

Political Engagement from a Performer's Perspective

When I originally started thinking about a presentation topic for the European Forum on Music, I immediately ventured into the field of arts funding. You see, I had recently moved back to Europe from living in the US for more than 15 years, where I had become intimately familiar with the endowment and donations-based model for arts funding. [...]

In 2005, the average American orchestra received 45 percent of its income from donations, 13 percent from investments and 5 percent from governments, with the final 37 percent of revenue coming from ticket sales. [...] In Europe there is a fundamentally different arts funding model, where - ranging from a significant part to the majority of the operating budget is covered by public subsidies. [...] It is clear that public arts funding has suffered in Europe, but we must also carefully analyze the reasons behind it. While at its source all arts funding cuts are due to economic factors, we still see two different strategies emerging across the European Union: 1. economic factors as sole driving force, and 2. a shift in political culture.

In countries such as Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Ireland, where the economic crisis is threatening those countries' continued membership in the Euro-zone, cuts in arts funding are relatively proportionate with cuts in social programs, healthcare, education and other government subsidized entities. Arts funding in these countries will remain tight for years to come, and arts organizations will have to continually compete for funding. However, in countries where a drastic political shift in arts funding has occurred, such as in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, the longterm implications for arts organizations can be much more enduring, regardless of the state of economic recovery. Both countries are leaning more towards a US model for arts funding, with significant contributions having to come from corporations and private donations. This change in funding paradigm raises a number of questions, which deserve careful consideration.

Historical role of government

The role of government in society has been fundamentally different between the US and Europe. Historically government intervention in people's daily lives has had negative connotations for most Americans, who prefer a small federal government, with most power relegated to the States and local municipalities. [...] Governmental spending for public healthcare, education, social and cultural services must be minimized while allowing the deregulated free market to dictate the degree in which arts and culture are wanted and ultimately consumed by the individual.

Corporate sponsorship and private donations

[...] Corporate sponsors, foundations and wealthy (and not so wealthy) individuals have recognized the need to support the arts above and beyond the marketplace. This tradition of giving also fits into the Anglo-saxon tradition of civil society, where individuals and foundations, and more recently by extension corporations, have filled in the gaps left by small government. [...] Switching from a primarily government-based funding model to a private/corporations based funding model has multiple complexity layers that cannot be captured in a one-line political slogan. Without going into too much detail I'd like to offer the following points for debate:

- The Anglo-saxon civil tradition has deep historical roots unknown or at least unfamiliar to continental Europe. [...]
- The U.S. funding model demands a legal and fiscal infrastructure, which in most European countries is still lacking. [...]

- U.S. arts organizations have a huge headstart with organizing fundraising departments. Even in small arts organizations one can usually find a fulltime employee dedicated to fundraising through corporate sponsorship and private donations. [...]
- American arts organizations are led by boards, whose constituents are the most generous donors and who have access to the rich and powerful. Executive and artistic directors are directly accountable to the board, with the final measuring stick the financial success of the organization. This has direct and severe impacts on artistic programming. [...]

It is clear to me, both from personal experience having lived and worked in the U.S. and from some of the data I presented above, that a move to a U.S. system of arts funding would have disastrous consequences for the diversity, richness and sense of exploration that currently surges through the European arts scene (and which, in my opinion, always has been one of its defining characteristics). Nonetheless, the economic reality is such that European arts organizations will have to increase their efforts supplementing operating budgets from sources other than government subsidies. However, the entire arts community has a huge obligation to continually inform policy makers about the enormous societal value of a thriving arts scene. [...]

As a conductor myself, my personal conviction is that art music, classical music, has a value to society, the sum of which exceeds its measurable parts. It is the intrinsic value - what does music contribute in and by itself - that needs to be referenced more as a fundamental condition for continued governmental support for the arts. The main issue with arguing the benefits of the intrinsic value of art and music, is that those are hard to prove by crunching data and presenting assessment based outcomes. [...] If there is one message I'd like to send out as a professional musician, is for all artists to start advocating passionately, intelligently, and well informed, on the intrinsic value of art in society. We need to mobilize our audiences to stand behind us as voters and tax payers, and include them in our advocacy for continued governmental support for the arts. We can no longer let our art do the speaking alone, but we have to become at the same time the practitioners, guardians, historians, visionaries and lobbyists of what we hold so dear.

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