

URC Presentation

Opera has become an endangered art form. This is especially true for the United States, where the majority of opera companies are struggling against debt, dwindling audiences, and declining ticket sales. The reasons behind this are topics of debate, but the fact remains that the public regards opera as tedious, elitist, and irrelevant to community development. It is tempting to view this as an unsolvable issue, but I believe nonprofit opera companies are on the verge of transformation through the process of community engagement.

As indicated in a 2012 study by the National Endowment for the Arts, 37% of American adults have attended a live performing arts event within 2012, and only 2.1% of those audiences attended an opera. Although this measurement has not changed since 2008, opera attendance has significantly decreased within the past two decades from 3.3% in 1992 to 2.1% in 2012. This decrease may appear unsubstantial, but this actually equals a 36.4% decrease in overall opera attendance over the last 20 years, or more than a third of the original surveyed population of 1992.

Nonprofit opera companies must take responsibility now by evaluating their community relevancy. They must ask themselves whether they are creating new partnerships and establishing stronger patronage through meaningful, more authentic communication outside the arts community to insure opera is an indispensable part of community development. To further explore such questions, arts administrators have developed a framework defined as *community engagement*.

Community engagement is the practice of forming long-term, reciprocal relationships between arts organizations and their respective communities, particularly

those not participating in the arts. It is an organization's willingness to be available for the whole community and not only its traditional audiences; this includes those who feel the art in question is inaccessible, boring, or beyond their understanding. Most importantly, the arts organization must define its mission, vision, and values in a way that shows sharing its art and establishing relationships is as essential as the art itself.

Community engagement expert Doug Borwick, author of *Building Communities, Not Audiences*, defines this as a "process whereby institutions enter into mutually beneficial relationships with other organizations, informal community groups, or individuals, [which] normally implies arts organizations developing relationships outside of the arts community." Successful community engagement is an arts organization using its art to enhance understanding of identity, sense of place, and encourages open dialogue between different groups of people. Borwick asks, "what if [the mission] was to be deeply valuable to the community in which the organization presides?" He cautions that excluding community engagement from mission statements deemphasizes community engagement within the entity and makes it harder to practice.

Community engagement is not a marketing tactic, and many nonprofit operas rely on marketing as the principal way of conversing with the community. Community engagement is most effective when an organization establishes regular communication that is more like a natural conversation. Marketing is not always the best way to do this because it is one-sided, much like a broadcast. Having a strategic marketing plan is critical for promoting events and cultivating an image, but if marketing is the sole means of communicating with patrons and non-patrons alike, this severely limits the organization's ability to practice community engagement in an effective way.

By ensuring community engagement is part of its organizational structure, opera has an opportunity to become an indispensable part of the social fabric of its surrounding communities. This idea is especially important for Indianapolis opera companies to understand, as they are struggling to gain and retain the support of a rapidly changing community that does not envision opera as a vital part of its future. By taking an analytical look at the missions of Indianapolis opera organizations—namely, Indianapolis Opera and the Intimate Opera of Indianapolis—it is apparent these operas are not fully practicing community engagement. By incorporating community engagement into their mission statements, both opera companies will establish a more inclusive sense of community within partnerships and patronage, resulting in a more engaged and diverse audience. This is absolutely necessary if opera is to continue in Indianapolis, especially given the cancellation of Indianapolis Opera’s remaining 2014 season.

As 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, these Indianapolis opera companies are legally obligated to respond to the needs of their communities in a service-oriented way. The IRS government website designates 501(c)(3) as a tax exempt status for qualifying organizations that must provide their communities relief and support in underserved areas. Usually, nonprofit opera organizations claim nonprofit status by providing educational opportunities, but these are often overshadowed by missions especially focused on achieving artistic excellence through a staged product. Ultimately, this detracts from the requirement to meet community-wide needs. Contrastingly, opera companies using their art as a community mouthpiece to directly address shared concerns and celebrate local culture are sustaining a viable place within their communities.

While Indianapolis Opera maintains it will serve a broadly defined audience

through entertainment, cultural, and community activities, the current wording of its mission statement limits its ability to serve others through opera performance because there is too much emphasis on *entertainment value*. This encourages organizational behavior and strategic planning that inhibits unique, reciprocal relationships and instead focuses primarily on artistic excellence and production value. The words *to entertain* reflect a necessary and expected commitment to artistic excellence, but focusing primarily on entertainment engages only those who appreciate and understand what “entertainment value” means within the realm of opera. It requires specific knowledge to understand why an opera company would benefit the community solely based on its production value. As a result, long-time opera patrons become the main targets for programming and the opera appears to be too exclusive for non-traditional opera audiences.

If the mission prioritized the opera’s commitment to community activities, it would better reflect the level at which Indianapolis Opera offers educational, cultural, and performance events for the community at large. This will shift organizational thinking towards programming that appeals to a diverse audience base that realistically reflects the Indianapolis community. This will not inhibit the drive to provide excellent performances, but it will encourage the opera to be accessible and engaging to individuals outside of the arts community. By elevating community engagement within the mission statement, it becomes a prerequisite that is reflected in programming, community initiatives, partnerships, and in the selection of board and staff members. These are the changes that must take place if Indianapolis Opera wants to convince the community it wishes to become more active and engaging for Indianapolis citizens.

The Intimate Opera of Indianapolis is confronted by a very similar issue. The current wording of the mission statement suggests that presentation and performance are more important than community engagement. This drives attention away from the value of its educational programs, musical experiences, and performances and makes it harder to realize community engagement within its programming and events. This is shown in the first sentence of the mission statement. Since it is an opera company, it is not incorrect to state its primary role is producing opera. However, this fact can be assumed; the mission should first explain how the opera company is an asset to the community by being invested in new relationships and operatic works that enhance understanding of Indianapolis as a multicultural, creative place.

The Intimate Opera of Indianapolis would have a much stronger connection to community if its mission immediately outlined its goal to connect with the community at large, and then expressed its commitment to presenting local talent and underperformed music. Resultantly, programming and initiatives could be developed within the context of the Indianapolis community rather than within the standards of artistic excellence. Its reason for existence would be clearer, and could possibly attract nontraditional opera patrons, more community partners, and funders.

Some argue that community engagement will sacrifice artistic quality. I do not argue that opera should be dumbed down or that the artist's expertise be ignored. But I do stress that community engagement must have equal representation in mission, vision, and value statements. If opera companies want to connect with more audiences, they should view their work as a larger part of a collective vision meant for inspiring dialogue within their community. This mindset will allow the organization to fluctuate and adapt its sense

of place as the community inevitably changes over time.

While incorporating community engagement into an organizational model may seem impossible, some have been leading the charge, like the Houston Grand Opera. I quote: HGO “exists to profoundly impact our community by creating operatic art that provides access to music’s boundless power and beauty.” HGO makes certain that community relevancy is equal to its artistic visions, ensuring that the organization is no larger than its own art form. This is particularly evident in its continually successful community initiative, HGOco.

Established in 2006, HGOco allows the Grand Opera to fully understand its community through storytelling, relating through opera the journeys of Houston families and individuals. One such project is an original production titled *The Refuge*, inspired by the true story of a family’s journey from El Salvador to Houston. Eventually, the production grew into the *Song of Houston* project, an ongoing community engagement program that utilizes opera to reflect the different immigrant communities of Houston.

As HGOco director Sandra Bernhard explains, “the rationale for HGOco’s branding is to provoke the question: What’s an opera company doing in Houston?” Its organizational purpose allows the community to define why it exists and how HGOco can best serve Houston. HGOco was not created to boost ticket sales, but is a founding principle subsequently reflected in all other HGOco programming, repertoire, and community projects.

By critically assessing the state of opera in the Indianapolis community and where it must incorporate community engagement, both Indianapolis opera companies will build stronger, diversified partnerships and patronage. As a result, these relationships will

better reflect the community and allow the organization to become an indispensable asset through its art and ability to provide opera as an irreplaceable service to Indianapolis.