Whose Art is it Anyway? Issues Shaping the Arts and Culture Sector

This is the fifth installment in our series *about arts and culture philanthropy. The series is published as a collaboration between* The Philanthropist *and The Metcalf Foundation.*

When people gather for a pops concert by Symphony Nova Scotia, Chris Wilkinson scans the lobby of the Dalhousie Arts Centre in Halifax. The last thing the symphony's CEO wants to see is a familiar face.

"If I can't recognize the audience, I've done my job," he says. To draw audiences who are younger and more diverse than the usual crowd, the orchestra has programmed concerts with personalities visiting town for a sci-fi convention, the drag queen violinist Thorgy Thor, and the Soul Sisters duo from Halifax's black community in North Preston. Ticket sales have doubled since 2013.

"Our goal is to present concerts that appeal to all people," Wilkinson says.

All people? With its main season still filled with Beethoven and Mozart that may sound impossibly ambitious. Culture's relationship with audiences is perhaps the single largest issue — or series of issues — that Canadian arts groups face today. Their challenges include everything from the proverbial getting "bums in seats" when people might prefer to stay home with Netflix, to answering society's call for diversity, gender equity, and reconciliation with First Nations. As an organization that has had to rethink who it serves and how, Symphony Nova Scotia is typical of arts organizations across the country.

"People who care"

When not upending the taxi industry or closing local newspapers, the digital revolution has also transformed Canada's cultural sector. The cultural industries, including film and television production, broadcasting, the music business, and book publishing, have always had to compete with Hollywood and New York. But they now find that competition particularly stiff in a landscape that now includes Netflix, Amazon, and Apple. These industries are often regulated, even governed in some instances, by Canadian-content rules, and sometimes subsidized by tax credits and government loans. Nonetheless, they are commercial ventures.

The non-profit cultural sector — including public art galleries and museums, most of the performing arts, and literary, film, and some music festivals — is a different beast, free of direct government regulation but ruled by the competition for arts council grants. The level of subsidy varies widely. At the lowest end, an entertainment machine such as the Stratford Festival receives a paltry 5% of its budget from grants. At regional theatres such as Winnipeg's Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre (Royal MTC) or Halifax's Neptune Theatre, less than 20% of the budget comes from government, while capital-intensive museums are subsidized more heavily — around 30 to 50%. Meanwhile, the small, independent groups — an artist-run gallery; a new-music performance space; a shoestring theatre company — depend mostly on their individual success getting arts councils grants.

Whatever the endeavour, non-profit cultural organizations depend on what one arts administrator refers to as "people who care." These are the patrons who buy tickets and pay for parking, a coffee, or an item in the gift shop. And they are also the enthusiastic volunteers, committed corporate donors, and generous philanthropists. Today, who those people should be and how an arts organization should serve them is increasingly a matter of debate. For donors, the arts are sometimes an afterthought once contributions have been made to health or education charities, but the sector offers extraordinary opportunities for philanthropic engagement, from glamorous national institutions to grassroots indie groups.

Digital delights

In many ways, digital technology has invigorated the sector. Artists are certainly excited by new media. In Toronto, Anishinaabe filmmaker Lisa Jackson has created *Biidaaban: First Light*, a virtual-reality experience that imagines the city returning to nature in a rich piece of Indigenous futurism, while playwright Jordan Tannahill's *Draw Me Close* merges virtual reality into a live performance about his mother's impending death. In Vancouver, visual artist Howie Tsui has created a new hybrid video form with *Retainers of Anarchy*, a randomly-generated animated martial arts story that plays out on a huge scroll-like screen. In theatre, incorporating filmed elements has become almost commonplace – from Robert Lepage's *Coriolanus* at Stratford in 2018 to Kim Collier's recent production of the new Daniel Brooks family drama, *The Full Light of Day,* in Vancouver and Toronto.

And the back office is no less engaged by the technology that has enabled social media marketing. "On the communications side, it has been a boon," says Kim Gaynor, general director of Vancouver Opera. "It allows us to communicate widely, cheaply, and quickly."

However, digital administrative systems can be expensive. For example, few Canadian organizations can afford "shopping cart abandonment" software that lets vendors email buyers who changed their minds and ask why. "The danger with digital is that I am going to fall behind," Wilkinson says.

Missing audiences

But perhaps the largest concern about the digital revolution is what it may have done to audience attitudes. Will millennial consumers, addicted to the choice, convenience, and interactivity offered by their home entertainment subscriptions and social media feeds, darken the door of the theatre or concert hall?

"Twenty years ago, the performing arts assumed if the work was good, the audience would find it," says Camilla Holland, executive director at Winnipeg's Royal MTC. "Twenty years later we believe the work is good and wonder where the audience is."

Holland attributes this to busy schedules. "People's lives have changed; the work day has expanded; commuting has eaten into leisure activity," she says. To boost existing audiences and build new ones, Royal MTC uses targeting marketing, enhances the playgoing experience with talks, guides, and free community activities, and, like many a cultural group, is trying to plug gaps in public school arts curriculums by expanding its youth programs.

Adults certainly have more time for the arts when they retire, yet Holland and her colleagues

dispute the suggestion that audiences are not only grey-haired but actually dying off. In Vancouver, Gaynor holds to the old wisdom that the performing arts are a mature pastime. Take Richmond, BC, chartered accountant and music lover Christine Woodington. When she was in her 20s, relatives invited Woodington to a performance of *Figaro* but she was intimidated by the notion of an opera in a foreign language. She is now 36, and when a colleague offered her tickets to *La Cenerentola* at Vancouver Opera's annual festival last May, she figured she would at least understand the Cinderella story. Delighted to discover translated titles projected above the stage and singers who performed without microphones, she came home raving to friends. "I was amazed," she says, promising she will be buying tickets for next year's festival.

Woodington's conversion is exactly what was supposed to happen in 2015 when Vancouver Opera announced it was abandoning the traditional fall-to-spring season in favour of a three-week event in May. The idea was to boost flagging subscriber audiences with younger single-ticket buyers and cultural tourists excited by crossover music offerings and the intensity of a festival experience. However, the financial efficiencies of a shorter performance cycle were less than expected. The tourists didn't materialize and many long-time subscribers simply cancelled. When Gaynor arrived in 2016, she quickly restored the fall and winter productions and shortened the festival to nine days.

"We are trying to be all things to all people," she says, echoing Wilkinson on the opposite side of the country.

Democratization in the arts

Indeed, one of the impacts of digitization, and of social media in particular, is a democratization of the arts. In a cultural climate in which anybody can be an internet blogger, Instagram influencer, or YouTube star, the boundary between professional and amateur content is softening, perhaps leading to less inherent respect for arts institutions. Certainly, citizens not only expect easy access to culture but also demand transparency and social engagement. Arts groups set lofty standards for themselves. "We all believe art can build empathy, foster community, and create better citizens," says Holland — which may explain why people perceive them as public institutions no matter their scale. So, audiences and the media often take an intense proprietary interest. Witness the heavy scrutiny the Soulpepper theatre company experienced when four actresses sued former artistic director Albert Schultz for sexual harassment. Meanwhile, notions of a curator's expertise or an artist's creative licence have been challenged by ideas about the primacy of community and controversies over appropriation of voice.

Artists who ignore these changes do so at their peril. Lepage is an internationally-acclaimed theatre director, yet North American producing partners pulled out of *Kanata,* his Canadian history show, last year when activists complained that it represented Indigenous characters without including Indigenous actors. In this instance, public concerns about representative casting trumped Lepage's practice of creating collaboratively with a longstanding group of performers.

Sometimes, unforeseen sensitivities can blindside an institution. After bitter protests against their "Into the Heart of Africa" show back in 1989, curators at the Royal Ontario Museum began seeking input from any community they feature. The ROM has recently engaged Japanese Canadian co-curators for an exhibition about the wartime internments and consulted

representatives of the Indo-Canadian community on a show of photographs by Raghubir Singh. Still, that exhibition was snared in controversy when a serious #MeToo allegation emerged against Singh, who died in 1999. The ROM hurriedly organized a smaller exhibition about #MeToo for its lobby, as well as panel discussions about sexual harassment, and gender and power in photography.

Neither public controversy nor funding bodies will let arts institutions sidestep these issues. In 2017, the Canada Council adopted a policy that reaffirmed its commitment to equity-seeking groups within its main granting system. It has also enlarged programs for Indigenous art. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission specifically recommended that museums and heritage centres acknowledge Indigenous history and perspectives, a task the sector has energetically undertaken, organizing exhibitions devoted to First Nations and Inuit culture while redoubling efforts to repatriate Indigenous artifacts and ancestral remains to their original communities.

Reconciliation in the performing arts is less well defined but non-Indigenous audiences have been enjoying the fruits of a renaissance in Indigenous art. For example, at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre last winter, theatregoers enthusiastically welcomed *Kiviuq Returns* — a production from Iqaluit told entirely in Inuktitut without benefit of subtitles — as they let the language wash over them like the lyrics of a foreign opera. On the other hand, some organizations target Canada's newest arrivals: Canoo, an app offered by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, provides new Canadians with free passes to arts events in the first year of their citizenship, while the Toronto Arts Council has a special grant program for newcomer artists.

Still, new or shifting categories can make it difficult for arts organizations centred on traditional European art forms. At Vancouver Opera, Gaynor says she can get grants for projects such as *The Flight of the Hummingbird*, a new opera for young audiences with an ecological theme based on both a South American Indigenous myth and the work of Haida illustrator Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas. Money for *Eugene Onegin* or *La Traviata* is scarcer. "The core of our work is becoming harder to fund," she says.

Redefining roles

There are varying approaches to these demands that the arts reach both more people and different people. In some ways, museums have it easier than the performing arts because they are community hubs open all day and year-round. Larger museums, in particular, are rapidly expanding their role as cultural custodians and research institutions to become community centres that offer an alternative to the mall, the amusement park, and even the doctor's office.

"The biggest reason millennials are coming to a museum is to chill out," says Stephen Borys, executive director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, where social dialogue and reconciliation have been added to a mandate of collecting, exhibiting, and researching. "Art museums are places that are safe and respectable — and neutral. Public trust is still high."

Montreal's Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) is an international leader in reconfiguring what may have been considered an elitist institution. The MMFA has added wellness to its mandate, pioneering a program in which Quebec doctors can prescribe a free trip to the museum for mental health. It has also built the largest art education and therapy centre in North America, serving teens with eating disorders and adults with dementia, while maintaining a fully-equipped studio that is open to anyone who wants to try their hand at creation.

“The question of being elitist is related to an understanding that art belongs to experts and can just be interpreted by those experts,” says MMFA Director General and Chief Curator Nathalie Bondil. “I’m sorry, but it’s the 21st century: Horizontality is everywhere.”

In Toronto, the Art Gallery of Ontario is also making changes. Without much fanfare, the gallery has rethought who it features in major exhibitions, replacing “mighty whities” with female and Indigenous artists. Recent shows have included the African American Mickalene Thomas, Inuit artists Kenojuak Ashevak and Tim Pitsiulak, BC First Nations artist Brian Jungen, and, from Japan, Yayoi Kusama, whose infinity mirror rooms provide an Instagram-friendly gallery experience. These big shows have proved popular, and the AGO has also launched a major outreach to youth, offering free admission to anyone younger than 25, as well as a new $35 annual pass to older visitors. (It would cost the gallery $14 million annually to offer free admission to all, as London’s National Gallery or the Smithsonian museums in Washington, DC, do.)

So far, the AGO’s bold experiment is producing some success stories. Western University student Phoebe Liao, 21, who hopes to become a doctor, visited the Kusama show after she saw the artist’s work on Instagram. She then followed the story as the AGO acquired its own infinity room for its permanent collection and got word of the new youth passes on the gallery’s website. During an internship in Toronto last summer, she took to dropping by the gallery after work.

Perils of populism

Liao has begun what may become a lifelong relationship with public art galleries thanks to both Kusama and the free admission. But is everyone’s connection this deep? Many programming experiments raise questions about how long audiences drawn by shiny offerings will stick around. When the AGO used the email list from its Kusama exhibition to crowdsource money to buy its own infinity room it drew half the response it had predicted. For some visitors, Kusama at the AGO was a fling not a marriage. That wouldn’t surprise Wilkinson of Symphony Nova Scotia, who has no expectation pop audiences will return to hear the classics. The point is to serve them, not convert them.

The trick seems to be balancing the popular with the smart. For example, when Bondil borrowed a blockbuster show about the African influences in Pablo Picasso’s work from a French museum in 2018, she made sure to add a selection of works by African American and Black Canadian artists, winning kudos from museum colleagues while drawing big crowds. The last time the Stratford Festival staged *The Merchant of Venice*, in 2013, it impressed critics with the way it addressed the play’s potential anti-Semitism: organizing a mock human rights hearing for Shakespeare’s Shylock with former Supreme Court Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin presiding.

Arts groups need to know who they mean when they say “community” so they can actually chart the effects of outreach. Targeting specific audiences may be effective, but nobody should check groups off a list or consider diversity initiatives as a “one and done,” says Ravi Jain, artistic director of Why Not Theatre in Toronto. After the company mounted *Prince Hamlet* last winter with deaf actress Dawn Jani Birley in a production that included both spoken English and American Sign Language, it continued working with her on a second project and also remodelled a training program for Edmonton’s Citadel Theatre so that it could include deaf

participants

Why Not is a cross-cultural company launched following the 2011 production of *A Brimful of Asha*, in which Jain appeared on stage with his own mother to tell the true story of her attempt to arrange his marriage to an Indian bride. The company now also helps other artists administer their companies and tour their work. “There is a role for a community changemaker that Netflix is not going to play,” Jain says, adding “Only a third of our activity is producing our own shows.”

“Two-thirds of our activity is saving the world,” chimes in Managing Director Owais Lightwala, with only a hint of irony. “An audience is people who buy tickets. Community is people you have accountability to. Loblaws has audiences; the arts should build communities.”