

'Revenue is liberation'

With her data-led approach proven to grow classical audiences, it's no wonder arts administrator Aubrey Bergauer's skillset is highly in demand. **Florence Lockheart** learns how organisations can transform their finances and achieve artistic freedom

Could you give our readers an overview of your career so far?

My first job was at the Seattle Symphony in the fundraising department. From there, the Seattle Opera called and asked me to run its audience development efforts and young patrons' group. At both of those organisations I could already start to see some of the issues for which I later came to champion solutions.

After six years at Seattle Opera, the Bumbershoot Music and Arts festival (think Coachella, but with a non-profit underpinning) brought me in as marketing director, and I got to start putting into place some of the strategies I had developed in my previous roles. Fast forward to 2014, and the California Symphony asked me to join them. It was a defining moment for me and the organisation became the one most people know me from today.

Since then, I wanted to make an impact beyond one organisation and really give to the field in a broader way so I branched out on my own in 2019.



During your five years with California Symphony the organisation doubled the size of its audience and nearly quadrupled its donor base. How did you decide to switch focus to marketing to audiences?

Research by the League of American Orchestras shows that 90 per cent of first-time attendees at orchestral concerts never come back. I know we need new audiences but we've got to keep the ones that are actually giving us a try, so pillar one was focused on retention. We did the same thing with donors, aiming to retain the donors we had so that we weren't experiencing a churn year over year. Within the first year we saw a 14 per cent lift in sales and we were hitting more and more of our retention metrics.

After about a year we decided to do some user experience research, which nobody was really talking about or doing in our field at the time. We discovered newcomers were educated, they had expendable income and they frequented other live entertainment options – so why weren't they coming back to the Symphony? They loved the performance itself, so I realised, it's everything tangential to our product that needs work. One person mentioned they weren't familiar with words like 'concerto' and that for me was the pivotal mind-shift; there's such a gap between what newcomers know about our art form and what we know about it. It's just changed how I approach audience development forever more.

You champion the use of data for arts organisations looking to build their audience. What's a good first step for arts administrators looking to implement data tracking?

Start small. Organisations reach out to me asking for a silver bullet to solve their problems and, this can be hard to hear, I don't think there's just one thing. What that means is we have to iterate: try something on a small scale, assess the results, measure, evaluate and then try again. In so many organisations we tend to come up with an idea and go out pretty big, but it's harder to iterate when you've made such a big splash.

During my time at the California Symphony, we had no money to hire a firm to help us, so we did it in-house. Often when we want to know what our audiences are thinking we do a survey, but that's only asking people who are already engaged, so we decided to just do a discussion group and ask new people what that experience was like. It

'We're in this business for the long haul' |

can be as simple as finding some friends of friends, bringing them out to a performance and doing an informal discussion over pizza and beer. It doesn't have to be so buttoned up – if we just relax a bit, we can learn so much and not break the bank to do it.

You talk a lot about 'changing the narrative' – what's your vision for the way the arts could be run in the future?

As an industry we tend to over-focus on the product. For a long time having an exceptional product was sufficient to bring in audiences and the revenue we needed. That's really shifted over the last 20 to 30 years and as an industry we're trying to figure out what that means. I always look at the bottom line because in most of my roles I measured my success by budget metrics – but it's not just personal. Having the revenue we need is liberation: liberation as institutions to programme the adventurous pieces we want, commission the new work that we're excited about, launch the education programme that

want to sell fewer tickets to white audiences, we want to add to that audience. If we had gone from our baseline at California Symphony, which was around 2 to 3 per cent Hispanic and Latinx audiences, to become more representative of the people in our community (around 30 per cent Hispanic and Latinx), we would have sold out every performance with a need to add more. Once we started actually looking at the numbers, we realised representation equals sales.

The sort of seismic organisational change you discuss in your blog posts feels very necessary, but can be a herculean task, so what is your advice to arts administrators who recognise the need for change, but don't know where to start?

Again: start small. We're not in this business to make it different tomorrow, we're in this business for the long haul. If we start small, then the current staff structure probably can handle the change, then we can build upon

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will make a difference in our community. Yes, these are metrics, but when we achieve those metrics, we get to better fund the arts, we get to go to the bargaining table and talk about raises for our artists. That's why I'm so dogmatic about the business of it, because it gives us freedom on the artistic side.

This makes a big difference, not only to our bottom line but to how full our concert halls are. There's such a different energy when the house is full, and our artists respond to that. It's not art for art's sake, (I know some people would disagree with me on that) I believe that we need the audience, we're so excited to perform for them, because we need each other. That is the change in the narrative that I wish for our industry.

Under your leadership the California Symphony became the first orchestra in the country to make a formal commitment to diversity, focusing on programming women composers, living composers, and composers of colour. This commitment makes ethical sense, but does it make financial sense too?

I love this conversation because yes, we absolutely have a moral imperative to do this work (I believe that wholeheartedly) but there's also money on the table. We don't

it. Then, as leaders of institutions, we need to champion these victories. Let's report our successes to the board, let's share them with the rest of the staff. Not everybody always wants to follow a change but sharing the data and showing what's working helps develop an appetite for what's next.

Your 'Run it Like a Business' advice will be included in your upcoming book, out in 2024, of the same name. What are you hoping readers will take away from this read?

Each chapter is a different strategy borrowed from outside the arts and applied to what we're doing here. It's meant to be buildable; we don't do it all at once.

It also helps foster a shift from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset. Abundance in the arts feels very foreign to what we are used to, but that is the ultimate vision. It's really hard to break out of that framing but we don't have to be beholden to a scarcity mindset, we can always figure out ways to invest a little. It's not always money, sometimes the investment is the emotional labour to do it differently on a small scale. We can do it, I believe it and I've seen it done. In the book every chapter has a case study of an organisation who has taken that particular step. ■