

How is Denver's Arts and Culture Community Doing?

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You've asked me here to talk about the state of arts and culture in Denver. My presentation is more a meditation or hypothesis than it is a credo or dictum. And I'd like to remind everyone of a story the physicist Niels Bohr used to tell when speaking about quantum physics:

A young rabbinical student goes to three lectures by a very famous rabbi. Afterward, he describes the lectures to his friend. "The first lecture," he says, "was very good. I understood almost everything. The second lecture was much better. I did not understand it, but the rabbi understood everything. The third lecture, though, was the best of all, very subtle and very deep. It was so good that even the rabbi didn't understand it."

That's about how I feel about the issue at hand, and why I claim no more for it than that it should be a jumping off point for discussion. Let me add that these remarks are mine alone and do not reflect an official position of the University of Denver. I should also note the presence in this room of numerous members of Denver's arts and culture community, both current and former staff and board members, as well as artists, each of whom has at least as much right as I to be up here offering an opinion.

I haven't taken on the task of doing empirical or comparative research into attendance, earned and donated revenue, or other statistics that can illuminate the health of Denver arts organizations. I'm not here to prosecute or defend any individual organizations. My thoughts are rather more broad and are based on my own experiences as a long-time Denver resident, a regular audience member, a staff member of a couple of cultural institutions, and a board member of arts and arts service organizations.

By many appearances arts and culture in Denver are thriving. The most recent bi-annual study by the Colorado Business Committee for the Arts (CBCA) of the economic impact of the more than 300 organizations funded by the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD), for instance, reports that Total Economic Activity, the combination of the operating expenses, audience spending and capital expenditures of those 300+ organizations, totaled \$1.76 billion in 2011, an 18.4% increase over 2009. "New Money" generated by those organizations – dollars that ordinarily would not be spent in the metro area – reached \$527 million in 2011, an enormous 36% increase. Attendance was counted as 14.6 million in 2011, a 30% jump. Capital spending was up, volunteerism was up, total SCFD distributions of \$41.9 million in 2011 were the second highest total ever. The SCFD itself was created in 1989 and has been reauthorized twice by voters. Since its inception it has distributed \$711M to scientific, arts and

culture organizations in the Denver metro area. So why was I asked to address the state of arts and culture in Denver?

In the course of preparing for this, I happened to look at a speech I wrote 15 years ago when I was Executive Director of Opera Colorado. One of the early paragraphs could have been written yesterday:

Opera, the ballet, and symphonic music seem to me to face largely similar problems when contemplating their futures. They are all products of the Old World, transplanted to the New, but without the same level of governmental support or general societal commitment as in their lands of origin. They all present and re-present largely the same works of art over and over again. They all identify the need to develop “new audiences,” by which they mean different people who will learn to love the same works of art that others have loved for 200 years. In other words, when considering their futures, opera, ballet, and symphony organizations are largely thinking about how to perpetuate their pasts.

So, maybe things in Denver, and elsewhere for that matter, are fine, and it’s just a handful of difficult cases that generate the concern about the state of things. Certainly many arts and culture organizations in Denver are doing fine, not that their lot is easy, but at least they aren’t at constant risk of their existence and their travails aren’t reported daily in the newspaper. Others, though, perhaps because of the challenges of making their particular artistic disciplines relevant in today’s world, perhaps because Denver hasn’t historically been as supportive of such institutions as coastal or Midwestern cities have been, are struggling. Maybe we just know about the struggles of a few particular cultural organizations because most cities only have one of a kind, one professional symphony orchestra, for instance, so it’s always in the spotlight.

Let’s begin by defining some terms. In 1982, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) started a series of studies, every 5 years, to measure participation in the arts. “Arts,” or what the study sometimes calls “benchmark arts,” are defined to be classical music, jazz, opera, musical and non-musical plays, ballet and visits to art museums and art galleries. We sometimes talk about arts in these NEA reports as if there is nothing else, but in point of fact these studies measure only a slice of all cultural activity.

This is crucial, because when we talk about the state of the arts, we should always ask ourselves what we’re trying to achieve. Are we trying to preserve or foment the “arts” as the NEA studies define them? If so, in many respects we are talking about particular organizations of long-standing that exist to produce one or another of the NEA’s “benchmark art” forms. And the question soon becomes: are we supporting the art, or are we supporting the attempt of particular legacy institutions to survive so that they can continue trying to produce that specific art?

Here, then, are some statistics from those NEA studies:

“Arts” audiences in the US are, on the whole, down. In 1982, 39% of survey respondents said they had attended an arts event. In 2008 that figure was down to 34.6%.

There are fewer “cultural omnivores,” that is, people who attend the arts frequently and attend a variety of such events. In 1982, 15% of respondents qualified as omnivores; in 2008 only 10% did. The annual number of events omnivores attended also fell. Their effect on the overall statistics was dramatic. As much as 82% of the decline in total number of “arts” events attended between 2002 and 2008, for instance, can be attributed to fewer cultural omnivores attending fewer arts events.

NEA studies also show that a person’s age is actually a poor predictor of the number of “arts” events he will attend. The current age distribution of “arts” audiences closely reflects the proportions of each age group in the general population. Educational attainment is a far better predictor of arts participation. Nevertheless, it’s important to note that audiences have in fact aged for arts events.

In 1982 young people in classical music audiences underrepresented their share of the general population by 11%, and by 2008 they underrepresented their share of the general population by 26%. In the same vein, in 1982 those 60 and older at classical music events actually underrepresented their share of the general population by 18%, but in 2008 they exceeded their share of the general population by 22%, an amazing swing and clear evidence that the audience for classical music has grown much older in the last 30 years. My experience is that in the classical music and opera world we tell ourselves that our audiences have always been old and that’s ok because it’s the music of maturity. But the NEA studies belie that theory and other studies from the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s show that the median age of audiences then was in its 30s!!

Another recent NEA study explored *participation* in the arts beyond the benchmark “arts.” For instance, in 2008 the data show that 74% of American adults performed an arts activity when the definition of “arts” was expanded from the NEA usage to include the creation of art or participation in the arts via broadcasts or recordings, including via the Internet. This rate is more than double the rate for participation in the benchmark “arts.”

So let’s look at how some of these trends are playing out in one of the benchmark arts areas, and the one that seems most often, though not exclusively, to be the source of concern about the state of arts and culture, namely classical music.

According to the League of American Orchestras (LOA), the average orchestra deficit in 2005 was \$193,000. In 2009 it was \$697,000. In 2008, half of orchestras reported deficits. In 2009 more than two-thirds had deficits.

Many orchestras have been suffering setbacks. The Minnesota Orchestra has a \$6M deficit and its musicians remain locked out, though its hall is being refurbished at a cost of \$50M. The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra only last week reached a new contract after months of lockout. It's having a new hall built to the tune of \$79M. It needs to overcome a \$1M deficit and under the new deal players accepted an 18 percent pay cut, a reduction in performance weeks from 37 to 32, and a reduction in size from 34 to 28 players.

The Grand Opera House in Wilmington recently cut a quarter of its staff and moved some other employees to part-time status. The Delaware Symphony had already cut back its own performances at that venue after it realized a deficit of nearly \$1M last summer.

The Gainesville, Georgia Symphony is shutting down after 30 years of operation. After piling up operating losses of \$27M for the years 2009-11 and receiving a flood repair bill of \$42M in 2010, the Nashville Symphony decided to default on \$102M in bonds used to build its hall in 2006.

The Jacksonville Symphony plays on, despite a large cut in pay following its Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The Syracuse Symphony filed Chapter 7 liquidation in its 50th anniversary season. The Honolulu Symphony filed Chapter 7. The Bellevue Philharmonic (Seattle area) closed after 43 years. The mighty Philadelphia Orchestra only recently emerged from Chapter 11.

The New York City Opera has been fighting for its life, homeless, endowment shrunken from \$55M to \$9M. The Kennedy Center took over operations of the Washington Opera, in debt to the tune of over \$11 million. Detroit Symphony musicians were on strike for many months. In the final settlement the number of players was reduced from 96 to 81, workweeks were reduced from 52 to 40, and pay was cut. The orchestra had run up accumulated deficits of about \$20M and used much of its endowment to cover those losses. Even with the new deal, the orchestra expects to run deficits of about \$3M per year for at least three years.

I could go on and on. In our own community, the Colorado Symphony, itself the heir of the bankrupt Denver Symphony, continues to struggle to find a sustainable business model, never mind finding the funds required to complete the once-dreamed of renovation of Boettcher Concert Hall. Opera Colorado had to cancel one-third of its most recent season, and that after finding insufficient support for expanding its offerings upon moving into the new Opera House. Multiple local organizations owe their continuing existence to the generous philanthropic support of a very small number of

individuals. Even the largest of organizations find themselves cutting expense budgets to match constrained earned and donated income.

In efforts to address similar challenges, on July 1 the Sacramento Symphony and Sacramento Opera will merge administrative functions, with one board of directors, while retaining separate artistic control. The combined entity will have a budget of about \$300,000 less than the sum of the prior two. The Dayton Symphony, Opera and Ballet have merged. The Cincinnati Vocal Arts Ensemble and May Festival Chorus are also entering into a strategic partnership that is part administrative and part artistic. The World Piano Competition, Cincinnati Symphony, and University of Cincinnati College of Music are entering into a partnership.

In Denver, the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation, while other foundations are quitting the field of arts funding, has devoted itself exclusively to that. It has set itself the goal of supporting innovation in the arts and one of its largest recent and multi-year grants was to Colorado Public Radio to help it create a robust arts and culture section of its news operations, on air and online. The Foundation is making this part of a mission to help the city use arts and culture to brand itself nationally and internationally.

The Denver city department Arts and Venues, along with the Office of Economic Development, is conducting an online survey to find out what citizens think the future of arts and culture in Denver should be. I encourage you all to visit that site and take the survey. You can find it at ImagineDenver2020.org. This is the first city planning effort around arts and culture since 1989. The website adopts a very ecumenical tone:

At the heart of a great city is art and that art is defined in hundreds of different ways. In Denver, a big-selling band at Red Rocks is as relevant as a trio at a bar on South Broadway. A small gallery in a neighborhood arts district is as charming as the Blue Mustang or a major museum exhibit.... The business of arts, culture and creativity helps define a city, too. Dollars spent in record stores, galleries, filmmaking, fashion production and restaurants all point to an appreciation of human creativity. Simply put, support for arts in many forms help support a city's quality of life.

In an article on Friday, May 3, ("Take the survey: Denver invites citizens to vote on ideas for new cultural arts plan") Ray Rinaldi of *The Denver Post* offered his own list of 8 ideas for bold moves that could change the arts and culture landscape of Denver. All that – the bold individual ideas, the survey, the planning process, the funding program – assumes that in this day and age any government or institution can actually plan for or direct what Denver's arts and culture future will be or what its personality and reputation may become.

Which brings us to some consideration of what's causing all this ferment. As noted, we in Denver are not alone. Plenty of cities, larger and smaller, are working

through the kinds of difficulties that some of our artistic institutions are fighting. Yes, some cities are better off. In San Francisco the orchestra was recently on strike, but not because of pay cuts or reduced numbers of musicians. Rather, musicians struck because the pay increase from their average base salary of \$141,000, and other benefits including fully paid for health insurance, 10 weeks of paid vacation and a retirement plan, was deemed insufficient. And it has been true for a very long time that musicians at orchestras in even some smaller cities are paid more than the base rate the CSO pays its musicians, a rate that has only decreased in recent years. In other words, as Tip O'Neill said of politics, all arts are local.

But, there are tides and winds of epic proportions that are battering every artistic institution afloat on the cultural sea today. In a TEDx talk in 2010, the brilliant Ben Cameron from The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation described the situation:

Arts organizations today compete in delivering their marketing messages with the 3,000 to 5,000 marketing messages a typical person sees every single day. And technology is the biggest competitor for leisure time. Video games outsell music and video recordings combined. We can get anything we want whenever we want it, now not even having to sit in front of a computer, just using a smart phone, and that creates expectations of personalization that the live performing arts, which take place in a specific shared space that you have to go to, and only at specific and limited times, and at the cost of travel, parking, and admission, can never meet.

Doug McLennan, a brilliant arts blogger, suggests that this choice explosion forces you to spend more time editing your own choices, which means it's harder and harder for someone offering but one alternative to get people's attention. And people spending all that time on their choices end up having higher expectations than ever about the quality of the experience they choose, which increases the risk of disappointment, which increases the likelihood that artistic directors will program things thought to be safe.

What's going on, Cameron says, is not the annihilation of the arts, but a fundamental Reformation, like the religious Reformation of the 16th century. Each was catalyzed by technology. In the case of the religious Reformation, the invention of movable type and the printing press led to the ability to print the Bible in multiple vernacular languages and put the texts in the hands of people other than priests. This accompanied a comparative democratization of spiritual thought and practice, taking from the institution of the Catholic Church and its educated elite the exclusive power of communication through the written word. It led to a tempestuous period of many decades loaded with debate, disagreement, creation of new groups and communities, and the destruction of old ones, not to mention wars.

At heart, Cameron says, both Reformations are about this question: who is entitled to practice, how are we entitled to practice, and do we need anyone at all to

intermediate for us in an experience of the divine, or in this case of the arts? Thanks to technology and the Internet, today's version of movable type and the printing press, the means of creation and distribution of art (movies, music, theater, dance, and also of journalism) have been completely democratized. It's easy, and it's cheap both to make it and to disseminate it on your own. Anyone is a potential musician, artist or journalist. The numbers of *participants* in the arts, as long as you define arts more broadly than does the NEA, is exploding, as shown in those NEA statistics.

"Mass amateurization" through the Internet, like the spread of the printed word and literacy, leads to all sorts of people doing things that had previously been limited in their practice to professionals. As Clay Shirky, the author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (Penguin Group), wrote:

Because social effects lag behind technological ones by decades, real revolutions don't involve an orderly transition from point A to point B. Rather, they go from A through a long period of chaos and only then reach B. In that chaotic period, the old systems get broken long before new ones become stable. In the late 1400s scribes existed side by side with publishers but no longer performed an irreplaceable service. Despite the replacement of their core function, however, the scribes' sense of themselves as essential remained undiminished.

By analogy, we're living through such a chaotic period right now. And the explosion of pro-am practice is undermining the cultural autonomy, leadership and sense of themselves as essential that legacy, professional cultural institutions enjoyed before the Internet Reformation. That, of course, implies some difficult things about not only the survival of legacy cultural institutions but also about the venues that have been built up to serve their needs.

Cameron says, however, that we should remember that the religious Reformation didn't spell the end of the traditional Church, and likewise the Internet Reformation won't spell the end of legacy cultural institutions, though there has already been, and will likely be more, dislocation. He maintains that the Internet Reformation has led and will continue to lead to the growth of independent artists who create works that have meaning not just aesthetically but in a social context such as human rights or global climate change or gender equality or bullying... And for that reason he maintains that the performing arts broadly conceived, not necessarily in the sense of the NEA's "benchmark arts," have the potential to be more important than they have ever been.

While the arts are certainly economically important, as demonstrated locally by the bi-annual CBCA study of the economic impact of SCFD-funded organizations, he urges us to consider the humanistic value of the arts. Leaders in business and government need leadership capacities that depend on creative and emotional intelligence, the ability to motivate others and to empathize, capacities that the arts

teach. We need the arts more than ever now, in this post-9/11 world, as we confront human relations that are more and more based on suspicion, fear, and hostility, instead of on generosity, curiosity, and openness, which are experiences the arts invite us to have. The arts can create experiences full of meaning that can be chewed on and digested and which are, therefore, nourishing to our character, not just the sensations or rushes of adrenaline that come from playing a video game or being overwhelmed by a wave of sound and lights at a rock concert.

What, though, do we do with the many legacy cultural institutions that we brought into our communities in the last century? Many of them were the product of a mid-20th century Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, NEA model for development of the arts. The model was culturally Eurocentric and in essence intended to replicate around the country some version of Manhattan's cultural scene in the form of regional theaters, orchestras, and Balanchine-like ballet companies. Richard Evans, an arts consultant from EmcArts in New York, notes that the legacy institutions that are often now struggling came out of this Ford-Rockefeller-NEA philosophy. The economic model called for the creation of excellent, and therefore scarce, products that could be sold at high prices. That was a model for elitism, and one that is today diametrically opposed to the populist call for unlimited quantity, easy, quick, cheap, or free access, and participation even by the pure amateur.

Evans argues that now that this world is gone, we need to structure our cultural organizations very differently. They have to connect with their communities in new ways. Cultural professionals have to go from being supply-side providers of elite culture to being enablers of the community's participation. Today's problems are not going to be addressed by changing our marketing. We have to change our PRODUCTS.

We have to embrace the power of creative failure, give ourselves the space to experiment, to fail, to learn from the failures and then to move on. We have to stop thinking inwardly and defensively, we have to make adaptive leaps, cutting back our old core activities and freeing up money to use for new things. And while we can spend a City Club luncheon doing it, we can't get stuck thinking about big systemic issues. We have to think about smaller, manageable, innovative projects we can actually do, and later we'll know whether systemic change came from them.

That means that we, especially those of us who are in legacy arts institutions, have to embrace this new pro-am diversity of arts expressions. We have to welcome and encourage the development of such expressions and neither oppose nor ignore them out of defensiveness. And it means that we as a community, from a policy point of view, cannot limit our investments of time, money and energy to, metaphorically, "saving the symphony," as if that's punching our culture card and ensuring the health and vibrancy of our cultural community.

In other words, we have to make a paradigm shift in how we conceive of arts and culture, just as the Internet and technology have caused a paradigm shift in how people

communicate, how they relate to each other, and how they associate with others in groups or communities. Clay Shirky, the author of *Here Comes Everybody*, already quoted, recites the history that in 1501 a Venetian printer named Manutius printed a new translation of Virgil's works. This wasn't what was noteworthy. What mattered was its size; it was small enough to be carried in saddlebags. He had accepted the notion that printing was here to stay and he offered an innovation that made books smaller, more portable and more affordable, thus more desirable, and others soon followed suit with more experiments and innovations.

The lesson from Manutius's life is that the future belongs to those who take the present for granted.... For [those of us born before about 1980], no matter how deeply we immerse ourselves in new technology, it will always have a certain provisional quality.... But in times of revolution,... [w]hen a real once-in-a-lifetime change comes along, we are at risk of regarding it as a fad. Like Aldus Manutius, young people are taking better advantage of social tools, extending their capabilities in ways that violate old models not because they know more useful things than we do but because they know fewer useless things than we do.

One arts blogger writing online about the CSO's new business plan wrote: "I was reminded of what a friend said after returning from the League of American Orchestras conference a year or two ago. 'It's a dinosaur convention,' he reported. 'They all know the comet has struck, but they have no clue what to do about it.'" Legacy cultural organizations that take the present for granted, and perhaps those that turn their leadership over, sooner rather than later, to younger people who don't have to unlearn "the way we do things," the way we created and shared arts and culture pre-dating the Internet Reformation, will be the ones to survive and thrive.

When people today don't attend the symphony or opera or ballet, they may not just be saying that their taste doesn't align with such things, they may more fundamentally be challenging a basic organizing principle of how we think about arts and culture. That's not to say that they won't ever come into concert halls or museums again, but they may only come when something happening there connects them to a community that they otherwise belong to online. Some new and stable arrangements of arts and culture may ultimately result, but even if so, they won't ever be a return to old order. And of course technology will create new characteristics in old institutions, at least those that are able to adapt and survive.

Daily there are more stories online about experiments being undertaken in the arts than you can hope to keep up with. For instance, last week an article in *The Guardian* reported:

The Royal Shakespeare Company has partnered with Google for [a] project, called *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, in which Shakespeare's fanciful play will unfold in real time. The production will use a number of online formats, from live-

streaming to written blogs, all shared through the social network Google+ over the Midsummer weekend, from 21 June. It marks the company's second major foray into online drama, following its Twitter take on *Romeo and Juliet*, *Such Tweet Sorrow*, in 2010, which saw actors microblogging in character over the course of five weeks.

The Metropolitan Opera, which was able to negotiate a revenue sharing deal with its unions so that it could broadcast live, HD quality video of its performances in movie theaters around the world, is more likely to find audiences than most orchestras that have union agreements that restrict or even prohibit digital sharing without onerous extra fees. The company once called Ballet Nouveau Colorado, which reinvented itself as *Wonderbound*, a name without the word ballet or dance in it, moved out of suburban Broomfield and into an empty building across the street from the Denver Rescue Mission. It has an open-door policy so people can just pop in to watch a rehearsal, and it has been collaborating with visual artists, authors, and musicians of all stripes. Maybe it stands a better chance than a dance company offering more traditional fare.

WESTAF, the Western States Arts Federation, one of six regional re-granters of NEA money, worked with the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs and an ad hoc group of people from the music world, which I was happy to be part of, to think about how to support Denver's young musicians. What came out of it is an experiment called the IMTour (Independent Music on Tour) project. It is based on a philosophy that cultural policy can't be built around just "saving the symphony." WESTAF selects Denver-based musical ensembles that are ready to tour but haven't yet made that step, and it connects them with presenting institutions throughout the West. WESTAF makes a grant to the nonprofit presenters to support the performance. The musicians gain the experience of touring to nonprofit performing arts centers, they get to put that experience on their resumes, and the presenters get introduced to young artists they might not otherwise find. Through these artists they have the chance to bring new and young audiences into their concert halls. And in the process Denver's reputation as a source city for new music is enhanced.

The Colorado Symphony has certainly shown remarkable drawing capacity with certain programs. A few years ago I attended the *Cinco de Mayo* concert in Boettcher Hall. It was free to the public and I assume the Symphony received some support from the Mexican Consulate, but the place was packed and everyone was very glad to be there. The audience sang along with many of the songs. I've hardly ever felt an orchestra be so relevant and connected to a community. And numerous performances in recent years have seen collaborations between the orchestra and non-classical musicians, both at Red Rocks and in Boettcher Concert Hall. These kinds of performances tend to be the modern analog to former "pops" concerts, and I suspect the challenge will remain what it has always been, that is, to see if the audiences for the pops shows will come back for a traditional classical performance. I suspect that won't happen much; it never has. The bigger question is whether the center of programming

gravity will have to shift over time from classically dominated to pops dominated in order for the institution to survive.

In marketing these days we acknowledge that we have to use social media such as Facebook and Twitter, but that we also have to run print ads in the newspaper. We have to send email newsletters and maintain a vibrant website, but we still send direct mail. In other words, we say that we live in a “both/and” world, not an “either/or” world. I think the same is true of cultural offerings and organizations themselves. We are less inclined to define our city by one or a small handful of organizations or artistic disciplines, and instead are more likely to expect a multiplicity of offerings and identities. We will have both classical music and the widest array of new genres of music, including art music, that have ever been known. We won’t have either a symphony or the new. Having said that, not every city may have classical music produced by a full-time professional symphony orchestra. Many may have classical music created only by part-time and community orchestras. The hard part will be knowing what resources a city is willing to invest in which aspects of arts and culture. And with limited resources, which choices to make, that is whether, and how much, to invest in legacy institutions and art forms, or whether, and how much, to invest in innovative artistic expressions that break traditions.

Coming back to where I started, what about the state of arts and culture in Denver? Well, to paraphrase a famous President, I suppose it depends on what the meaning of arts and culture is. Ten years ago I was one of 8 cultural organization representatives sent on an exchange trip to France. We were to learn about how the French fund arts and culture, and the French in turn sent a delegation to the US to see how we do it. One of the most fundamentally striking differences to me was simply the breadth of the activities usually considered as cultural in France. For instance, "culture" was defined to include the sale of CDs, movie and circus attendance, and even the sale of TVs and stereo systems. That’s a useful insight. You get what you measure, and thus if you really want to know about the state of arts and culture in Denver, you have to measure things other than the symphony, opera, ballet and traditional theater. Not only do you have to measure and celebrate what we sometimes dismissively refer to as the activities of “culturally specific” organizations (when, by the way, did Western European classical music stop being culturally specific?), but you also have to measure and celebrate the new technologically based, individually created, massively shared expressions that the Internet Reformation has enabled.

So let’s keep our eye on the ball. That ball shouldn’t be just the health of one or more particular legacy organizations that happens to produce a particular art form. That ball should be artistic exploration and expression, the artistic inquiry for meaning about the human condition, how we treat others, our fellow creatures over which we have achieved dominion, and this small blue planet we all share.