silence until the end of a musical work. The tradition of silent observation continued and in the 1940’s when radio shows flourished, audiences were asked to remain silent so listeners at home could hear performances without interruption (thesmithcenter.com).

At present many critics, as well as performers and workers in the industry, believe that “performances should be listened to in complete silence. That way, everyone could enjoy the music; and artists could be accorded the respect they deserve.” An opposing view is that the audience have the right to voice their disapproval, as was done in early theater (Lee, historytoday.com). I would also say that the audience has a right to voice their approval, when appropriate, for an excellent performance, through clapping and the occasional holler. When audience members are asked why they choose to remain silent while experiencing a performance, many state that they don’t want to disturb the composer’s vision of their piece. But early composers didn’t write their music with a silent audience in mind. In fact, many of them expected ambient noise to be part of the experience. (scnea.org)

Samuel Taylor writes in *My Life with the Shakespeare Cult*, “every convention of your average modern theatre serves to make people passive, docile, distanced from the play and from one another, almost entirely erased...the pacification is profound...[we encourage] total passivity of body, mind, and spirit...and expect them to listen hard to complex, antiquated verse poetry that relies on an active, social, participatory relationship.” He goes on to say that “the art of theatre *requires* an audience, preferably an engaged, responsive, demonstrative audience” (qtd. in Tichenor shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu). I’ve been speechless for days, processing that information. The more I think about it, I believe he is absolutely correct. We have built a wall with these norms that separates the audience from truly experiencing the artform being presented to them by expecting the audience to experience deep, emotional connection in restrictive, stifling silence. It’s quite literally an oxymoron. Emotion is moving, freeing, ever changing. We can’t expect our audience members to truly gain anything from a performance with such constraints. It’s no wonder younger audiences feel discomfort in a concert hall.

The performing arts are nothing without an audience. The pandemic has made that strikingly clear. As a teacher, being asked to teach to a computer screen drained the life from my craft. Teaching music through online services made me question the point of any of this. Taylor’s commentary on forced passivity really made me question what it is we want from our audience. There’s a fine line between accommodating this cultural shift of defining proper etiquette and still respecting the hard work put into a performance.

Performers generally aren’t trained to interact with audience members because they expect passivity. Sure, many actors with improv chops will break the fourth wall successfully, but many others will either make a fool of themselves or the audience depending on how the interaction plays out (Tichenor shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu). It’s not always appropriate to break the fourth wall, but when it’s done successfully it brings a new level of enjoyment to both the audience and the performer. The level of audience engagement also depends on the medium. For a ballet, opera, or

theatre performance, the visual art is just as important as the music or speech. I would argue that the audience should be actively involved in the action on stage. However, a purely instrumental artform, such as a symphony, does not need the constant attention visually to absorb the music. Yes, many people enjoy watching musicians play, but we have to face the reality that many of today's youth are better able to focus through multitasking. One symphony in Texas encourages the use of technology by offering live program notes through an app (Fraser 41).

2. What are audiences looking for today?

"The moment they feel you are trying to sell them something, they push back."

(qtd in Peterson confluence-denver.com)

The root of what audiences today want connects to Sinek's concept of the Golden Circle; "people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it". Developments in technology over the last few decades have produced unlimited access to arts content (Morris 5). What we've discovered is that "we [need] to change the experience, not the repertoire" (Fraser 41). Younger generations are interested in classical artform, but are not interested in the current way of experiencing it. For starters, "price is key to attracting a younger audience" (qtd in Peterson confluence-denver.com). Whether or not the older generations accept it, the cost of living has gone up exponentially, leaving a wage gap that makes it increasingly more difficult for Gen Y and Gen Z to justify high ticket costs. Add in the fact that quality recordings are available for viewing all over the internet, and it becomes much more appealing to stay at home, rather than venture out for a pricey evening excursion. So we embrace technology and cultural shifts. Offer livestreams and webcasts. Enjoy good food and drink. Create interactive program notes with exciting and fun facts (Fraser 41, 58). Bergauer offers first timers a discount to their next concert, rather than trying to bombard them with newsletter sign ups or season tickets. They feel valued. Being more focused on the quality of the experience rather

than following the ritualistic traditions of marketing is going to add to the concept of personalization and making younger generations feel like their patronage is valued (Fraser 60).

Audiences aren't looking for quality arts programming; they are looking for a cause to support that aligns with their views. Therefore, arts organizations "must embrace personalisation and...invite a greater level of interactivity" (Morris 7). Gen Y and Gen Z have become especially conscious of their cultural and societal footprint; it's important that they support causes that are making a difference and building connections. In this case, personalization is about encouraging participation in the process and letting the art speak for itself (Morris 8). By allowing audiences to "engage on their own terms at their own convenience and in a personal way is only going to increase, accelerate and enhance" participation from Gen Y and Gen Z (Morris 14).

3. How do we embrace society's changes?

"Enabling the audience to have OUR art, THEIR way, both widens and deepens audience engagement."
(Morris 16)

I read two fascinating articles about what changes need to happen in order to move with the times and get younger generations on board with the arts. The first was put out by Creative New Zealand, stating that audiences are looking for interaction and personalization in their arts experiences. This concept links directly back to Sinek's concept of The Golden Circle. Most organizations begin focused on a product; in the case of the arts, we are focused on offering quality experiences to as many people as possible (Morris 4). This is where many organizations get stuck because they are so set on the prospect of making money that they lose sight of their mission. Many arts organizations hold "on to elitist practices to a point where we are no longer delivering public value" (Morris 7). I see this in the way that professional organizations in my area treat "the locals"; the local talent are volunteers, free help. Often, these organizations would rather spend money

bringing in artists from the city than utilize the talent right in their own communities. Eventually, the organizations that are able to stick around evolve to a customer-focused model that puts its patrons and their interests first (Morris 4). Focusing on the customer's values aligns with the cultural shift that audiences want more than to be entertained. They want to be part of the creative process and they want to invest in an organization that shares their values (Morris 6).

The development of the internet has given the masses instant access to unlimited amounts of content. It's changed not only our value of the arts, but who we perceive to be knowledgeable in the arts and worthy of our time. Professional-Amateurs, commonly referred to as Pro-Ams, are quickly challenging the idea of who the experts, academics, and professionals are. The internet, and specifically social media, "has given rise to an explosion of creativity, particularly amongst young people, with increasing numbers of individuals making and disseminating their own music, performance, written words and moving images" (Morris 5).

What I think has been the downfall of arts education is the fact that we cannot document or measure its value. Morris discusses institutional, instrumental, and intrinsic value. We have spent decades trying to measure the arts in terms of instrumental value, that is "the value it generates in contributing to other agendas and strategies". How many articles have we read about how the arts help students learn to read, be better at math, and how the arts are part of a well rounded education. It seems like the focus of arts advocacy is based in connecting the arts to other more "important" parts of education. In reality, the arts have intrinsic value; the arts contribute to your "personal well-being" and that is nearly impossible to document or measure (Morris 6). Now arts education finds itself stuck in the vicious cycle of having to grade students on their ability to perform in the arts. Cue the slow, painful decline and death of arts education.

I'm reminded of a post I saw on Instagram from user thelight.of.day: "...baseline human activities like singing, dancing, and making art were turned into "skills" instead of just being seen as human behavior...you don't need to be good at it to enjoy it or for it to set you free. Forget

everything you ever heard or read about art and just do it.” At what point did we decide that the arts were something to be conquered and perfected? When did we make the shift from the arts being something innately human to something only the elite few can partake in? At what point did we decide, as a society, that those things with intrinsic value no longer hold value within the education system because there’s no way to measure success? Why can’t the arts be seen as valuable simply because they make us more human?

I was especially intrigued by this quote from Diane Ragsdale within Morris’ paper:

“The great crisis in American culture right now is the dwindling of younger audiences...we are dealing with a massive and profound cultural change that has been evolving for the past two decades, driven by demographic changes, globalisation, technology, and many other forces... To survive...we need to start by accepting that it’s real and permanent...and to solve the mystery of why 30-year-olds won’t buy tickets to the symphony, we’re going to have to put more on the autopsy table than the season brochure...Arts organisations need to be willing to find themselves, to re-think why they exist...we must re-define our missions in relation to people” (7).

I was blown away by that quote. Diane Ragsdale so clearly states exactly what is wrong with arts organizations that it led me to find a transcript of Diane Ragsdale’s keynote address at Mission Impossible, as well as this short article that offers five ideas that help organizations embrace the cultural changes we are seeing today.

1. Go cellular - not as in phones, but small groups who share a common interest. For me personally, this is definitely a top priority. Looking back on all the communities I was part of as a child, then through my high school and college years, what sticks out most to me was being surrounded by others who shared the same views and interests as me. That is something sorely lacking in my adult life and it would be great to rekindle that feeling of belonging from my school days.

2. Sample and Share - this ties in with the vast growth we've seen in technology over the past few decades. This article may have been written in 2008, but Ragsdale was ahead of her time in suggesting we embrace the ability to make works easily available to download and affordable to purchase. One thing I have enjoyed during the pandemic is being able to see my favorite YouTuber livestream performances from her house. I've never been able to see Colleen Ballinger perform Miranda Sings in person and now that I have a young daughter, it makes it that much more difficult to get away to Boston for an evening performance. While nothing can replace a live performance, having the option to attend events virtually has been really wonderful. I was able to attend virtual music educator conferences last year that I never would have been able to in a normal year, due to the fact that I can't be away from my family for multiple days.
3. Embrace the Pro-Am revolution - Ragsdale defines Pro-Ams (professional-amateurs) as "people pursuing amateur activities to professional standards". This again ties to the widespread use of the internet. We have limitless amounts of information at our fingertips, housed in tiny electronic devices in our pockets. Gone are the days of having to physically travel to see an expert speak on their craft. You can find literally anything and anyone on YouTube and social media. We should be embracing and encouraging collaborations with those in our communities that hold influence, especially within demographics that we are trying to break into.
4. Be arts concierges and filters - The arts are overly saturated to the point that many people struggle to make decisions. Rather than trying something new, those who can't make up their minds may just stick with what they know, rather than venture out into the unknown. By collecting patron data to help make decisions, we are again offering personalization and making our audience feel valued and building connections.

5. Aggregate supply and demand - I found this final idea incredibly fascinating and quite relatable. The term Cultural Omnivore is used to describe arts consumers who want to experience a little bit of everything. Ragsdale states that “maintaining our ‘separate and better than others’ status [means] the fine arts appear to be losing their spot.” Ballet Nouveau Artistic Director Garrett Ammon in Denver, Colorado touches on this concept as well when discussing with Eric Peterson about “how to create something new out of these mediums that are living in their own isolated bubbles” (qtd in Peterson confluence-denver.com). I wholeheartedly agree with everything about this statement. First, we have to eliminate this concept of the arts being an elitist activity. That view is deeply rooted in the state of this country’s abhorrent arts education and it will take some serious uprooting to reverse the damage that’s been done. Second, I think it’s extremely important and beneficial for organizations to collaborate with as many people as they can, as often as they can. Although the ideas in my grant were just an exercise in creative writing, it’s that kind of out-of-the-box thinking that is going to get new, younger patrons filling the seats. Ragsdale’s concept of a “Customized Cultural Omnivore Subscription” is genius. For example, you have a theater like Northern Stage partner with Trailbreak Taps + Tacos and a local skiing facility to create a tourist bundle - for one flat rate, you can spend the weekend skiing at Whaleback Mountain, sample some delicious Mexican fusion and craft beer, then watch Northern Stage’s holiday production. Have a child that is obsessed with all things Disney? City Center Ballet is putting on a production of Cinderella, the New London Barn Playhouse Junior Interns are putting on High School Musical, and the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth is hosting an Imagineers inspired workshop where students can learn from real engineering students how to design and build functioning amusement park rides.

“If we want to attract a faithful new generation of patrons, it seems we can start by holding concerts in environments that are inviting to the intended audience and by communicating how composers or musicians would have wanted or want their music to be enjoyed”. (scena.org) And yet, there’s a fine line between trying too hard to change with the times and being authentic to your mission while letting the necessary changes happen organically. “Never attempt to be hip” (qtd in Peterson confluence-denver.com). “There are many options for how you embrace interaction and personalisation”, make sure they “fit well with your artistic vision” (Morris 12) “The task of engaging people with the arts is all happening in the top right box (referencing the box labeled “vision led, audience-focused)” (Morris 13)

Vision-led, audience-focused

Ambitious, aspirational vision that aims to engage with the widest possible audience.

Focus: on captivation.

Personalisation: customer insight; segmentation strategies; diversified communication strategies; personalised customer service and concierge services to help inform choices; interactive web-site; choices for accessing experiences – tours, downloads, dvds, apps, simultaneous transmission; responsive mechanisms for feedback and suggestions, blogs, chat-rooms, social networking; provision of detailed on-line background information, videos of artists, essays.

Interaction: Programme that adapts to meet needs more effectively whilst staying on mission; membership and friends groups that gain greater insight and involvement with organisation; occasional interactive projects, events, festivals; interactive web-site for uploading/ downloading mixing own content, virtual experiences and environment extension of programme.

What are other places doing?

DENVER, CO The Denver Center Theatre Company has created a less traditional venture called Off-Center @ The Jones. They have a recurring event called “Cult Following”; it’s an improv show that details “the life and times of it’s film-geek characters and incorporates crowd-suggested scenes” (Peterson confluence-denver.com). In addition to what sounds like a hilarious setup for

improv that's sure to bring in millennials, audience members get to wear fun glasses while munching on free popcorn and sampling free beer. I don't even like beer and I'm sold!

Meanwhile, Opera Colorado has hacked the "Tik Tok" version of opera by offering several short opera performances in English to cultivate more interest from younger generations. A three hour long opera in a different language is intimidating, to say the least. Creating a casual, nontraditional environment for younger audiences "helps demystify opera", and you get to enjoy some food and drink with your friends too! Even Ballet Nouveau has worked hard to bring in a broader audience through collaborations - folk artists, poets, and orchestras. Buntport Theatre performs original plays in unexpected ways, claiming to be almost "anti-theater". They produce a live sitcom to entice younger audiences to become regulars.

WALNUT CREEK, CA Amy Bergauer is "Shaking Up The Symphony" just outside of San Francisco. As a millennial, she is part of the generation that grew up without technology, but has embraced it in adulthood, making her the perfect candidate to teach arts organizations how to embrace recent cultural shifts. Bergauer offered Gen Xers \$5 tickets in exchange for genuine reactions. Her survey project uncovered that it's not about the repertoire. They want program notes that are more simple and fun. They want a less formal environment to experience the music in. Bergauer has also put considerable effort into diversity, both within the audience, leadership, and symphony members and also within the music performed. She received a grant to translate materials into Spanish for the large Latino population. At one holiday event, the conductor asked audience members to listen for specific sounds in the music, which kept audience members engaged. There were festive treats and even an instrument petting zoo for anyone curious. Overall, Bergauer has succeeded in taking "the stuffy edge out of the symphony" (qtd in Fraser 62).

SEATTLE WA Seattle Symphony plays shortened versions of big classical works, such as Beethoven and Brahms, while wearing jeans. They collaborated with rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot and posted the performance on YouTube, where it has over ten million views.

SAN FRANCISCO CA The San Francisco Symphony has a high tech performance venue called SoundBox without assigned seating. They can adapt the sound to fit their eclectic music choices to make pieces sound as if they are echoing through a Gothic cathedral or whatever else fits. Audience members are encouraged to interact with the musicians while sampling cocktails and craft beers.

HOUSTON TX Roco Symphony has an app that “delivers program notes in real time”. They once hosted an event called Musical Chairs, where audience members walked through historic homes and listened to different ensembles during their stroll.

DETROIT MI The Detroit Symphony Orchestra has celebrated African-American artists for over forty years. They started a dinner party series called Musical Feasts, which is held inside patrons’ own homes. You can also listen in on one of their free webcasts (Fraser 41).

What do these places all have in common?

1. They are embracing technology, both for marketing and as a production tool.
2. They are creating an experience by changing up the location and adding fun food and drink.
3. They are offering snapshots of larger classical works to peak interest without overwhelming new patrons.
4. They are utilizing pop culture in creative ways.
5. They are embracing the cultural shifts and meeting the audience where they are.

4. Final Thoughts

I would like to find a balance between being respectful of artforms and allowing younger generations to feel like they are welcome and wanted in the arts community. Tichenor accurately verbalizes my thoughts on the issue of theatre and concert etiquette. Talking about theatre etiquette in today's rapidly shifting society and culture, we must acknowledge that it reinforces "a shared vision of socially acceptable behavior that makes public space better for all, **and also** a morally suspect act that is disproportionately wielded against people of color, the working class, etc." The historical reasons behind these norms were definitely part of the ever present need to create a human hierarchy. And yet, "we need to honor the fact that we all have our roles to play in the theatrical experience, whether it's onstage, backstage, or sitting in the seats" (Tichenor shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu).

There are times when sitting quietly and respectfully is appropriate and acceptable. There are times when enjoying a meal with friends while interacting with the entertainment is appropriate and acceptable. My hope is that we can find ways to encourage both and create a new set of norms that fits the needs of new audiences, but also honors the hard work that artists put into their craft.

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