

Selfless Self-Promotion: The Art Of Surviving Annual Festivals

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As George Harrison once wrote, “I, me, me, mine.” So often the fallacy of self-promotion is that the only way to look after oneself is to exclude looking after others. Experience has proven the complete opposite to be true. The true way to look after your best self-interest is to look after others. Creating venues to perpetuate art music, which might be seen at some level as shameless self-promotion, in fact encompasses countless hours of hard work. The countless hours of organizing, building, writing, calling and crying is spurred on by knowledge that such work comes back ten-fold. Through this dedicated labor, the ability to meet some of the world’s most talented composers is in itself inspiring and creatively invigorating. Developing new nodes in a network of like-minded professionals occurs simultaneously while increasing the depth of thought behind one’s own work.

Preface

I know each of you are more interested in the fine dinner we’re about to share than my pontifications so I’ll try and keep this address down to an hour at best.

Introduction

It is said that when Chet Adkins’ son said to his father, “Daddy, when I grow up – I want to be a musician.” Chet replied, “Son, you can’t have it both ways.” Sometimes we forget that child in us as we stand up on the podium preaching to the unwashed masses about the finer points of set theoretical analysis. We are truly the fortunate ones. We have taken the joy and innocence of our art and have found a way to get a steady paycheck for practicing it.

Thesis

With a musician’s blessing of eternal youth comes inordinate obligation. We are charged with the future of our art form. We are the ones that must find ways to perpetuate contemporary art music. No one will show us a pre-cast fountain; we must each be our own Ponce Deleon.

As recently as in the early part of the 20th-century, in a time before the pervasive onslaught of electronic media, there was a time when in order to be a well-rounded member of society you needed to be musically literate. They didn’t only study the Greek educational system – they lived the quadrivium. Families would gather around the parlor to play duets and piano trios. Then the distraction of electronic black boxes entered homes –

first with sound with radio – then with black-and-white pictures with television...eventually even with color. Evening distractions become less participatory and more sedentary. Face it! Music in the schools is nearly dead if it isn't attached to some outdoor wind symphony with fancy suits and tassels.

Nearly 100 years have passed since the destruction of music education began. Not only did alternate forms of pass-time assist in eroding interest in developing personal musical skill, but, in the latter part of the past century, the government has assisted. Government school music education programs have been drastically cut or all together eliminated in much of our country. Perhaps, like many of you, I am part of the last generation where such music education could be taken for granted.

What does this have to do with a gathering of composers? Well, we too can't take for granted that our art will have an audience placed in the auditorium seats. We can't assume that someone else will find our music interesting enough to pull the resources together to put on a concert, festival or conference for our benefit. Each of us must take the charge to do this for ourselves as well as others. That is the real key – to think of this not as a selfish act for personal gratification but as a way of building a resource for contemporary art music as a whole.

Fallacies

What does it take to be a contemporary art music promoter? Some say a slight bit of insanity. Others say a bucket full of money. I say that insanity is much more important than all the gold in Sacramento. For the most part the willingness to jump into a lake without testing the water is an admirable quality in a conference or festival host (something I wouldn't recommend when you go camping). The real trick is to start small...but do something. One concert becomes a concert series over time. Once confidence is built then starting a festival...that becomes an annual event isn't much of a stretch. Pretty soon you're hosting regional, national and international events – whether it be for a society, an institution, or on your own.

So, what are some of the fallacies of concert presentation? First and foremost, when I discuss this topic with some they confront me with the age-old argument –well, shouldn't you doing something else with your time? Isn't presenting concerts a waste of time – time that should be spent doing something else!?!

Presenting concerts should be part of what we do as composers. Sure, we all could be pushing little back dots around a page instead of working on a 50 page program book or dealing with Coca Cola about whether they should deliver a fountain dispenser or cans to an event. When all is said and done, the return from being around a wonderful and talented group of composers and performers far outweighs any lost composition time. The inspiration and momentum gained from interacting with other creative souls is well worth a relatively few hours of administrative duties.

Failure is part of learning. After 14 years of presenting concerts in the academy, each year I think I've seen everything and dealt with all possible problems that could crop up. Each year, without failure, there is another unique problem or set of problems that need to be solved. Over the years I've had to deal with a composer-in-residence that canceled the week prior to the event due to a severe heart condition (resulting in heart bypass surgery only a few weeks after our festival), the threat of funding reduction, venue cancellations, broken gear, and even an foreign composer that was arrested (the names have been changed to protect the innocent). Nothing has killed me yet – each year I try to, as Emeril says, “Bam! Kick it up a notch.”

If there is one most important thing I've learn it must be that I can't do everything. It is impossible to be everything to everyone. If you put on conferences or festivals you will get an amazing array of special requests and complaints. Though I try to be reasonable and supportive of visiting composers' wishes it is just not possible to grant all requests. Insanity loves company. That said, most of our colleagues are just wonderful with which to deal and extremely adaptable and forgiving (like missing bios or program notes – we have mechanisms in place to prevent this from happening but there are always errors in print).

For the first half of my concert-presenting career I did everything. I didn't what to let go of any aspect of the preparation or presentation of the event. I designed the programs, posters, and press materials. I even tech'ed all the concerts. Well, as the years passed, either my intelligence increased or my back gave out. I had to allow others into the process. This is when I found the greatest asset of any concert organizer – their staff (in my case my students). For example, Sam ham has been my right hand for many

years now. Frightening to think he may graduate and move away...and he is dissertating right now...but then again, I am the chair of his committee!

The sense of community at our institution is very important to my colleagues and I at the University of Florida. The composition faculty and student body truly enjoy working together towards concert presentations. Over the years we have built an internationally renowned festival, an electroacoustic music concert series with four concerts annually named "UnBalanced Connection," SCI organized semesterly composition student recitals, and other special events such as hosting two Society of Composers Inc. regional conferences within my years at UF. My composition faculty colleague Paul Richards and saxophone professor Jonathan Helton even have a new music ensemble with an annual concert schedule and guest composers. Mark Engebretson was a great help during his time on the UF faculty – and will host the 2005 SCI National at UNCG.

Our students have organized two student government supported organizations, the Society of Composers Inc. Student Chapter (started by our host for this conference Ron Parks in 1991) and a more recent organization, the Sonic Computing Organization (named after the Csound score file extension). Both organizations receive annual funding from our student government that help support their activities such as travel to conferences and special programs such as inviting visiting composers to campus. Thus far our SCI student chapter has funded visits by noted composers such as Roger Reynolds and James Tenney and Sonic Computing Organization has provided funding for guest lectures by Richard Boulanger, Paniotis and Jeffery Stolet – to name a few.

The key to making this all work is the interaction and mutual support present in our composition community. For example, Sonic Computing Organization piggybacks their guest lectures on the already successful electroacoustic music festival. They are able to extend invitations to composers already attending our festival and willing to stay over a few days for a modest honorarium. In fact, our composer-in-residence program for the Florida Electroacoustic Music Festival was started on a very minimal budget and the supportive attitude of my teacher, Dr. Hubert Howe. When I had the brainstorm, or perhaps a crazy idea, to begin a composer-in-residency program for our annual electroacoustic music festival I inquired what it would take to get Tuck to join us for the event. Between airfare, a bed in my then spare bedroom, and a few meals on my credit card – a

program was initiated. I continue to be amazed at the generosity of great artists and composers such as Dr. Howe, Jon Appleton, Joel Chadabe, Barry Truax, Cort Lippe, James Dashow, Larry Austin, Richard Boulanger, Gary Lee Nelson, and Paul Lansky. What started as a “what if” quickly became institutionalize and has endured the test of time. Be careful what you wish for – you might just get it!

What have I learned from all this? Perhaps the biggest lesson is to go with your instincts. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Start small. Don't take no for an answer. Collaborate and cooperate. Don't do it all yourself. Be open to suggestions from those around you. And, have a supportive spouse.

One of my favorite saying is, “if you don't shoot for the stars you'll certainly never reach them.” Many of my career advancements over the years can be traced back to a connection I made at the Florida Electroacoustic Music Festival or through the network of like-minded “crazies” that has been cultivated through similar events - such as Electronic Music Mid-West, 3rd Practice and so many wonderful societal events like this one.

Thanks for your attention. Enjoy your dinner. And, start a concert series or festival in your community soon! Oh, and take your vitamins every day...you'll need them.