



SYMPHONY ORCHESTRAS ARE STRUGGLING AS CONCERT ATTENDANCE ACROSS THE NATION DECLINES — BUT THEY AREN'T GIVING UP. THE PITTSBURGH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA IS REACHING OUT TO NEW AUDIENCES BY OFFERING CONCERTS WITH MORE CONTEMPORARY FLAVOR, IN MORE UNCONVENTIONAL VENUES.
BY JEFFERY FRASER

Melia Peters Tourangeau left Utah for Heinz Hall this summer to become the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's new president and CEO. She inherited an orchestra that's considered one of the world's finest but, like others across America, has a shrinking audience at a time of demographic upheaval and fierce competition for the attention of a public inundated with entertainment choices.

The share of the nation's population that attends classical music concerts has been slipping for decades. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported in March that only 57 percent of the seats for the city symphony's signature classical music series were filled by paying customers last year. As such sobering numbers suggest, an industry that cherishes tradition now faces an urgent need to change and adapt.

The good news is that nontraditional approaches to capturing a broader audience are showing promise in experiments across the country, including in Pittsburgh. And then, there's the product itself.

"Hearing the powerful, visceral sound of the Pittsburgh Symphony is an experience that every resident of the city and region should have," Ms. Tourangeau said.

The symphony's music is becoming more available through new creative opportunities for people to listen outside of its Heinz Hall home.

On a warm September afternoon, five musicians from the symphony's brass section serenaded visitors to Downtown's Market Square. The selections ranged from Giovanni Gabrieli's *Canzon per sonare No. 2* to the "Pink Panther Theme" by American pop composer and West Aliquippa native Henry Mancini. Some in the lunch-hour crowd examined the kale, corn and

tomatoes on sale at the weekly farmer's market. Others gathered around the small ensemble.

James Nova took the microphone to describe his journey to the Pittsburgh Symphony, where he has been a trombonist for eight years. It began with a crime, of all things. As a young freelance musician, he had finished a winter concert with the New Haven Symphony in his home state of Connecticut and discovered that his car—which he claimed was worth less than his horn—had been broken into. On the drive home, shivering against the cold blowing through the shattered window, he discovered "this amazing orchestra performance" on the radio.

"I had to pull over to focus all of my attention on this concert," he recalled. "When it got to the final chords, I was blown away."

It was the Pittsburgh Symphony performing Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. Mr. Nova said he told himself, "I want to be in that orchestra." Years later, while with the Utah Symphony Orchestra, he heard of an opening in the Pittsburgh Symphony.

"I went after it like a military operation. And here I am," he told the Market Square audience to hearty applause.

The outdoor "Music Squared" concert was part of the symphony's Neighborhood Week, which dispatched musicians to nearby communities to share their stories and art in one of several summertime experiments to explore new ways to reach new audiences—a trend that's increasingly being embraced by orchestras nationwide.

A National Endowment for the Arts study reports that the classical music audience contracted by 13 percent from 2002 to 2008, attendance among college-educated adults dropped 39 percent, and nearly two-thirds of those who attend live performances are baby boomers or

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older. Although a healthy 18 percent of Americans listen to classical music, most listen to recorded performances, particularly those found online, which are quickly becoming their top choice.

Local studies suggest that Pittsburgh is not an exception to such trends and that many in the region feel that classical music performances, with all of their rituals, are not for them.

The research also points to opportunities, such as offering concerts in non-traditional locations and in different formats, that provide more varied programming to pique the interest of those unfamiliar with the classics, and loosening the formalities of a performance, including ways for the audience to interact with the musicians.

In Pittsburgh, the symphony finds itself having to address the shifting landscape at a time of major transition within the company. Its new president and CEO arrived in August. Devin B. McGranahan, a director of the international consulting firm McKinsey & Co., became chairman of the symphony's board of trustees in September. And the finishing touches are being applied to a new strategic plan due within six months. All have their work cut out for them.



Michael Salaida

Melia Peters Tourangeau left her position as head of the Utah Symphony | Utah Opera to become president and CEO of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in August.

“Orchestras are challenged to retain and continue to be responsive to their core audience on one hand and to cultivate a new one. That often involves rethinking what the nature of the concert experience is,” said Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras.

Few other performing arts bear the weight of tradition more than orchestras.

“No one is saying the orchestra needs to leave its traditional repertoire,” said Janet Sarbaugh, senior director of the Endowments’ Arts & Culture Program. “PSO’s new leadership is offering inspiring and encouraging visions of how the orchestra will combine its artistic excellence with increasing community relevance going forward.”

Nationally, experiments have included orchestras offering more affordable tickets and membership plans more flexible than conventional subscriptions. Even traditional concert hall design is being challenged. At Miami’s New World Center, glass walls expose symphony rehearsals to the outside, and select live concerts inside are projected onto an outside wall for audiences who gather on the lawn.

At Heinz Hall, the Pittsburgh Symphony is trying out different programming based on the strategic plan. With catchy monikers like Fuse@PSO, the popular events have exceeded financial expectations, earning revenues 20 percent greater than projected.

“Seeing a performance live is what’s meaningful,” says Ms. Tourangeau. “Introducing that value proposition and getting people’s attention in this age of media is probably the biggest challenge for us. But if we can get them into the hall, make them feel welcome and engaged, we will continue to see audiences who enjoy what we do. I wouldn’t be in this business if I didn’t believe that.” **h**

MUSIC N’AT

The Neighborhood Week series that brought the symphony brass

ensemble’s “Music Squared” concert to Market Square in Downtown Pittsburgh sent an ensemble to perform at Wigle Whiskey Barrelhouse & Whiskey Garden, below, on the city’s North Side. The latter was part of “Play N’at,” a series of happy hour chamber music concerts that took place in different neighborhoods and paid homage to the region’s unique dialect.

Among the other performances with creative themes was “Brass N’at,” an outdoor concert in the Oakland neighborhood’s Schenley Plaza that featured members of the symphony’s brass and percussion sections along with community brass musicians. The “Classical Standards” concert at the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, a popular North Side venue for jazz performances, included MCG jazz artists as well as string and woodwind symphony musicians. In the Hill District, the “Sounds of Summer” concert provided an opportunity for student poets from the Life Stages in Pages creative writing program to present their work.



Photos courtesy of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

FUSE@PSO

Another new approach to Pittsburgh Symphony performances this year has included blending classical music with pop culture. Steve Hackman, right, a conductor, composer and producer, was named creative director this year of Fuse@PSO, a series he developed that offers mash-ups of classical masterpieces and popular music. The concerts integrate such disparate works as Brahms' First Symphony and the music of British rock band Radiohead as well as Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony and songs from Coldplay.

Live performances with popular artists such as Diana Krall and Smokey Robinson drew large audiences to the symphony's Icon Series. Grammy Award-winner Arnie Roth was guest conductor for the symphony's "Final Fantasy" performance, which featured music from the popular video game and opportunities to meet Japanese video game composer Nobuo Uematsu.



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CLASSICAL BBQ

To further capture the mood of summer, the symphony introduced Classical BBQ to Heinz Hall. For each of the two barbeque events, a \$35 ticket covered a pre-concert courtyard reception with hors d'oeuvres such as beef and corn cake sliders, watermelon salad and mini apple strudel. An 80-minute concert inside the hall followed, and wrapping up the evening was a post-concert jazz performance that included symphony members. Concert-goers also had the chance to meet, greet and take selfies with symphony musicians, such as bassist Micah Howard, left center.