

Notes: Opera America Conference 2012: Creative Resurgence

June 14-15, 2012

It was a luxury and a bit of a gamble to spend two days away in June at the Opera America conference in Philadelphia, but it was well worth it. I sat in on seven sessions, spoke on a panel as part of the Artist Intensive and caught up with colleagues.

In order not to come away from conferences energized but lacking focus, I always try to create a narrative in which I make the first step in figuring out what the take-aways might be; how the ideas and energy that swirl around in a conference environment might actually have an impact back home. I hereby submit my stream of consciousness that spun out from **Creative Resurgence – Opera Conference 2012**.

(If you're mildly curious but not into crawling through this whole document, you can get the 140-character Twitter version at www.twitter.com/kimpwitman)

Promoting New & Rare Operas

The Discussion:

So easy to talk about, and theoretically easy to sell (both to patrons and supporters), as it embodies a creative energy that almost anyone can feel. But we need a completely different philanthropic model than the one we're used to. The folks who love to underwrite lavish productions are not the same people who hanker to gamble on the future of art. Does the personality of the financial world's venture capitalist translate to a new kind of "venture philanthropist?"

The Take-Away:

I guess there's comfort in knowing that more and more of the opera world is joining us on the new/rare opera side of the divide. Getting the marketing or fundraising message nuanced enough to promote things that no one has heard of is a huge task; we're still climbing up that hill and perhaps now that we have more compatriots, we'll all figure it out.

Engagement

The Discussion:

True engagement with stakeholders is deep and textured. After all, having a lot of Facebook fans does not mean that anyone is engaged with you on any significant level. It used to be that audiences were mostly interested in the performance product, but now, they are also interested in art as process. Increasingly, folks want to complete the life cycle – experiencing the creative process leading up to the performance, and sharing it with their friends afterward. They no longer want to consume; they want to participate.

The Take-Away:

We at WTOC have always been more committed to process than product, as our core mission is to help shape the skills and careers of our singers. This new model of audience engagement is good news for us, as our company is practically defined by its vibrant process. At the same time, our challenge is figuring out how to share that process without compromising it.

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Civic Footprint

The Discussion:

It's sobering but true that the actual "product footprint" of any opera company (let alone a tiny one like ours) is miniscule in context of the larger culture. We focus too often (and unproductively) on trying to increase that actual footprint – measuring our worth by how many (or few) people we manage to sell tickets to. We should think more often of enlarging our civic footprint; measuring and improving the ways in which our art contributes to our communities.

The Take-Away:

For stand-alone opera companies, the civic footprint could manifest in sharing opera with thousands of folks in a stadium broadcast, and taking song and theatre out into the community in new ways. (Think "flash mob" and its cousins.) Broadening one's civic footprint is an exercise in vitality, flexibility, inclusiveness and good will. In considering the importance of embracing opportunities to offer affordable opera beyond one's insider circle, I'm newly sad about the way in which WTOC has lost its ability to put opera on the open air stage at Wolf Trap's amphitheatre. We must renew our question for a new chapter of opera at the Filene Center.

But I've begun to think that broadening the civic footprint also has a different meaning for us; WTOC's civic footprint also comprises the ways in which the artists who train here take their Wolf Trap experiences and lessons out into the music industry. Everything we do to deepen and clarify their relationship with music and art has far-reaching tentacles way beyond the walls of The Barns.

Excellence

The Discussion:

Keynote speaker Douglas McLennan believes that defining excellence on your own terms is problematic. Actually, it's probably worse than that; it has downright dangerous implications. Our personal and narrow definition of excellence may often be at odds with what our audiences really want; if so, it hurts both us and them.

The Take-Away:

McLennan's discussion of excellence really hit home. I'm severely allergic to the overuse of claims to excellence; if I have to use or hear "world-class" in one more piece or marketing, I may do something rash. But if we're not touting "excellence," what are our tools? If the postmodern definition of excellence depends on context rather than being absolute, how do we craft a message? Already, we craft different messages for various purposes (web vs print, indie print vs mainstream, social media vs web...), so I guess this isn't insurmountable. But somehow it feels like looking for a needle in a haystack or trying to be all things to all people in a way that lacks focus. We must continue to search for a way to telegraph integrity and commitment without seeming breathless, naïve and effusive to a fault.

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Channeling Limited Resources

The Discussion:

Arts organizations somehow have a reputation for being spendthrifts, but we are actually some of the most resourceful organizations around; we do a tremendous amount with very little. Due to our uber-thrifty nature and our experience with pinching pennies, we should be skilled at saving money everywhere we can and putting the money in the art itself.

The Take-Away:

For us, this is validation of our determination to funnel as many of our resources as possible toward our main mission, that of training and promoting our emerging artists. But it breaks down at a certain point, because the way in which we serve our singers is embedded with our ability to mount full opera productions. And our ability to mount full opera productions depends on marketing, budgeting and fundraising... things on which money must be spent in order to complete the circle.

Excellence – Crowd-sourcing vs. Curating

The Discussion:

Opera has suffered from the belief that there's one perfect way to enrich the art form. We need to be broader in our definitions and give the audience opportunities that might seem inferior to a purist. Perhaps it's time to consider the "good enough" criteria in which a product only has to satisfy the most important goal of the consumer; to answer a need but not necessarily at the highest level.

The Take-Away:

TV reality show competitions have tapped into crowdsourcing in a big way. But I do believe that audiences appreciate looking to 'experts' to help curate the noise that's out there. Yes, it's a more inclusive and expansive environment than it used to be, but crowdsourcing can be exhausting. If it were the only answer, everyone would watch YouTube all day and never go to the movies. We have to continue to find ways to make our organization transparent and welcoming without pretending that we don't have expertise that consumers would welcome.

Innovation

The Discussion:

Innovation is the new core discipline. But don't confuse innovation with creativity. Creativity is characteristic of individuals, and innovation is the turning of creative ideas into strategies that organizations can implement. As we innovate, it's critical to create repeated low-stake trials in order to build up experience and expertise before we attempt to monetize.

The Take-Away:

It's important to resist the temptation to focus too much on what we are losing as we adapt and diversify; look at what we're gaining that wasn't a part of our organization

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decades ago. Sadly, it's not possible to grow without allowing something to fall away. And it's freeing to step away from the idea that everything we try has to be a long-term success; but while it makes perfect sense to allow for a period of experimentation before trying to monetize, one has to pay the bills in the meantime... No revelations here, just questions.

Planning

The Discussion:

Michael Kaiser spoke passionately and eloquently about the value of strategic planning. A revelation is that planning is an important way of problem-solving that is less clouded with emotion than focusing on current problems.

The Devil's Advocate:

EmcArts' Michael Evans spoke of innovation and the notion that long-term planning is not a particularly effective way of dealing with our rapidly changing landscape; adaptability may trump focusing on the far-off horizon.

The Take-Away:

It makes sense to combine these two concepts. Yes, we need to cast our time horizon many years out, to consider the ways in which we need to grow and may want to change and still not lose sight of our core mission. But for a small company, thinking that far out needs to be pretty conceptual, whereas planning for the next year or two is far more detailed and real somehow. To succumb to the temptation to imagine the details too far out is to limit one's success, particularly in a financial and cultural environment that's changing at the speed of light.

Chamber Opera

The Discussion:

Since "chamber opera" (or, my new favorite moniker, "micro opera") is pretty much all I do these days, it was exciting to hear other more mainstream companies discovering it, shaping it and speaking of it in new ways. It creates "a different kind of relationship between the music and the audience." It's "the passion of grand opera on an intimate scale." It "invites you in rather than dictating your feelings."

The Take-Away:

The challenge is how to keep the term "chamber opera" from doing a double-negative-whammy – potential new opera goers are already allergic to the term "opera," and I have yet to find someone who, upon hearing the descriptor "chamber", wants to run out and find out more. Labels are hell.

Social Media

The Discussion:

After all these years of blogging, FB'ing and tweeting myself blue in the face, I had never heard of the Rule of Thirds, which defines an ideal distribution of types of social media posts (across platforms, I believe): 1. Education / 2. Community / 3. Off-Topic

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The Take-Away:

Seems that not only are folks comfortable with a certain amount of general, non-work-directed chatter, best practices indicate that you should mix it up with some off-topic posts. Now I don't need to feel so guilty when my content veers toward the insubstantial 😊

Phew. Time to go back to work.