NEW AUDIENCES FOR NEW MUSIC:
A STUDY OF THREE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC ENSEMBLES

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Erin Lee
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NEW AUDIENCES FOR NEW MUSIC:

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Erin Lee

Thesis

Approved:      Accepted:

______________________________  ______ ____________________
Advisor      School Director
Durand Pope      Neil Sapienza

______________________________  _______________ ___________
Faculty Reader     Dean of the College
Neil Sapienza     James Lynn

______________________________  ______ ____________________
Faculty Reader Dean of  the Graduate School
George Pope      George R. Newkome

Date

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In the United States, there exist over 500 professional classical music organizations, which include, for the purpose of this study, professional symphony orchestras, chamber orchestras, and instrumental chamber music ensembles (League of American Orchestras). While no quantifiable data exist to gauge the frequency at which instrumental chamber music ensembles perform contemporary music (loosely defined here as concert music created by a living composer), the majority, approximately 92%, of repertoire performed by symphony orchestras across the country was composed before 1980 (League of American Orchestras). The currently accepted view favored by most performing arts ensembles is that programming contemporary music, while important, is a risky undertaking because of the typically low ticket sales resulting from such programs (Lawson 300-12). This project will argue that performing arts organizations have the obligation to encourage the creation and performance of new works, as these works define the cultural landscape of the United States in the 21st century. Furthermore, this project will attempt to refute the belief that the increased programming of contemporary music is detrimental to arts organizations’ earned and contributed revenue goals. This paper asserts that,
through the creative presentation and marketing of contemporary music, arts organizations have an avenue to achieving increased revenue, community visibility, and ongoing artistic and financial stability.

Statement of Problem

Current trends in audience participation dictate the need for changes within the typical classical music organization’s business model. In 2002, the National Endowment for the Arts, in its Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, determined that over the course of twenty years, classical music saw a statistically significant decline in all areas of participation, from live performance attendance (13.1% to 11.6% of the population); listening to classical music recordings (from 24% to 19% of the population); listening to classical music on the radio (31% of the population to 24% of the population); viewing classical music on television, VCR or DVD (26% to 18% of the population); and personally creating or performing classical music (4.2% to 1.8% of the population) (National Endowment for the Arts). This last statistic may present a particularly daunting obstacle to audience development, as applied study of music has proven a strong indicator of future arts participation (Pitts 8). The ultimate impact of this one area of decline is unlikely to be realized in the short term, however.

In recent years, much has been debated as to the crisis affecting classical music; the so-called “graying” of the audience, the argument that as audiences age, they are not being replaced with the younger generations, has been cited as a growing problem for these organizations. Some arts organizations agree, while
some hold that their audiences’ average age has remained largely unchanged; regardless, studies show the average age among classical music attendees to be around 55 with decreasing rates of attendance from younger age groups (National Endowment for the Arts). With the exception of opera, classical music participants are, on average, older than participants for all other art forms (National Endowment for the Arts), which, while problematic for classical music organizations, represents an area of opportunity for growth. It is interesting to note that American classical music organizations have been gradually increasing the amount of music written before 1900 in their concerts while simultaneously reducing the number of contemporary compositions they perform (Lawson 300-12). While a commonly held belief that traditional repertoire results in higher ticket sales, the statistics cited do not support this belief.

**Importance of Project**

The great majority of audiences and performers of classical music pay attention mainly to the work of the established masters of past centuries. The problem of programming contemporary music is not only a problem from the current century, but has its roots as early as the 1830s, when the symphonies of Beethoven, which were based in the Romantic ideals of individualism, became the model by which all works to follow would be measured (Frisch 12). The roots of the public’s reticence to embrace newly created concert music dates back to this period, but as time progresses, these established works become increasingly archaic relative to current culture. Another unforeseen obstacle to the establishment of a foothold for contemporary music arose from the increased
availability of grants for the commissioning of new music beginning around 1960. While undoubtedly a positive development in encouraging the creation of new works, the concentration on premieres, rather than repeat performances of newly created works, has not paved the way for the establishment of a contemporary repertoire for the post-classical era.

To address this problem, this project argues that the ongoing creation and performance of contemporary music is both vital to the cultural identity of the United States as well as an important instrument in developing audiences for classical music organizations. To support this belief, this paper will examine three chamber music ensembles: The Kronos Quartet, Bang on a Can All Stars, and eighth blackbird. These three ensembles have been successful in areas such as attracting diverse audiences of all ages and consistently performing to near or at capacity audiences, areas where other performing arts organizations constantly strive, yet continuously fall short.

This project explores the effect that adventurous programming, combined with creative presentation, has in engaging a diverse audience base. The success of the ensembles studied suggests that classic music organizations would be well served to look to other art forms, such as visual arts, theatre, literature, architecture, and film, which center on the creation of new works that are often the subject of much public interest, controversy and debate. Classical music organizations could go a step further and look even to the popular music idiom, particularly so-called independent artists, whose often groundbreaking,
adventurous programming attract large diverse audiences and blur the line between art and popular culture. In its current state,

[Twentieth-century classical composition] is a largely untamed art, an unassimilated underground. While the splattered abstractions of Jackson Pollock sell on the art market for a hundred million dollars or more, and while experimental works by Matthew Barney or David Lynch are analyzed in college dorms across the land, the equivalent in music still sends ripples of unease through concert audiences and makes little perceptible impact on the outside world. Classical music is stereotyped as an art of the dead…yet these sounds are hardly alien. Atonal chords crop up in jazz; avant-garde sounds appear in Hollywood film scores; minimalism has marked rock, pop, and dance music from the Velvet Underground onward…[There is an] often ill-defined or imaginary border separating classical music from neighboring genres (Ross xii).

Possible Applications of Research

This research aims to make recommendations to arts administrators to help maximize revenue through programming contemporary music. Most arts administrators recognize the need for contemporary music, as the performance of contemporary music is necessary for perpetuating the art form and remaining relevant to contemporary culture, but current performances of contemporary music tend to be “hidden” within programs highlighting traditional classical repertoire. A typical orchestra concert on which a piece of contemporary music would be performed might, for instance, feature a performance of Beethoven Symphony No. 5, perhaps a shorter work by a composer such as Mendelssohn or Berlioz, and between both works, a new (short) work by a living composer such as Osvaldo Golijov or John Adams. The program would likely be marketed as a concert featuring Beethoven’s most popular symphony with little mention (if any) given to the new work in printed or radio announcements. The current
presentation of contemporary music by the more traditional classical music organizations seems like an apologetic afterthought rather than innovation.

There are limitations to the applications of the performance practices studied; for instance, chamber music ensembles perform in a variety of venues, which allows for greater flexibility in presentation as well as greater ease in implementing programming changes. Smaller chamber music ensembles are more nimble than larger, well-established orchestras. In spite of this greater flexibility, many chamber music ensembles may be in residence at universities or other institutions, where significant changes in presentation (i.e. altering performance spaces, lighting and sound systems) may not be feasible. Likewise, with few exceptions, most professional orchestras perform in the same concert hall for all concerts. The three chamber music groups studied perform contemporary music exclusively, yet this research should in no way be taken as a suggestion that other ensembles completely alter their repertoire to mimic these groups. Rather, this research should be construed as a guide to successfully programming contemporary music as a means to develop, as opposed to discourage, potential audiences for classical music organizations. Arts administrators should consider that in programming contemporary music, current audiences may not be the target audiences for new music and that the best course of action may be to match specific programs to specific groups of people if a program has a direct relevance to a specific group’s affinity. As noted previously, a shift in the programming and presenting of contemporary music
should serve as a means to attract a broader audience including a younger and more diverse demographic. A “one size fits all” approach for concert music, this paper argues, will not yield successful results.

**Project Outline**

The remaining chapters of this document will be divided among each ensemble selected as a topic of study. The ensembles were selected for their successes in the programming and presenting contemporary music; for their diversity in instrumentation; for their regional distribution (West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast); and for the different stages they represent in their respective careers (The Kronos Quartet is in its thirty-sixth year, Bang on a Can is in its twenty-second, and eighth blackbird is in its thirteenth).

The following chapters of this project will be devoted to the history and various marketing and presentation techniques employed by each ensemble and will highlight both their similarities and differences. The findings from this research will serve as a basic framework for arts administrators looking for a means to diversify their audience base and perform culturally relevant works. The final chapter of this project will make further recommendations for arts administrators of American symphony and chamber music ensembles as well as applications, limitations and risk factors associated with each.
CHAPTER II
THE KRONOS QUARTET

The string quartet has long been considered the quintessential medium for classical chamber music, the image of which evokes a formal, stuffy setting. It is in precisely this medium, however, that one can find some of the strongest evidence that new works of art, even performances of contemporary music, can succeed in attracting a large audience. The Kronos Quartet, now in its thirty-fifth year, performs contemporary music almost exclusively and has been more successful than almost any of its more traditional counterparts. The Kronos Quartet, whose mission is “to present and promote contemporary music and expand its repertoire for string quartet” (Kronos Quartet website), was established in 1973 by first violinist David Harrington to enable him to play newer music on a regular basis. The quartet has since performed works by contemporary American composers such as George Crumb (whose quartet Black Angels provided the initial inspiration for Harrington), Terry Riley, Steve Reich, John Cage, and Philip Glass, twentieth century European composers such as Dmitri Shostakovich, Arnold Schoenberg, and Alban Berg, and a diverse range of other international composers. The Kronos Quartet, which is self-
managed through the San Francisco-based nonprofit organization The Kronos Performing Arts Association, has performed over six hundred works, of which approximately four hundred fifty were commissioned by the quartet. The Kronos Quartet (consisting of violinists David Harrington and John Sherba, violist Hank Dutt and cellist Jeffrey Zeigler) tours nationally and internationally for five months of the year, maintains an active recording schedule, makes use of both sophisticated sound and light systems for concerts, and has released recordings that have topped classical, popular and world music charts.

When the Kronos Quartet first began attracting audiences in the mid-1980s, they:

startled audiences by coming onstage in modish fashions, in a look that suggested a genteel art-rock band. They also lowered the lights, projected images behind them, and generally attempted to bring a little atmosphere to whichever hall they had booked for the night. Self-appointed guardians of the classical grail…dismissed them as purveyors of kitsch. But Kronos wasn’t putting on a show; they were choosing to be their funky San Francisco selves, rather than checking their personalities at the door (Ross).

While mundane, the quartet’s apparel was an instantly recognizable trademark in the classical music world, where typical concert dress is somber and black. By ignoring tradition, the quartet instantly was able to send a message to the audience that it was a product of the twenty-first century, not the nineteenth century. At the same time, it created an easily identifiable brand. While not discounting the sheer artistry of the ensemble, the musicians in the Kronos Quartet have recognized the need to appeal both visually and aurally to its audiences. A typical Kronos Quartet concert attracts a diverse crowd
consisting of so-called typical classical music aficionados (middle-aged, well-to-do arts patrons), as well as a broad range of audience members of all ages and backgrounds. As this chapter argues, The Kronos Quartet’s success lies in its strategy to make its concerts challenging and participatory experiences, which is more reminiscent of rock music than of classical music.

**Programming**

I’ve always wanted music to be vital, and energetic, and alive, and cool, and not afraid to kick ass and be absolutely beautiful and ugly if it has to be. But it has to be expressive of life. To tell the story with grace and humor and depth. And to tell the whole story, if possible…” (Harrington, Kronos Quartet website)

The inspiration to form the Kronos Quartet came to David Harrington after he heard a performance of George Crumb’s *Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land*, which was written as the composer’s response to the horrors of the Vietnam War. The idea came to him that concerts could become a medium to explore social issues. As a result, Kronos often commissions works that can speak to audiences in a socially active way and confront issues that have affected people’s lives in the last century (Kronos Quartet website). For instance, in one of its earlier recordings, also entitled *Black Angels*, Kronos introduced a recurring theme: protest against war. The recording is an eclectic collection of different composers’ musical reactions to war, beginning with the title track, and includes Istvan Marta’s *Doom: A Sigh*, which was the composer’s reaction to the Romanian Revolution and combines string quartet with a tape of a peasant woman singing an ancient lament; and Dmitri Shostakovich’s *String Quartet No. 8*, which the composer dedicated “to the victims of fascism and war.”
A main difference between the Kronos Quartet and traditional string quartets is in how the music Kronos performs often relates more personally to an audience. Harrington explains that string quartets' roles have changed as have their audiences, since string quartets really started with Haydn, at a time when musicians had to go through the kitchen to get to the concert hall, and string quartets were basically dinner music for rich people. The medium is becoming more active, part of a larger concern, and it is exciting for us to be a part of this, through our commissions and performances (Harrington, quoted in Bye and Young 998-999).

To appeal to modern audiences, Kronos performs music that is current to the century and to which most people can relate. For instance, in Different Trains, a work commissioned by The Kronos Quartet that has since become a staple of string quartet repertoire, composer Steve Reich dealt with the Holocaust, a period that David Harrington feels “anyone calling themselves in artist in the twentieth century must deal with” (Bye and Young). Composer Steve Reich says of the piece:

The concept for the piece comes from my childhood. When I was one year old, my parents separated. My mother moved to Los Angeles and my father stayed in New York. Since they arranged divided custody, I traveled back and forth by train frequently between New York and Los Angeles from 1939 to 1942 accompanied by my governess. While these trips were exciting and romantic at the time, I now look back and think that, if I had been in Europe during this period, as a Jew I would have had to ride very different trains. With this in mind I wanted to make a piece that would accurately reflect the whole situation (Steve Reich to Bye and Young).

The subject of the Holocaust affects most people on a certain level; the effectiveness of a work on this subject could not be lost on an audience. For this piece, Reich recorded the voice of his governess, reminiscing about their train
trips together; the voice of a retired Pullman porter who used to ride the lines between Los Angeles and New York; the voices of three Holocaust survivors speaking about their experiences; and European and American train sounds of the 1930s and 1940s. The extra-musical concepts in *Different Trains* and many of the works Kronos commissions speak to an audience in a way that 18th or 19th century quartets cannot, for the historical works are either too far removed to be in the public's social agenda, or were never intended to make a social commentary.

Perhaps most interesting about the Kronos Quartet’s repertoire is its commitment to performing challenging and unfamiliar pieces at every concert. While classical music organizations averse to risk perform mainly “safe” classical music repertoire pieces, the Kronos’ success lies in its ability to actively engage its audiences through a continual stream of challenging music. While many arts organizations are almost apologetic about performing difficult music, the expectation to be challenged at Kronos concerts is at the very core of the organization’s success in attracting a large and diverse audience base (Headlam 115-18).

World Music

Twenty five years ago, The Kronos Quartet mainly performed works influenced by the Western European classical music tradition. In the mid-1980s, the Quartet began adding world music to its repertoire and as a result has been able to attract a more racially and age diverse audience, since world music is more a subcategory of pop rather than classical music. The group regularly
performs music from such diverse countries as Portugal, Mexico, India, Iran, Argentina, and various locations in Africa. It was, in fact, with its recording *Pieces of Africa*, its boldest venture into world music at the time, that Kronos had a double chart success when in May of 1992 it reached No. 1 on both the classical and world music charts. The album is a collection of commissioned works by seven African composers from South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Morocco that contain both elements of African folk music and Western classical performance practice. In several of the pieces, the Kronos Quartet collaborated with African instrumentalists who played such African instruments as the *sintir* (from Morocco), the *kora* (from Gambia), and the *tar* (from Sudan). The combination of these elements clearly established that the recording was world music as well as classical music (Terry 5).

According to first violinist David Harrington, the enthusiasm that listeners have shown for Kronos Quartet’s venturing into new music supports his conviction that human beings are naturally curious and that “People have to explore the world around them. You know, ‘Who lives next door?’ and ‘Who lives over the next hill?’ Learning new things is a basic human need that hasn’t changed” (Harrington to Bumbarger 41). The greatest proof that this is true is shown in the quartet’s continuing success in recording and programming world music. Apart from *Pieces of Africa*, the Kronos Quartet has performed Argentinian music in collaboration with tango master Astor Piazzolla in the recording *Five Tango Sensations*; Czech Gypsy music (in collaboration with the Romanian Gypsy ensemble *Taraf de Haidouks*), Bollywood film music (in
collaboration with the tabla musician Zakir Hussain), Portuguese, Mexican, Russian, Lebanese, Hungarian, and Iranian music in *Kronos Caravan*; and Mexican music in *Nuevo*. In these recordings, the Kronos Quartet provides a sense of the wealth and variety of music in these other cultures; for instance, *Nuevo* includes

the mid-century modernist Silvestre Revueltes rubbing elbows with the late Juan Garcia Esquivel, the king of bachelor-pad pop. There were old popular standards by Agustin Lara (described…as a sort of Mexican Cole Porter) and Alberto Dominguez, a recent soundscape by the rock band Café Tacuba and music from the long-running TV comedy show *Chespirito* (Buckley 38).

Part of the reason for the Kronos’s success in the field of world music is due to its collaborations with international musicians, whether in live or prerecorded performances. The combination of the traditional string quartet with the instruments indigenous to those cultures increases the sense of authenticity while retaining a sense of familiarity in the performances.

**Multimedia Presentations**

In a manner reminiscent of rock music concerts, the Kronos Quartet rarely performs without light displays, sound effects, and/or amplification. The quartet sometimes is accused of “using bizarre costumes and theatrical props that distract from the music…” and that “its search for a mass audience for new music has sometimes sunk to a race for celebrity” (Gann). The music performed, however, is almost always so-called “serious” though eclectic music by well-respected composers. The sound, visual and lighting designers with whom the Kronos Quartet regularly collaborates are, in many ways, almost like members of
the ensemble in that their efforts are meant to intertwine with and enhance the overall production. The light shows and special effects merely add another dimension rather than detract from a performance and help to successfully blur the line between art and popular culture.

The Kronos Quartet frequently employs sophisticated sound system technology in both recordings and in concert for purposes including amplification of the quartet and sound effects that commissioned composers have indicated in the score. In the music by such composers as Terry Riley and Steve Reich, the Kronos Quartet frequently prerecords itself to provide a counterpoint to the sound of the live ensemble in concert. The quartet usually performs amplified and has been criticized for this departure from tradition; but much of the music that Kronos plays actually demands amplification. Contemporary composers deal with a much larger range of dynamics than composers dealt with one hundred years ago, and a very soft pppp would simply not be heard in a very large hall. If the musicians did not exaggerate these dynamic contrasts, they would be departing from the composer’s intentions, and the performance would be less effective. The amplification brings the listener closer to the music, for a listener in the back of a large performing hall does not feel as far away from the stage when the sound is surrounding the hall.

Two major projects undertaken by the Kronos Quartet over the last decade best illustrate the ensemble’s dedication to making concerts a multisensory event for its audience. With these projects, entitled Sun Rings and Visual Music, the Quartet has truly broken new ground in the field of multimedia
presentation. *Sun Rings*, a collaboration with composer Terry Riley and commissioned by, among others, the NASA art program, commemorates the Voyager space probe’s 25 years in space (Kronos Quartet website) and is a multimedia production featuring the Kronos Quartet, a live choir, and sounds and images from space.

In 2000, the NASA art program contacted the Kronos Quartet with an invitation to launch a project that combined music with sounds from space that had been recorded over a period of forty years with plasma wave receivers designed by physicist Donald Gurnett of the University of Iowa. The Kronos Quartet drew on its longstanding partnership with Terry Riley to provide what was ultimately a 90 minute, 10 movement work combined with Gurnett’s collected sounds and photographs of space from the Hubble telescope and Voyager. What made *Sun Rings* innovative was the Kronos’ partnership with not only Riley, but also with a team of visual, lighting and sound designers, who were integral to the production of the work. Composer Terry Riley notes that he conceived the movements of *Sun Rings* as

…separate musical atmospheres with the intention to let the sounds of space influence the string quartet writing and then to let there be an interplay between live “string” and recorded “space” sound. In some movements, the intention was to place the quartet in such a way that it felt like they were traveling through spatial atmospheres…In some cases, fragments of melody that I observed in these sounds became the basis for themes that were developed in the quartet writing…Space is surely the realm of dreams and imagination and a fertile feeding ground for poets and musicians. I feel these influences are somehow responsible for this amazing collaboration which has been so enthusiastically undertaken by all the participants responsible for its outcome (Riley on Kronos Quartet website).
Sun Rings received its first performance in 2002, and has been subsequently performed throughout the world to enthusiastic acclaim.

In February 2003, to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of its founding, the Kronos Quartet premiered a program titled Visual Music, a concert-length multimedia event consisting of ten pieces that had been performed by the ensemble at different stages of their career. Some of the works, such as a movement from Riley’s Sun Rings, were commissioned by the quartet, while others, like John Zorn’s Cat O’ Nine Tails, come from the group’s recorded catalog. To accompany each piece, the quartet enlisted sound designer Mark Grey, scenic and projection designer Alexander V. Nichols, and lighting designer Larry Neff to create a unique aural and visual environment, in order “to give each piece a setting, a visual environment to live and breathe in…. We move into a totally different place, a different room in each piece.” according to David Harrington (Kronos Quartet website). This is accomplished with the aid of video projections created by several artists including Catherine Owens, Mickey T, and Willie Williams, combining with the music to elevate the concert event to a complete multidisciplinary experience that engages an audience on many levels. This program most succinctly demonstrates all the defining characteristics that set the Kronos Quartet apart from so many other ensembles, including a commitment to consistently programming challenging works; brand identity formed by a variety of long-term collaborations with artists of various disciplines; and a spirit of cultural inclusion that draws on musical influences from around the world.
Artistic Collaborations

As noted earlier, over six hundred works have been commissioned by the Kronos Quartet. The quartet has had ongoing relationships with such composers as Franghiz Ali-Zadeh, Steven Reich, Osvaldo Golijov, and particularly the minimalist Terry Riley, who has composed twelve pieces for the group. Through these collaborations, the Kronos Quartet has been able to develop its highly individualized style. Since composers work closely with the quartet, the performances have a more personal meaning than perhaps a Haydn string quartet, which was composed over two hundred years ago to serve as aristocratic court music. For instance, it is through Kronos Quartet’s collaborations that Terry Riley’s work *Requiem for Adam* has met such great success: Riley composed this work in memory of David Harrington’s sixteen year old son, Adam, who died unexpectedly of a blood clot on a family trip. Listening to *Requiem for Adam* is “like overhearing a family conversation, for the influence that Riley and the Kronos Quartet have had on each other since 1978 has been incalculably large” (Harry 24). It is almost impossible to imagine another quartet performing this work since it is such a close collaboration between the artists and composer. It adds a human dimension and emotional resonance to the Kronos Quartet that enables it to relate to an audience on a deeply personal level.

The success of the Kronos Quartet is strong evidence that the classical music industry has not exhausted its relevancy in the 21st century; however, this does not suggest that every performing arts group should attempt to transform
itself into the next Kronos Quartet. The Kronos Quartet’s success is due to its recognition that contemporary audiences demand both change and challenge. There is a great need for a broader support of the arts, and the Kronos has succeeded in reaching a large and diverse audience. The key to its success comes from Kronos finding an identity that distinguishes it from other quartets. Kronos recognized that modern audiences (particularly those in the baby boomer generation and beyond) simply are not interested in sitting through two hour long traditional chamber music concerts. By blurring the lines between art and popular culture, the ensemble has succeeded in reaching a wider audience by performing music with repertoire that could have been deemed inaccessible in other settings.
CHAPTER III
BANG ON A CAN

Bang on a Can, an organization that started as an all-day music festival in 1987, has evolved into a difficult-to-categorize, multi-dimensional vehicle for contemporary music, with a resident performing ensemble and a wide range of projects including teaching, commissioning, recording, organizing music festivals and touring. While Bang on a Can and the Kronos Quartet share several characteristics, and have likely influenced each other in many ways, the origin of Bang on a Can is markedly different from that of the Kronos Quartet. Whereas the Kronos Quartet was formed by musicians with a mission to advance and expand the repertoire for string quartet, Bang on a Can was founded by three composers, David Lang, Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe, who sought the means to forge their musical paths by defying musical categorization. They later founded a chamber music ensemble, the Bang on a Can All-Stars, to bring their music to the world. In 1987, the three composers, all recent graduates of Yale University, moved to New York only to find that the music they were interested in creating did not fit neatly into the New York art music scene, which at that time was divided between what was known as Uptown and Downtown styles. The Uptown
style was mostly practiced by academic composers, such as Milton Babbitt and Elliott Carter, and was heavily influenced by serialism. The Downtown style was largely practiced by the devotees of John Cage, and also included so-called “avant-jazz” composers, such as John Zorn, and minimalists, such as Steve Reich.

The composers recognized that the music they liked, and that the music they and other young composers created, didn’t fit into any of the established categories, so in response they founded Bang on a Can in 1987 with a mission to commission, perform, create, present and record contemporary music. The resulting style coming from this group (sometimes referred to as totalism) drew its influences from almost all categories of music, including minimalism, jazz and rock, and alternated between written and improvised music, world music and noise, and live and electronic music (Gann 155).

**Bang on a Can Marathons**

Bang on a Can’s first event, a twelve-hour marathon concert in a SoHo art gallery, included the works of twenty-eight composers, some of whom were well-established New York Uptown and Downtown composers. However, most of the works in the first Marathon were by the three founder-composers and a host of young, multi-genre, unknown and emerging composers. With a goal of being audience friendly, Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe shared similar characteristics from the start with the Kronos Quartet, including an unusual name, a hip venue, an all-day festival format that encouraged listeners to come and go as they pleased, and a generally informal atmosphere.
Since then, Bang on a Can’s annual twelve-hour Marathon (except for in 2007, the organization’s 20th anniversary, when the marathon lasted twenty-six hours) has become the organization’s most visible event and draws audiences of thousands to the World Financial Center’s Winter Garden, a free public venue that encourages the same freedom for audiences to come and go as they please. In addition to the music of Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe, the Bang on a Can Marathons continue to feature relatively unknown and emerging artists, but have grown to include the works of major composers and a variety of performing groups (both the Kronos Quartet and eighth blackbird have performed as part of the annual Marathon).

In addition to contemporary music ensembles, of which there are dozens who participate in the Marathon each year, Bang on a Can Marathons also feature a diverse range of styles that go even further than the Kronos Quartet in the blurring of art and popular culture and are programmed with a “gleeful disregard for the boundaries that separate classical music, rock, ethno and electronics” (Tommasini). The Marathons have seen such a range of composers/performing groups as minimalist Terry Riley, Sonic Youth’s Thurston Moore, the 30-voice Finnish shouting choir Huutajat and indie rock band Yo La Tengo.

A survey of online article and blog comment entries written about the Bang on a Can marathon provides ample evidence that this method of programming is not universally appealing, with comments ranging from “amazing,” “thrilling but tiring,” and “exhilarating,” to “ear assault,” “I can’t believe anyone would listen to
this,” and “I can’t run away fast enough.” However, the active online discussion
the Marathon generates is evidence of its ability to provoke interest and comment
from among diverse audiences. Critical reviews of the Marathon, even those that
are negative, consistently note with admiration the organization’s innovation and
ability to attract large crowds. Rarely does an arts organization have the visibility
to elicit the same type of debate and conversation as Bang on a Can.

Bang on a Can All-Stars

The Bang on a Can All-Stars was established from a core of versatile
musicians who began, in 1987, to perform with regularity at the annual Bang on a
Can Marathon. From this core, the All-Stars were formed in 1992, as an eclectic,
fairly stable four to eight member ensemble generally consisting of clarinet,
keyboards, percussion, electric guitar, cello and bass, to be the resident
ensemble of Bang on a Can. This group makes up the performing component of
its parent organization, and has evolved from exclusively premiering the music of
Gordon, Wolfe and Lang to its current status as one of the most wide-ranging
virtuoso ensembles in the world. Their repertoire includes works by Tan Dun;
Glenn Branca; and Thurston Moore, guitarist of the rock group Sonic Youth. The
stylistic breadth of music taken up by the All-Stars can be seen in their
recordings of Brian Eno's *Music For Airports* and David Lang's *Lying, Cheating,
Stealing*, the former quiet and contemplative, and the latter ear-splittingly
raucous, complete with two percussionists playing automobile brake drums.

Another unique aspect of this group is its unusual instrumentation. As an
ensemble formed from acquaintances of the three founding composers, it was
bound to be an unorthodox mix. However, this custom approach to sonic coloring was precisely the sound required for the composers’ iconoclastic experiments. In fact, the All-Stars’ instrumentation proved so unprecedented that once they decided to play works by other composers, they found themselves without a repertoire, and have specially commissioned almost their entire performance catalog. Perhaps because of this, of the three ensembles studied in this project, the All-Stars are arguably the most individualistic, the most genre-defying and the best equipped to effectively present the widest stylistic range of music. Ken Smith, writing in the American Music Center’s online magazine *New Music Box* points out that “some groups have been formed specifically to suit the whims of the composers” and cites the All-Stars as a primary example (Smith). He also notes that “The sound of much American concert music is largely shaped by the fact that composers are writing for specific ensembles,” and it follows that by maintaining such flexibility in style and instrumentation, and offering the widest range of options to composers, the All-Stars are perhaps the most fertile ground for nurturing new experimental paths in concert music.

The Bang on a Can All-Stars is the most fluid of the three ensembles contained in this study. The All-Stars only vaguely resemble a classical music ensemble and are more accurately described as part chamber group, part rock group, and part jazz band. They have been able to draw their audiences from fans of all these types of music, and have therefore reached a much larger number of listeners than would be possible if they had a narrowly-defined sound. Michael Gordon sums up this aspect of their success:
We’re not burdened with having to perform classical music; we’re only performing contemporary music. And the big problem with putting that piece of contemporary music on a classical music program is the audience doesn’t want to hear that piece of contemporary music…when someone comes to hear a Bang On A Can concert, they know that they’re going to get weird music. We don’t have anyone at our concerts who doesn’t want to be there (Smith 1999).

**Populism**

Bang on a Can is, arguably, one of the most populist contemporary music organizations; its very name, Bang on a Can, implies a universal ability to create music with one’s surroundings. The “music for everyone” approach does not, however, imply that Bang on a Can attempts to appeal to everyone; but rather that Bang on a Can is a welcome and audience-friendly experience for anyone wanting to participate. Like the Kronos Quartet, Bang on a Can, and in particular the Bang on a Can All-Stars, project a style reminiscent of a club setting, including casual dress, dramatic lighting, and amplification. While populism in music for another organization might suggest safe, unadventurous programming, Bang on a Can’s version of populism embraces the notion that contemporary music can include influences from all genres, including rock, jazz, and world music.

It is this sense of inclusion that has informed Bang on a Can’s most visible commissioning project, entitled, appropriately, the People’s Commissioning Fund. According to Bang on a Can co-founder David Lang, People’s Commissioning Fund was started to address a very important problem for us - how do you pay people no one has ever heard of before to make music that doesn't fit into any established tradition or category?...we noticed very quickly that it was
often easier to raise money for the famous people. But our mission was to work primarily with lesser known composers, and we needed to figure out how to pay them. Our solution was to start the People's Commissioning Fund (Lang in Interview on PBS).

The idea behind the People's Commissioning Fund is relatively simple: as opposed to most commissioning projects which rely on contributions from a single or very few individuals, foundations, or government organizations to commission a well-known composer to create a work, the People's Commissioning Fund pools contributions from hundreds of donors and annually commissions three emerging experimental composers to create works to be performed by the All-Stars as the culmination of a three-day festival.

In reality, Bang on a Can’s fundraising method for commissioning new works is not drastically different from most other organizations that commission music. With the exception of commissioning funds established by a single donor, many organizations commission projects using general operating funds, which are, in effect, pooled contributions from hundreds of donors. In fact, Bang on a Can solicits foundation and government grants just as all arts organizations do, but the organization’s ability to effectively market its “music for all” theme in this manner, by framing the project as putting “the power to change musical culture into the hands of the audience,” has made the People’s Commissioning Fund project extremely successful and given commissioners (donors) a sense of ownership in the project. (Bang on a Can website).

Since the project’s inception in 1997, over twenty-five composers have had their works premiered by the All-Stars, and many of these commissions
become part of the All-Stars’ ever-increasing repertoire and have been recorded by Cantaloupe Records (Bang on a Can’s own record label). While the uniqueness of the ensemble’s instrumentation makes the long-term viability of these works uncertain, the organization’s reputation gives many promising composers the visibility needed to gain larger scale prominence on the international music scene. More importantly, perhaps, is the acceptance of new music in general that the People’s Commissioning Fund seems to engender. Upon witnessing the People’s Commissioning Fund 2005 concert at New York’s Merkin Hall, the New York Times reported that:

Merkin Concert Hall was a mob scene… At five minutes to 8, the line of ticket buyers snaked out the door. Inside the lobby, the crowd ranged from elderly couples to bearded twentysomethings…it was a fitting reception for pieces filled with creative energy…it wasn’t polished or perfect, but it was alive, eminently cool and actually about something (Midgette).

One may surmise, then, that the sense of ownership Bang on a Can imparts with this project helps to generate this type of enthusiasm.

Multimedia Presentations

Unlike the Kronos Quartet, Bang on a Can’s concerts and festivals are not as consistently theatrical; however, the three artistic directors of Bang on a Can (Gordon, Lang and Wolfe) have produced several large-scale staged productions that rival the trailblazing multimedia initiatives that have come to distinguish Kronos. To date, they have produced four multimedia staged works, Carbon Copy Building, Lost Objects, The New Yorkers, and Shadow Bang, which combine music composed by the three Bang on a Can composers with a diverse array of theatrical elements.
For instance, *Lost Objects* is a production that can most aptly be
described as an oratorio lamenting loss as the unavoidable consequence of
progress. It describes losses from the inconsequential (socks, umbrellas, etc.) to
the crucial (friends, family, sight, and memory), and combines three musical
ensembles, including the Concerto Köln, a 30 piece Baroque ensemble; a four
piece rock group composed of members of the Bang on a Can All-Stars; and
three operatic vocalists to reflect upon the implication of loss. In addition, short
electronic pieces by the turntable artist DJ Spooky provide interludes between
musical acts, and staging from film director François Girard provides a visual
counterpoint. The collaboration of the different ensembles with the film provide a
larger statement of the loss of old technology to new technology, where

the composers have it both ways: by amplifying the Baroque instruments
and juxtaposing them with a rock band, they show the tenuousness of the
orchestra’s historical role; but they also show that it is still here. The first
passages the orchestra plays are couched in Vivaldi-like figuration, and it
is a surprisingly short leap from Vivaldi’s repetition to that of Mr. Gordon,
Mr. Lang or Ms. Wolfe (Kozinn 2004).

While ultimately not among Bang on a Can’s more successful experiments
(reviews surrounding performances of staged works are mixed at best),
*Lost Objects*, along with Bang on a Can’s other staged works, represent an
ambitious foray into modern opera, with a nod to the past but with a product
undeniably and unapologetically contemporary.

Of the ensembles included in this study, Bang on a Can has proven the
most difficult to classify. On one hand, Bang on a Can has its roots as a loosely
organized Downtown New York collective that stages the 12-hour musical
Marathon and embraces the notion that contemporary music can and should be for everyone. On the other hand, Bang on a Can is a far-reaching nonprofit organization that operates annual festivals, encompasses a resident ensemble, maintains its own record label, and has even branched out to include an annual summer music festival that promotes music business classes for student composers and performers as a main component of the festival. Perhaps it is this very flexibility that makes Bang on a Can so appealing. Whereas many arts organizations react to change, Bang on a Can is actively changing art, and constantly redefining itself to maintain its relevance.
Of the three organizations examined in this project, the sextet that calls itself eighth blackbird is, in some ways, the most indebted to tradition. Despite a comparatively conventional approach to much of its artistic strategy (or perhaps because of it), the ensemble has been able to garner critical acclaim and widespread popularity while programming new music exclusively. Formed in 1996 by friends at Oberlin College’s conservatory of music, the group quickly rose to prominence after winning the 1998 Concert Artist Guild Competition while pursuing an artist diploma en masse at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. Since then, eighth blackbird (which derives its name from the eighth stanza of the Wallace Stevens poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and consists of flutist Tim Munro; clarinetist Michael Maccaferri; violinist and violist Matt Albert; cellist Nicholas Photinos; percussionist Matthew Duvall; and pianist Lisa Kaplan) has distinguished itself as a champion of new music written for their specific combination of instruments.

Like the Kronos Quartet, and unlike Bang on a Can, the instrumentation for eighth blackbird is standard chamber music ensemble instrumentation. Also
like Kronos, eighth blackbird performs previously composed works written for its instrumentation. Though the roots of eighth blackbird’s instrumentation are not as classical as that of a string quartet, eighth blackbird is a standard “Pierrot” ensemble, named for the colorful combination called for in Arnold Schoenberg’s landmark work “Pierrot Lunaire.” This instrumentation was novel when the piece was written in 1913; however, since that time it has been employed by many composers and was hardly considered novel in 1996. Also, while eighth blackbird tours extensively, the ensemble has thrived mainly in academia, holding residencies at DePauw University, the University of Chicago, The University of Michigan and the University of Virginia at Richmond.

Academia had been seen, until fairly recently, as the “ivory tower” bastion of difficult contemporary music too esoteric to be enjoyed by typical audiences (especially during the severe serialist vogue of the 1960s and ’70s). It was largely in reaction to academia that groups like Bang on a Can formed, and was considered by populist-minded composers the enemy of progress in new music since it alienated potential audiences. eighth blackbird has evolved within academia, but has wisely used to its advantage the loosening of artistic restriction in academia that began in the mid-1980s. The music that eighth blackbird commissions, from composers such as Frederic Rzewski, Jennifer Higdon, Derek Bermel and Stephen Hartke sits more squarely in the traditional classical style than music performed by the Kronos Quartet or certainly the post-classical Bang on a Can. Until relatively recently, eighth blackbird concerts employed little amplification, video projection, or special lighting effects. (A
notable exception is Steve Reich’s recent “Double Sextet,” which pits the live sextet against the ensemble’s prerecording of the other ensemble parts. This work points out an interesting relationship with the Kronos Quartet and its commissioning of Reich’s “Different Trains,” discussed earlier.)

Since its founding the ensemble has served as a model for many other young ensembles formed in American colleges and universities, and dedicated to contemporary composers, such as Alarm Will Sound and the International Contemporary Ensemble, from the Eastman School of Music and Oberlin College, respectively. Despite these ties to classical tradition, eighth blackbird has succeeded in subverting what may be the greatest obstacle to artistic progress—reliance solely on the masterpieces of the past to attract an audience. The ensemble has evolved from its roots as a new-music, yet tradition-bound ensemble, into a popular, exciting contemporary music group that has been rewarded for the artistic risks it has taken.

Audience Engagement

One of the most notable characteristics of eighth blackbird is its ability to communicate with its audience on a personal level. There are several aspects to a typical eighth blackbird performance that allow this, but most important is the ensemble’s commitment to music memorization. Besides being an impressive technical feat (and one that is nearly always mentioned in concert reviews) memorization enables the ensemble to communicate the music more intimately to the audience by eliminating the physical barrier that the presence of music stands creates. Furthermore, the ensemble capitalizes on its ability to memorize
complex scores by choreographing movement that provides either a visual reflection or counterpoint to the music being played. For example, in a performance of composer Derek Bermel’s “Tied Shifts:"

The six musicians move toward one another for tight ensemble, [and later] cellist Nicholas Photinos, facing left, and clarinetist Michael Maccaferri, approaching the stage from the back of the hall, locked in a battle of glissandi for dominance. It was settled as Photinos stood to play, and Maccaferri lay on the floor (Webster).

The freedom of movement that memorization affords the group also allows the ensemble to perform certain types of theatrically-oriented works which require such movement. This style of presentation can be considered an offshoot of the multi-disciplinary work of performance artists like Laurie Anderson and Meredith Monk, who in their pieces play instruments, sing and dance. Such an approach brings a new aspect to integrating music with other artistic disciplines; while the other ensembles discussed in this project juxtapose their instrumental parts with lighting or film, eighth blackbird is able to achieve a more thoroughly integrated and unique art form by performing on multiple instruments and executing choreography itself, all of which is called for in the score of such pieces as “Singing in the Dead of Night,” a collaboration between Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe. The result was:

a more experimental work – it was actually choreographed, by acclaimed stage director Susan Marshall…the ensemble took on a variety of instruments as they moved around the space, playing with the sound of dropping pans and metal instruments, and pouring and shifting sand onto an amplified table (Anderson).

The ensemble is also well-known for its openness to audience questions and for its enthusiasm in sharing insights into the works it has chosen to perform
and their personal significance to the members of eighth blackbird. Perhaps more than many arts organizations, eighth blackbird performs with a clearly visible energy that is transmitted to the audience. As pianist Lisa Kaplan notes:

> We've all seen the guys sitting in the back of the violins at whatever symphony orchestra concert like they've been playing for a thousand years. This is not to say that they don't like what they're doing or that they're not good players. But it's not the kind of energy that sells the piece. I feel like we're always aware of that (Kaplan in interview with Otieri).

**Online Presence**

All three organizations included in this study have a strong internet presence. For instance, the Kronos Quartet maintains a visually interesting, comprehensive website, along with Facebook and MySpace pages. On these sites listeners can become “friends” of the quartet, find latest tour, recording and commissioning updates; sign up to receive e-mail and listen to audio and watch video clips of performances. The extent to which eighth blackbird promotes itself, however, is remarkable, not only for the sheer volume made available on the website (www.eighthblackbird.com) and on MySpace and Facebook pages, but also for the humor and wit the ensemble shares through its blog, Thirteen Ways (another reference to the Wallace Stevens poem that gave the group its name). While the blog arguably has its shortcomings (more allowance could be made for comments and responses from the bloggers to encourage interaction), the blog gives the group an appealing human element and offers an insider view into rehearsals and performances, and is an effective tool for generating interest in seeing a concert. Topics discussed in the blog vary widely, but include
rehearsal and performance triumphs and mishaps, and reflections on cities, universities and institutions the ensemble interacted with during tours and in residence. The organization is also on Twitter, a Web-based social networking tool which provides up-to-the-minute “tweets” (the short messages sent through Twitter) about the ensemble’s activities.

Multimedia Presentations

Until recently, eighth blackbird’s concerts were clearly indebted to classical music tradition. The ensemble followed a standard university-based residency model, and concerts were performed with little amplification, lighting effects, and/or staging. In fact, with the exception of the semi-choreography the ensemble employed, and the common thread of rejecting traditional concert apparel, there was little in appearance to distinguish eighth blackbird’s concert from other chamber music ensembles. Like the Kronos Quartet, however, which also has more traditional roots, eighth blackbird has continued to evolve as it defines itself. Now in its thirteenth year, and with a large and devoted following, eighth blackbird has embarked on more adventurous productions that show its evolution from

...1996, [when eighth blackbird’s] repertory consisted largely of revivals of older scores and works by young composers in the early stages of their careers. The group has not forsaken those composers, nor has it given up curatorial programming completely, but … it is now in another league (Kozinn).

Perhaps eighth blackbird’s most noteworthy exploitation of multidisciplinary performance is in Slide, a concert-length music/theater work that the ensemble will begin touring with in 2010 and that features the sextet,
actor/singer Rinde Eckert and composer/performer Steve Mackey. *Slide* examines the manipulation of the American psyche and was inspired by a published psychological experiment in which the subjects viewed a series of out-of-focus slides and were asked to identify the images when they were brought into focus. Subsequently, the same subjects were asked to guess the images depicted on another series of out-of-focus slides before the slides were brought into focus. Surprisingly, it took the subjects longer to identify the image when a guess had previously been made. *Slide* uses the experiment as a metaphor for today’s world, where persuasive images are employed to sell a commercial or political product. For this work, eighth blackbird and Steven Mackey are called on to take various roles onstage in addition to performing instruments. As is standard with the ensemble, the music is memorized, and projected images play an important role.

As the most recently formed ensemble in this study, it will be interesting to see eighth blackbird continue to evolve over the coming years. As chamber music ensembles specializing in new music become increasingly ubiquitous, the ways in which eighth blackbird continues to define itself as a unique entity while continuing to evolve strategies to attract an audience will be critical to its ongoing success.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

The progress of classical music is constantly lagging behind the evolution of other cultural disciplines. This phenomenon has led traditional music ensembles to adopt a reactionary position within the framework of our larger artistic society. Classical music organizations understand the value of classical music in society, but generally have made little effort to justify its importance or make a compelling case for its relevance today. However, as the success of the three chamber music ensembles in this study demonstrates, this challenge can be met as long as change is embraced as an opportunity to expand and diversify the audience instead of perceived as a threat to an organization’s existence. While the Kronos Quartet, Bang on a Can and eighth blackbird are exemplary, there exist a growing number of like-minded ensembles that have embraced change and as a result, have enjoyed at least some degree of success.

Limitations and Applications

The studies of these three ensembles are not intended to be used as exact models of replication. In fact, while these organizations have undoubtedly influenced each other to some extent, the appeal of these groups lies partially in
their independent approaches and willingness to take risks artistically. There are, however, common strategies employed by these organizations that can inform arts organizational planning. For instance, using new media to its fullest extent to reach a broader audience has become increasingly important, particularly in attracting a diverse audience base. Successful ensembles are recognizing that the boundaries between so-called “classical” music and popular music are increasingly blurred, thereby rendering the supposition of the superiority of classical music archaic. Additionally, arts organizations that wish to attract interest in non-traditional programs are beginning to realize that the ideal target audience for such a program is not likely to be the same audience a traditional program would attract. Therefore, it would be in their interest to explore other avenues of advertising. For instance, while an all-Beethoven concert could be effectively advertised on a local classical radio station, programs of the kind performed by Bang on a Can would be better advertised to fans of alternative rock, independent films or underground theater.

The Kronos Quartet, Bang on a Can and eighth blackbird all have utilized these strategies effectively to increase audience numbers and have garnered critical acclaim in the process. By embracing changing technology, rejecting outdated conventions of concert etiquette, and employing imaginative marketing approaches, they have secured for themselves a devoted following that allows them to perform the kind of music they believe in while advancing the progress of concert music in this country. For the time being, this support shows no sign of wavering.
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