

Feature**Cleveland Orchestra initiatives are paying off:
a look behind its report of record ticket sales**

by Mike Telin



While symphony orchestras here and abroad have been gazing deeply into their navels to find ways to fill their seats and pay their bills, The Cleveland Orchestra has unleashed a powerful set of initiatives that are already bearing fruit in increased attendance and revenue.

Last week, almost at the same time as the head of Universal Music's classical division was preaching a “change or be doomed” message to the Association of British Orches-

tras, the Musical Arts Association released an impressive report on its first half of season ticket sales demonstrating that a number of the new plans it announced at the launching of the Center for Future Audiences in October of 2010 have already taken hold.

During November and December of 2012, 51,184 people attended performances (92% of capacity), an increase of 38% over the previous year. During that same period, the Orchestra took in \$2.8 million in ticket sales (a 47% increase over 2011) and increased its Holiday Festival sales by 16% to a record total of \$1,177,271.

Announcing the \$20 million Maltz Family Foundation leadership gift that made the Center possible two seasons ago, TCO executive director Gary Hanson declared at the time, “We’re setting an ambitious goal for the Center — the goal of having the youngest audience of any orchestra in the country by the time of our centennial in 2018.” Ross Binnie, who was named director of the Center added, “Our strategy from this point forward will to focus on filling seats rather than earning income from those seats. By the time we celebrate a hundred years of this amazing Orchestra, I can’t expect everyone in this community to love our art form, but I do expect everyone to have tried it.”

Though those formal initiatives are only two years old, the conditions that set them in motion go back much farther. When did the Orchestra first start looking at the numbers and realizing that something needed to be done to keep the organization relevant? “The short answer to that is four and a half years ago with the economic downturn,” Hanson

recalled in a telephone conversation last week. “There is a longer answer as well, but certainly over the last four seasons — beginning in the fall of 2009 — we have focused very seriously on diversifying our programming and broadening the audience. This is all part of our strategic initiative to broaden what the Orchestra does — to play more music for more people. And it is yielding great results this year in terms of ticket sale success.”

During November and December of 2012, the Orchestra programmed an eclectic menu of events and genres: its customary diet of classical music along with Celebrity concerts, KeyBank Fridays@7, Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* with orchestral accompaniment, traditional Christmas concerts, *The Nutcracker* with the Joffrey Ballet and a pair of concerts with “Portland's Little Orchestra”, Pink Martini.

Hanson attributes a lot of the impressive numbers to this new breadth of programming. “We have received great feedback from concerts with artists such as Bela Fleck [*who played his new banjo concerto on the Fridays @7 series as well as at regular subscription concerts — photo above*]. There aren't a lot of popular artists who have crossed over successfully into serious orchestral repertoire, so it's not something that you can attempt to do every week, but with artists who have done so, it really does make a difference in attracting new audience members.”

How has the Orchestra's popular Fridays@7 series translated into audience growth at its regular subscription concerts? “The goal of Fridays@7 is to attract new people to Severance Hall and The Cleveland Orchestra”, Hanson said. “The goal is not to convince them that they should then move on to the Thursday or Saturday night subscription series. We will be delighted if they continue to be patrons only for Fridays@7.”

A major part of the Orchestra's strategy to fill seats both at Severance Hall and at the Blossom Music Center targets students and younger listeners. Supported by the Alexander and Sarah Cutler Fund for Student Audiences, the student Frequent Fan Card and the “Under 18s” free ticket program — the latter introduced at Blossom in 2011 and expanded to Severance Hall this season — have resulted in a doubling of student attendees at Severance Hall concerts. An average of 200 students now attend each subscription event and on occasion, students have made up one fifth of the audience. “That has changed the feeling of Severance Hall”, Hanson noted. “With so many young people, there is now a real buzz.”

Regarding his centennial goal of getting everyone in the community to at least try out what The Cleveland Orchestra has to offer, Binnie said last week “I can't give you an update on how many people still have to come, but that goal on that day was to make sure the door was wide open to anyone who did want to experience it.” The Frequent Fan program has been a signal success in that regard. “That's a terrific deal,” Binnie said. “It's a \$50 one-time purchase, and then students can come to any subscription concert that they want to during the season. We sold an amazing 388 of those. I was blown away by the number we sold. And of the students that are coming, some have come to over half the concerts this fall.”

Another big success this season has been the Orchestra's Student Ambassador program, of which Ross Binnie is justifiably proud. “We've done a number of things on a number

of levels with that program. This year we've engaged twelve students from around the community and they've been absolutely terrific advocates for us. Pushing concerts and encouraging students to come — it's been tremendous. They have their own social media site too, which has certainly helped."

I spoke to three of this season's student ambassadors: Alex Ahern, a second-year student at the CWRU Law School from Connecticut; Kushal Shah, from North Carolina, a master's candidate at the CWRU School of Medicine; and Seth Pae, from Hudson, a senior viola major at Baldwin-Wallace Conservatory.

All three came to the program by different paths. "My mom has always been a great fan of classical music", Ahern said. "She was coming to visit me for Mothers' Day last Spring and I thought it would be a great present to take her to The Cleveland Orchestra." Though not a classical music fan himself, Ahern was "blown away" by Severance Hall and found the concert "relaxing and soothing to the soul." Casting about for a birthday gift for his mother's next visit in November, he noticed both the Student Advantage and the Student Ambassador programs "and I thought these looked like something I would want to take advantage of."

Seth Pae, who was already an usher at Severance Hall, received an email about the Ambassadors program "and I thought it sounded like something interesting. I thought it would be a very good fit for me. I'm an outgoing person and I like doing things like putting up posters. I do have a lot of pride for Cleveland and I want to show people how many great things there are to do."

Kushal Shah just stumbled upon the Orchestra. "I just moved to Cleveland this past August. I had never been here and didn't know anything about the city. I was looking on-line about things in Cleveland, and since I'm only here for about two years I wanted to make the most of my time. But one of the things the website mentioned was Severance Hall and The Cleveland Orchestra as well as all of the musical performances the city has."

How do these Ambassadors help get the word out? Shah uses old-fashioned means as well as social networking. "The School of Medicine is in one building, so I post flyers on all of the bulletin boards. We also have student groups on Facebook and Twitter, so I post messages there about upcoming performances and ticket costs as well as the Student Advantage Program." Ahern's approach is similar, except he doesn't use Twitter. "Actually I don't have a tweeter! Facebook I think works better and especially the CWRU Law School class wall." His own Facebook account has 900 friends.

How have fellow students and friends responded? "Well, now going to the Cleveland Orchestra has become the cool thing to do," Pae says. "It's like people who get buzzed up about the Cavs' games. I find that people who go to concerts who are not conservatory students just go because they haven't done it before and they want to check it out. Conservatory students will circle certain pieces on the calendar. Mahler was really popular and so was Rachmaninoff. And people are going gaga over Beethoven 7. There is a lot of excitement about certain pieces."

Not surprisingly, there's a social dimension to attending Cleveland Orchestra events. "One of my friends is close friends with many CIM students," Kushal says, "so we all get together and will eventually end up at the orchestra concert. We do go out and have dinner, and after the concert we are always talking about which part was our favorite. I've been to two Fridays@7 this season and the Balinese gamelan was a favorite. These are the kinds of things that many college students don't think about until they are older and they say, I should have done that." Ahern says, "I have created groups on occasion when I have been able to coordinate my schedule with my friends. It all depends on the timing." Many of his friends are new to classical music, "but moreso it's a very diverse group. There are a number of men and women as well as international students. I have been pleasantly surprised with the reception."

If Sean Pae's reaction to The Cleveland Orchestra's new audience initiatives are any indication, the donors who support them can feel their gifts have been greatly appreciated. "I'd like to thank the family that donated the money. I was at the concert where they presented them with an award — this was during student advantage week — and thought it was an amazing thing to do. I love going to The Cleveland Orchestra concerts and I hope that as many people as possible can get to experience one of the greatest orchestras in the world."

Are The Cleveland Orchestra's recent successes an anomaly, or are other Northeast Ohio performing arts organizations also experiencing a resurgence of attendance and support? Next week we take a look at some other institutions to see how they're faring these days.

Daniel Hathaway contributed to this article.

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