

Thoughts on Evaluating Opera

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The first, and best, reason for any performing arts organization to give careful thought to evaluation is to provide the information needed to improve/develop/sustain the programming it offers to its audiences. Whether performance audiences are increasing or decreasing, whether educational programs are attracting more or less support, whether company operations and morale of members seem smooth or bumpy, whether programming decisions favor the established canon or new work, it is always helpful to have information to help the company assess its work. No performing arts organization is so secure in its service to constituents and in its financial situation that it does not need to consider improvement of existing programs and development of new initiatives. Concern for advancement or improvement is inherent in art-making.

In addition, funders are increasingly interested in knowing that their philanthropic investments are effective. The opera company that is able to show the impact of its programming with systematic data will have more success in today's difficult funding environment. However, impressing funders must always be subordinate to the company's commitment to internal monitoring.

Some basic considerations in designing evaluations:

- *The information to be collected depends on the goal of the activity.* The first question to ask is, "What are we hoping to accomplish here?" This question needs to be asked before the activity starts. It is too late when the curtain has fallen or the outreach activity is completed to ask, "What information do we have to report to our staff, board, or funder?" Even if the only goal of an event is to sell tickets (which seems unlikely), there still needs to be a mechanism for determining that outcome and deciding if the result was disappointing, satisfactory, or beyond expectations.
- *Any organization needs to be sure that its activities are consistent with its overall mission and long-range goals.* Mission leads to strategic plan, which leads to program initiatives with specific articulated goals, which lead to evaluation, which leads to program improvement, which leads back to strategic plan. The best evaluation strategy will not be useful if programming is scattered and unfocused.
- *Collecting data is not just a process of counting something.* In the arts, strong qualitative information is just as important as quantitative information. There is no

substitute for the compelling story of an audience member who was deeply moved by a performance or of a young person whose goals in life were shaped by participation in the art. However, good qualitative evaluation needs to go beyond finding a good quote to put in the next grant proposal. For example, structured, in-depth interviews with a portion of the company's constituency will allow both quantitative and qualitative assessment that goes well beyond attendance figures or single anecdotes into the area of long-term or deeper impact of the work.

When an opera company designs an evaluation plan, the ultimate question is, "What is the benefit of opera?" What do individuals and the community gain from opera—from attending a performance or having an opera company as part of the community? Is opera simply entertainment, no different from professional football or popular music? As an opera lover myself, I believe that opera provides a deeper engagement with what is important in life which transcends simple entertainment. But what is that deeper engagement, and how might we "measure" it? And how does an opera company assure that the impacts of its work are accessible to the broadest segments of the community possible?

Assuming the opera's staff has identified the specific goals of either their overall program or of a specific activity, it is possible to collect information which will lead to conclusions about not only whether the audience felt entertained, but also the degree to which deeper or more long-term effects were accomplished.

The easiest method is an audience survey which is included in the program booklet and collected after the performance. However, such results are subject to too many short-term influences and can't provide assessment of long-term impacts. (For example, I recently attended an opera that I didn't much "like" at the time; I thought the staging was distracting and that some of the singers were not up to par. At the time, I might have responded negatively. However, the deeper moral and social issues raised by the work have stayed with me; a survey or interview with me today would show that I was deeply affected by the performance.)

The whole panoply of research techniques used by social scientists and evaluators can be brought into play.

- Focus groups with a sample of participants in some activity: ticket buyers, subscribers, board members, educators, students, or company members. There are

many good guides, such as *The Focus Group Kit*, published by Sage. Perhaps there is a board member whose company has the capability of running a focus group for you.

- Telephone or in-person interviews.
- Mail surveys. This method is rapidly becoming antiquated as web-based surveying methods (which are cheaper, quicker, and just as reliable) are becoming more commonly used. It is fairly inexpensive to commission a short web-based survey from the many firms who provide this service.
- For an activity that has a discrete beginning and end (a training course for teachers, a camp for youth, the development of a new work by the creative team), the pre- and post-test allows participants to express their expectations at the beginning and the company to assess existing skills/attitudes, with a follow-up to measure the degree to which expectations were met.

It is not necessary to use all these methods for everything, or to evaluate every program and activity. But it is important to prioritize which events or programs are most in need of good feed-back, to articulate what the desired outcomes of these are, and to figure out the best and most practical way to collect information about the degree to which the goals were achieved.

There is an increasing number of evaluators who specialize in arts and culture work. They are available to help—from the most basic advice about how to structure the evaluation for a grant proposal to full-fledged comprehensive evaluation of a company's program.

Even a small investment of time and money in evaluation of program can greatly benefit a company. Evaluations can yield not only invaluable information for program planning and improvement, but also concrete ways to demonstrate the value of its work to supporters and potential funders. ♦