

Business

# For The Hartford Symphony And Other Legacy Arts Groups, A Dilemma Over Innovation



From left, Nick Rubinstein, Hilary Ledebuhr, Josh Michal and Barbara Hill of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra perform in the Burr Mall next to the Wadsworth Atheneum Sept. 2. The performance was part of a weeklong series of pop-up concerts designed to raise awareness for the musicians as they continue negotiating a contract with the board of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)



By **Dan Haar · Contact Reporter**  
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DECEMBER 20, 2015, 7:45 AM

**I**t was a tough week at the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, as the board and management mounted a belated public announcement that the symphony might not survive past January. But even as the crisis unfolded, the germ of a revolutionary, long-term plan flourished.

The symphony and The Bushnell took steps toward their dream of opening the Institute for Digital Performance Art — to transform themselves and, perhaps, the Hartford music scene.

The institute would look for ways to combine digital media technology with traditional performance, including, but not limited to, orchestral music. That could mean new ways to present music, or the creation of new types of music. It would live in a former residential space near The Bushnell, and is expected to include a request for state funding.

"It's still evolving," said Steve Collins, the symphony's administrative director. "We have a solid business plan. ... We're in the quiet phase of developing support locally and regionally."

Is this folly as Rome burns? The symphony is bleeding \$1.3 million a year and nearing the end of its cash reserves. It's asking for pay concessions from the musicians' union, which is, to say the least, not thrilled with this new digital scheme, as some musicians fear it could divert money or devalue their skills.

Folly or foresight, it's the sort of risk and innovation that could pay off.

As the symphony faces a crisis that's forcing difficult changes, it's worth looking at what that means not only for the symphony but for all long-established arts organizations — which must evolve to stay relevant, and in the long run, to pay the bills.

The Hartford Stage brings in a Hollywood star for a run, and it takes a risk on a new play that will make it to Broadway. The Wadsworth Atheneum jumps into the world of video art and makes hard choices about how to renovate its historic space. The New Britain Museum of American Art leaves priceless paintings exposed, inches from the swaying martini glasses of partying twenty-somethings.

All organizations must reinvent themselves, of course, but for nonprofit arts groups, unlike corporations or civic clubs, it's a high-wire act without a net, with the audience and financial backers watching every step and the public interest on the line.

Survive and advance, in the words of Jim Valvano, the legendary, emotional basketball coach. The picture at the Hartford Symphony highlights the sharp contrast of a struggle to stay alive alongside an ambitious digital project.

"When you are a nonprofit arts institution, you're giving something back to the community," said **Frank Rizzo**, the longtime Courant arts and culture columnist who recently left the paper. "It all boils down to a balancing act of maintaining your devoted followers at the same time while reaching out to a new audience. ... If you go too much one way then you're going to lose, and if you refuse to change you're going to lose, too."

As purveyors of culture, these are groups that bring more to metro Hartford than their economic size would suggest. So a lot is at stake. Hartford always had the Big Six, Rizzo said — Hartford Stage, the

Wadsworth, the symphony, The Bushnell, Hartford Ballet and the Connecticut Opera. With the last two gone, "now it's the Big Four and it might even be the Big Three," Rizzo said, if the symphony were to fall.

They are the Bigs in budget, not necessarily in artistic impact. Hartford is holding its own in the tier of midsize arts groups, such as TheaterWorks, the Artists Collective and Real Art Ways — especially for a regional city without a major university presence at its core.

### **A Crucial Donor**

At the symphony, there's faith on both sides of the union-management dispute that renewed strength is in reach. The crisis came to a head in part after an "angel donor," a board member who gave the symphony \$500,000 a year over several years, decided keep his checkbook closed this year.

I talked with that donor Thursday and Friday about the symphony's plight and its ambitions.

The donor, who asked to remain anonymous because his philanthropy is largely private, said he spoke with David Fay, CEO of both the symphony and The Bushnell, soon after The Bushnell took over management of the symphony.

Fay asked for a renewed commitment of four years, and the donor, a member of the symphony board, asked for two things. "They had to come to me with a sustainable financial model," he said. "I wouldn't commit to just filling a hole every year."

And he said, "I wanted them to present me with a development plan that would broaden and deepen the funding."

Despite strong efforts, the picture worsened. "So when they came to me this year. I said, 'Don't count on me,'" he recounted. "It's time for some other people to make a decision of whether this is an asset they want to keep."

That sounds harsh, but it's smart. In his view, it's not just the artistic output but the donor base that needs to evolve. That's a challenge for nonprofits in a city the size of Hartford, where a wide set of groups is competing for the same dollars, and the limited population of big givers feel "donor-fatigue."

The problem wasn't the labor dispute, at least not directly; it was the lack of a plan for programming that could pay for itself through ticket sales, grants, donations and other sources. The dispute, in which the symphony wants to cut the guaranteed commitment to its core musicians by 30 percent,

saving \$400,000 in salaries and related costs, is only part of that — as shown by the much larger size of the symphony's annual deficit.

The donor said he was insulted by some of the union's comments in recent months but his decision was made before that.

His action points to the big, related questions: What must the symphony do to right itself? A workable pact with musicians is part of the answer but not all of it. Ultimately, can Hartford still support an outstanding regional symphony?"

"We need to do a better job trying to understand our audience and what they are willing to pay for before we can reach that conclusion," the donor said.

That includes innovation. But, he said, "We have no risk capital. We can't afford to try something and lose more money."

And yet, they must.

### **Risk In No Risk**

All established arts groups struggle at key moments in their histories with who they are, and those self-examinations can come at times of crisis, as with the symphony, or just along the way as audiences change. It doesn't have to be radical.

At Real Art Ways, for example, director Will K. Wilkins sees the future as a "deeper dive" into the community, with the group reaching more local artists and artisans in and out of its Arbor Street space.

Every arts group needs to meet its new audience where that audience wants to be, but that mantra is harder to realize for some than for others.

Making matters yet more tricky, it's a risk for established, old-line arts organizations to not take creative risks. At the Wadsworth, for example, Director and CEO Susan Talbott — whose last day at the museum was Friday — recalled mounting the Monet Water Lilies, an exhibit that drew huge crowds.

Monet is a pop icon of impressionism, an attraction akin to Taylor Swift. But museums have to think hard before they go that route, Talbott said.

"It was a risk to do something so mainstream," she said — adding that a scoffing scholar from Yale was, in the end, impressed with the scholarship that went into the Wadsworth's Water Lilies show.

The Wadsworth also elected to go with a \$33 million renovation of its buildings and gallery space, rather than a splashier new building. "One thing that museums do is they hire superstar architects to build museums," Talbott said. "In a few cases, museums have had to close because they couldn't sustain the building."

With a \$100 million endowment — compared with \$7 million at the symphony, much of it untouchable — the Wadsworth has a safer cushion. That's not to say it has succeeded without taking on risk or that it won't take risks under the new director. The current exhibit on Andy Warhol and Mapplethorpe, exploring gender identity issues, raised talk of controversy, though none has emerged.

The picture is less comfortable at the symphony in part because its core art form, classical music, is largely, though not entirely, a preserved canon from the past. And its established method of presentation, the formal concert, is not as overwhelmingly favored by a generation of people used to having an electronic device plugged into their ears.

It's not that the symphony hasn't tried new things. Under Music Director and Conductor Carolyn Kuan, the symphony has performed more pieces outside of Western culture and added such innovations as the Playing with Food concert — with celebrity chefs cooking onstage — and the composition competition that led to "Fanfare for the Hartford Woman."

Some people believe the symphony should follow the lead of philharmonic groups elsewhere, mounting rock shows that are fronted by tribute bands to the Doors, Pink Floyd and others. That works in Dayton, but the sensibilities in Connecticut, so close to Boston and New York, might make it fall flat here.

Either way, the debate illustrates the tough issue of pop vs. serious, and within each end of the spectrum, how to bring in both old and new audiences.

"It's the 60-year-olds and the 70-year-olds who give you the big checks, it's not the 20-year-olds," said Rizzo, the former Courant critic. "If you lose all those faithful donors who like it in a traditional way, then you're in a pickle."

Thus the digital project, a whole new operation in conjunction with the Bushnell, which is paid an annual fee to manage the symphony. But keeping it separate from regular operations doesn't wall it off from the broader concerns of survival. .

"In our current state, where we're going to donors and we're saying 'Please help us so that we can keep the lights on,'" said Collins, the symphony administrator, "it's kind of hard to ask them, 'Please help us so that we can create this transformational project.'"

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