

Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra (CSO) Classical Roots

by Anne Cushing-Reid

Classical Roots is an uplifting concert celebrating the richly diverse African American musical experience, with the power of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Bringing together 150 singers from churches throughout the region, the Classical Roots Community Mass Choir (CRCMC) prepares over a 10-12 week period with the Classical Roots resident conductor, William Caldwell. The culminating concert takes place in Cincinnati Music Hall with the full Cincinnati Symphony & Pops Orchestra led by conductor John Morris Russell. (from CSO website)

Organization Description

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra is the fifth oldest orchestra in the United States and maintains a 52-week schedule. Its mission, “To seek and share inspiration,” provides a glimpse into a new kind of thinking about the role of an orchestra in the community. Supporting this mission is the vision, “We will engage audiences and community better than any other orchestra in the world.” Additionally, values grace the walls of the office:

- Determined for Greatness (tenacity and perseverance)
- A Place of Experimentation (commissioning, premiering new works, special projects)
- Cincinnati’s Ambassador (touring, broadcasts, recording)
- Cincinnati’s Own (commitment to community)

In 1989, the orchestra began addressing issues of diversity and inclusion, establishing the Multicultural Awareness Council (MAC). MAC’s initial committee, comprising board, staff, and community members, identified issues and made recommendations with regard to diversity and inclusion. Over time, MAC evolved into a volunteer organization and the Board of Trustees established a Diversity and Inclusion Committee. A full-time staff member to support Community Engagement and Diversity efforts was added in 2001.

Community Partner(s) Description

Classical Roots was the brainchild of the Multicultural Awareness Council (MAC), the CSO’s diverse group of volunteers focused on fostering an increased awareness of the CSO’s concerts and music education programs throughout Greater Cincinnati. It started with the CSO performing a handful of concerts with area partner churches. The concerts were wildly successful, and the desire for churchgoers and fans to experience classical music grew, especially within the African-American community. As more churches requested to have the CSO perform, it made sense to bring the program to Music Hall to accommodate a larger crowd.

History/Description of Pre-project Partnership

The early 2000s were painful years in Cincinnati. Police/Community relations were tense and boiled over into civil unrest when a Cincinnati Police Officer in the Over-the-Rhine community (the home of the CSO) shot an unarmed, young, African-American man in the back. Music Hall was often in the background of national news reports.

During that time, the local press started to focus on diversity issues in the city. This series included a scathing article about lack of diversity in the arts in Cincinnati. The CSO took that as a challenge and the board provided initial funding to hire a Community Engagement and Diversity manager. In fairly short order, the idea of a Classical Roots Community Concert(s) was developed with the MAC volunteers, partner church representatives, artistic staff and education staff. Concerts were scheduled with three church partners in the summer of 2001, several months after the civil unrest. While the concerts were not positioned as “healing” events by the CSO, it was clear that church partners saw that idea as part of their reason to commit to the project. The idea of bringing people together was appealing.

Evaluation

Process

The key to the success of the project – including its continued success – is that it is supported at the top levels of the CSO. The Multicultural Awareness Council comprised key volunteers who enthusiastically support the program. Along the way, **the CSO Board formed a Diversity and Inclusion Committee as a permanent part of the committee structure**, a clear signal of support. The President of the Orchestra from the beginning supported the project. The organization was ready to engage and moved toward the community with genuine curiosity and respect for potential partners.

Outcomes - Over time, ~33% of total attendees were new to the CSO; ~10% of CR attendees returned to the CSO or Pops for other concerts. At last check, the numbers were declining slightly only because of patrons returning for additional concerts.

Relationships Maintenance Plan/Activities

Primary relationships evolved with music ministers from several African American Churches. Relationships with Pastors and their wives were nurtured with an annual breakfast and a VIP dinner included African American business leaders who would later step up as sponsors.

Assessment

What worked well

The active participation within the program is by far the most meaningful part of Classical Roots. The Classical Roots Community Mass Choir brings together ~ 150 singers from churches across the Greater Cincinnati area. The support of church leaders and efforts of the music ministers is a testament to the value of the program in those local communities.

On purpose

Classical Roots was process oriented from the beginning. The CSO team included the Community Engagement Manager, the Education Department, and the Artistic Operations team. There was an emphasis on communications with the community partners and open dialogue regarding repertoire, preparation of the choir, and other details.

From a funding perspective, seed money of \$10,000 provided several Board donors launched the project's move to Music Hall. Efforts of board members, especially the Diversity & Inclusion Committee, to cultivate and build relationships with the African American business community increased sponsorship and donor support for the project to over \$100,000 in three years.

Accidentally

Classical Roots was initiated with emphasis on the artistic connection to the community. We discovered that internal education and training to serve this more diverse and often new audience was necessary. Trust developed between our partners and the Community Engagement Manager but that trust did not automatically transfer to other parts of the organization, such as the ticket sales team. There were many times when the only person who could help was the Community Engagement Manager. Over time, this changed as diversity/inclusion workshops were provided across the organization and as audience members returned to the event in subsequent years.

What could be improved next time

Because this program started small and grew over a number of years, it is safe to say that the relationships were nurtured and developed in such a way (literally over decades) that necessary improvements were openly discussed and addressed. The key was to maintain the trust that was built through genuine efforts to improve issues.

Lessons learned for effective engagement

Classical Roots emerged at a time when conversations around equity and inclusion were just beginning in the arts generally and in orchestras specifically. The CSO had to follow its instincts in many cases and, at the same time, maintain its mission and vision in the context of creating the program with the African American Church Communities who were our early partners. The Orchestra had to learn how to work with others. Because of the genuine interest and caring of the people involved with the project, both CSO and community members, the program was given time to grow at the right pace and in the right time.

Author's Note

This project took a lot of creative effort from the people involved at the very beginning. I personally thank Kathy Jorgensen-Finley, who served as the first Community Engagement and Diversity Manager and provided her personal vision and powers of persuasion to make Classical Roots a reality. Our work together on many interesting project during those years will always hold a special place in my heart.