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Lifelong Singing



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Building Resilience: Sustainability Considerations for Nonprofit Music Organizations

by Jack A. Cleghorn

Sustainability for nonprofit arts organizations has changed significantly over the years. Much of this change has been influenced by cultural shifts, economics, and an ever-evolving regulatory landscape. The origins of our modern nonprofit started to evolve in the mid-twentieth century as arts organizations began to foster artistic expression and community engagement through the arts. *Performing Arts—The Economic Dilemma* (William G. Baumol and William J. Bown) highlighted many of the challenges we face. Though published in 1968, the book remains relevant, as it addresses the economic challenges faced by performing arts and our need as artists and organizations to adapt to evolving audience preferences, engagement, and, of course, funding sources.

Many of us, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, were already navigating a complex environment. Leaders of the sector have never been shy about expressing

the importance of maintaining artistic quality and cultural contributions as being central to their mission. I suspect that we—whether participants, members, board members, or curators of such organizations—strive for these ideals too. During the pandemic, there began a growing recognition that there were diverse needs for smaller and mid-sized organizations in comparison to their larger counterparts with robust funding.¹

The Funding Landscape

As the Wallace Foundation reported in October 2021, funding for nonprofits, music or otherwise, has been competitive and fragmented.² In this landscape, we find there is a mix of government grants, private foundational support, corporate sponsorship, and direct patron support. The foundation argues that “sustainability for nonprofit arts organizations should not be an end itself but rather a means for pursuing mission-related goals according to this brief.”³ The challenges in securing adequate funding have prompted organizations to diversify their funding streams by exploring alternatives such as crowdfunding and corporate partnerships to build a more resilient foundation. Furthermore, the evolution of the regulatory landscape has pressured many organizations to develop new agility when navigating compliance requirements and changing donor expectations.

We have, to some extent, all witnessed this shift. Most notably, we see this in how audiences engage with arts organizations. Research has indicated that atten-



dance at various arts and culture events has declined or stagnated, with audiences increasingly seeking more immersive experiences rather than merely attending events.⁴ This evolving demand has necessitated a re-evaluation of traditional organizational practices to innovate in order to attract and retain audiences. The confluence of these factors illustrates the ongoing challenges and adaptations that nonprofit music organizations must navigate to ensure their long-term viability and relevance in a rapidly changing ecosystem.

But what to do about it? Financial sustainability is a cornerstone for nonprofit music organizations, enabling them to deliver programs and services without interruption. This requires a multifaceted approach that includes diversifying funding sources, managing expenses, and developing robust financial strategies. By adopting innovative funding models such as social enterprises and earned income initiatives, organizations can reduce their dependence on traditional donations such as grants and ticket sales, thereby minimizing financial risk.⁵ In 2025, it is expected that nonprofits will increasingly need to explore non-traditional revenue streams to ensure continuity and resilience.⁶

Sustainability involves the ability to maintain an organization's artistic and operational mission over the long term. While finances are a consideration, the capacity to adapt and thrive amidst changing cultural and economic landscapes is paramount. Key aspects of sustainability encompass strategic planning, resource diversification, and strong stakeholder engagement. These ensure that organizations can continue to serve their communities effectively.⁷ A clear and concise mission is vital for guiding all aspects of a nonprofit's work. Ensuring mission clarity can help align staff and board efforts while promoting a focused approach to achieving long-term goals. Investing in capacity building and staff development is crucial for maintaining a skilled workforce capable of meeting the challenges. Additionally, effective volunteer management should be implemented to maximize community engagement and support. By actively engaging our volunteers, we ensure that our organizations can leverage the unique skills and perspectives our volunteers bring to the table.⁸

Beyond our in-house operations, building strong partnerships and engaging with the community are fundamental to the sustainability of nonprofits. Col-

laborative efforts amplify our reach and effectiveness. Collaborative efforts also foster trust and credibility among stakeholders. Advocacy and public awareness initiatives are vital for promoting the organization's mission, thereby gaining additional support from the community and policy makers.⁹ It is also crucial to engage with the community regarding their needs. No one appreciates being told what they need or should like. Rather, engage in a dialogue to produce a result that will be beneficial to all concerned.

Challenges of Sustainability

The challenges we are up against mainly take four forms: funding instability, shifting donor demographics, operation costs and resource allocation, and a changing regulatory environment. Regarding funding instability, a study produced by *Pancover* revealed that nearly 90 percent of the nonprofits surveyed relied on a single dominant revenue stream,¹⁰ thus making them vulnerable to financial instability. Uncertainty surrounds investment income; foundation support, endowment withdrawals, and market downturns add to the already precarious financial landscape as donors reassess their giving based on investment performance.

As for shifting donor demographics, younger generations, including Millennials and Gen Z, are becoming influential in philanthropic endeavors but are very often prioritizing social justice, environmental sustainability, and giving transparency. This has and will create a shift in our organizations as we adapt to the changing preferences that emphasize authentic communication about mission and impact. *We must re-evaluate engagement strategies to attract and retain these emerging donor segments.*

Have you been to the grocery store lately? We can all see the increase in operational costs. Insurance and staffing have placed a further strain on the financial resources of nonprofits. Increased premiums and costs associated with recruitment and retention add another layer of complexity that further highlights the need for strategic financial planning and resources allocation. Perhaps trickiest of all is the regulatory landscape that is in constant flux with new laws and regulations that affect compliance requirements and fundraising practices. We must remain vigilant and adaptable to these

changes to ensure we operate and align with legal expectations all while maintaining our mission and focus. Issues such as tax reform and reporting requirements can significantly influence how we engage with donors and manage their finances. If you have a board of directors, it would be wise to consider recruiting a practicing lawyer.

Strategies Toward Sustainability

Strategies for achieving sustainability are numerous but require us to think outside of the box. What once worked (donations and grants) is no longer a guarantee. Diversifying revenue streams is a critical strategy. We should consider exploring innovative income-generating avenues that include social enterprise ventures, cause-related marketing, and fee-for-service models. The Anne Napolitano Consulting firm offers some suggestions. They argue for ventures that generate revenue

while supporting your mission: merchandise, training programs, membership tiers that offer exclusive benefits in exchange for a recurring fee, and social enterprises where profits are reinvested into your mission. They suggest, “Think of coffee shops, artisanal products, or workshops that align with your organization’s value.”¹¹

Training Programs

From a personal perspective, I have found training programs exceedingly valuable. Plant the seed. At the Symphony of Northwest Arkansas (SoNA), we have implemented a “SoNA Mentors” program where our symphonic musicians spend time in the orchestral and band classrooms across the area. Many professional choirs do this. We have found that this mentor program facilitates one-on-one tutelage from professional musicians in our community and takes us beyond the walls of the concert hall to engage youth in a way that is not possible in the concert setting. In addition, we bring

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talented young artists to give pre-concert “concerts” in the lobby before the performance. Subsequently, attendance from our youngest musicians (and their families) has increased significantly.

Ethical Practices

We must also integrate eco-friendly and ethical practices into operations. Perhaps this means energy-efficient technologies, waste reduction, and sustainable purchasing. By aligning our missions with environmentally conscious principles, we can enhance operation effectiveness while positively contributing to the environment. Consider a comprehensive sustainability assessment to help identify areas for improvement. Doing so will enable you to set measurable goals and actionable plans to minimize ecological footprints. Though we could simply eliminate paper programs, perhaps we take a more aggressive approach and look at our investments and their guidelines.

Though we at St. Paul’s have reduced the bulletin size to minimize our paper consumption, we have also made strategic investment decisions. We have asked our investment managers to avoid holding stocks in tobacco companies, private prisons, military contractors, and companies that derive more than ten percent of their revenue from fossil fuels. There are exceptions that arise from broad-market investments that may have some exposure in those areas, but our endowment holds no concentrated positions in them. Ultimately, we must be good stewards of our resources, those less fortunate and marginalized, and this fragile earth, our island home.

Building Community

Community is also key. I have found that direct asks (be that time, talent, or funds) and local partnerships can be a game changer. An African proverb states, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” Collaborating with other organizations and local businesses amplifies the impact of our own operations. Finding potential partners that share similar missions and values is essential for building mutually beneficial relationships. Through joint projects and resource-sharing initiatives, our organizations can enhance outreach and effectiveness while fostering a cul-

ture of collaboration.

As the ACDA Lifelong Choirs Chair, building community is a passion of mine. For those in the Music and Worship side of ACDA, I encourage you to celebrate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, source of the Nicene Creed. I am looking forward to the opportunity to make music with my neighbors-in-faith and producing an event bigger than any of us could pull off singlehandedly.

In-house culture and community should also be a priority. Investing in our people, both staff and volunteer, to build a skilled force capable of driving the organization forward is worth the effort on the front end. Ultimately, we want to attract individuals who are passionate about the organization’s goals and who can effectively contribute to its longevity.¹² Also related to housekeeping is a constant assessment of the goals and mission. Having a plan with clear financial goals and strategies to achieve them should be also be regularly assessed and adapted to changing circumstances. This ensures relevance and effectiveness in the mission.¹³

Case Studies

Where else can we go for guidance and understanding on the impact and effectiveness of sustainability initiatives within nonprofit music organizations? Case studies. Case studies uncover detailed narratives and insights regarding the changes brought about by specific programs. For instance, an instrumental case study focusing on the defunding of music education in a community revealed the crucial roles played by local anchor institutions, such as Oklahoma City University and St. Luke’s United Methodist church, in addressing these challenges. This study highlighted the sociopolitical dynamics at play and the lived experiences of the founders involved in music education initiatives, demonstrating how personal relationships and community engagement can drive sustainability efforts.¹⁴

The Wallace Foundation’s Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative¹⁵ investigated the audience-building strategies of various nonprofit performing arts organizations, including prominent orchestras such as the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The findings emphasized

that while diversifying audiences is essential, it does not singularly address the fiscal challenges faced by these organizations, indicating a need for ongoing dialogue with community interests and increased philanthropic support.

In addition to audience engagement, case studies also examine the utilization of qualitative metrics to capture the human side of program impact. These metrics provide context, nuance, and personal perspectives that complement quantitative measures, helping nonprofits articulate the transformative changes their programs foster. For example, feedback and testimonials from participants in music programs can provide subjective evidence of impact, enriching the understanding of how these initiatives resonate within the community and contribute to the broader goals of sustainability.¹⁶

Emerging Trends

As the landscape of nonprofit music organizations evolves, several key trends are emerging that will shape our approach to longevity. One of the most significant trends is the increasing reliance on technology. Nonprofits are adopting digital fundraising tools and social media platforms to enhance operations, engage donors, and communicate more effectively.¹⁷ The ability to host virtual events, such as galas and art auctions, expands outreach beyond local communities, allowing organizations to connect with a broader audience and generate funds while maintaining social distancing. This technological adoption not only facilitates fundraising but also helps in building a loyal support base by improving engagement and awareness.

Beyond technological integrations is the necessity for organizations to align their programs with the evolving needs of the community. Adapting our initiatives to remain relevant and impactful resonates with those we serve. Therein, ethical considerations and a focus on diversity are paramount for sustainability in nonprofit music organizations. There is a growing awareness of the importance of incorporating diverse voices and perspectives within organizations, both in staffing and programming. Emphasizing equity and inclusivity will strengthen community ties while enhancing the overall

impact of your nonprofit's work.

The landscape of nonprofit arts organizations continues to evolve, with sustainability emerging as a multifaceted challenge that demands innovation, flexibility, and strategic planning. As organizations adapt to shifting cultural, economic, and regulatory pressures, they must diversify revenue streams, foster community partnerships, and embrace new technologies to ensure long-term viability. By focusing on mission-driven goals, maintaining financial resilience, and integrating inclusive, eco-friendly practices, nonprofits can thrive despite ongoing challenges. Ultimately, sustainability is not just about surviving; it's about positioning these organizations to fulfill their artistic missions and strengthen their connections with the communities they serve for years to come.

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NOTES

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Community Choirs



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Choral Connections: Building Community Among Conductors

By Matt Hill

One of the most compelling benefits of participating in choir is the sense of belonging it fosters. In a world where social isolation and loneliness are increasing, and where screentime is increasing among all demographics in the U.S. population, the act of singing together in a choir is almost countercultural. Choir members work collaboratively toward shared goals, such as preparing for concerts or improving vocal techniques, which cultivates a sense of camaraderie and teamwork, and creates a final product that is greater than the sum of the individual contributions.

As choral conductors, we are intimately familiar with the values and benefits associated with participating in a choir. We’ve given our professional lives (and some of our personal lives) to maintaining and perpetuating the choral art and the communities that surround it. This profession, however, is by its nature isolated and isolating. The responsibilities go well beyond rehearsing and concertizing, and in most cases we are the lone captains of our respective programs, be they scholastic, parochial, or community ensembles. While many of us have learned to work and thrive in this environment, we too should remember the value of community and connection for ourselves. This is not to say that we can’t or shouldn’t build and maintain relationships with our choristers—of course we do that by the very nature of our work. But the need to maintain at least some layer of separation from our singers (even in the case of adult ensembles) creates limitations on the level of connectedness we can experience.

This is where ACDA and its state chapters have been an invaluable asset to me. When I began attending the