



Music Director Franz Welser-Möst leads the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall.

Roger Mastroianni

100 Years Young

by Mike Telin

When the Cleveland Orchestra began its centennial season on September 23, it had many things to celebrate. Not the least is the success of its Center for Future Audiences, launched in 2010 with the stated goal of having the youngest audience of any symphony orchestra in the United States. That's quite a goal, and while definitions of "the most" of anything are always up for grabs, the initiatives that have been created as part of the Center are paying off. In the Center's first six years, more than 220,000 young people took advantage of a broad range of new opportunities to attend Cleveland Orchestra concerts. Today, 20 percent of the classical concert audience is made up of patrons 25 years old and under, an increase of 12 percent since the introduction

and expansion of programs made possible by the Center's funding.

Created with a \$20 million lead endowment gift from the Maltz Family Foundation, the Center aims to address economic, motivational, and geographic barriers to attending Cleveland Orchestra concerts at Severance Hall and Blossom Music Center, the outdoor amphitheater located in nearby Cuyahoga Falls. In 2011, a \$5 million gift established the Alexander and Sarah Cutler Fund for Student Audiences with a focus on Cleveland Orchestra programs for students at Severance Hall. Funds generated by the endowments are used to underwrite concert tickets.

"I'm absolutely delighted" with the results, says Ross Binnie, the orchestra's chief brand officer and director of the Center for Future Audiences. "When we



Dudley Brumbach

Namesake John Severance lends a hand at the 1929 groundbreaking of Severance Hall, home of the Cleveland Orchestra.

started this journey, we had hopes—so many orchestras have tried to attract a younger audience. The number of young people coming now adds up to 40,000 a

year between Blossom and Severance Hall, and that's terrific."

How did the Cleveland Orchestra accomplish that? Not by creating concert



Peter Hastings

The Cleveland Orchestra with Music Director George Szell, 1966

programs targeted specifically toward young people—no beer-and-Beethoven approach—but by sticking to core principles that have existed since the Orchestra was founded, and by making a close assessment of the special qualities of Northeast Ohio. Those principles include an uncompromising focus on musical excellence, community service through pub-

Heading into its 100th anniversary season, the Cleveland Orchestra could have been content to rest on its considerable laurels. Instead, it is looking forward: patrons 25 years old and younger now make up 20 percent of its audience for classical concerts. How did they do it?



Roger Mastroianni

Audience members at a recent concert by the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall

lic engagement and music education, and a belief in the value of classical music for enriching the lives of future generations. And among the region's special assets is the large number of students who live and study there, with some of the country's top music schools.

Binnie notes that in the 1980s only some 8,000 households were buying tickets to the winter season at Severance Hall in the form of full-season subscriptions. As demographics changed and competition for people's entertainment expanded, the Cleveland Orchestra wasn't replacing aging subscribers with the next generation. "When I arrived in 2010, we probably had the oldest audience in the country at the time," he says.

Many orchestras face similar concerns about aging audiences, changing demo-



Members of the Circle, the Cleveland Orchestra's young-professionals group, at Blossom Music Festival, summer of 2017

graphics, and shifts away from the traditional subscription model. They are deploying a broad spectrum of tactics to address them, honed to their own situations: virtually every few days an orchestra announces a discount-ticket program for young people or an engagement activity with previously underserved communities or a social media event for millennials. The League of American Orchestras' "Reimagining the Orchestra Subscription Model" study, issued

Twenty percent of the classical concert audience is 25 years old and under, an increase of 12 percent since the launch of the Center for Future Audiences in 2010.

in 2015, documents changing patterns in subscriptions at orchestras nationwide—and offers insights and recommendations. (See the Fall 2015 issue of *Symphony* for more on the study at <https://americanorchestras.org/images/stories/ReimaginingtheOrchestraSubscriptionModelSymph.pdf>.) What's compelling about the case of the Cleveland Orchestra, aside from the considerable financial investment behind the Center for Future Audiences, is that an organization with an international profile still had to discover solutions tailored to its own circumstances by conducting research, being creative about events and offerings, becoming much more involved with social media, and learning what worked (and what didn't). The Cleveland Orchestra could have rested on the laurels of its artistic reputation. Instead, it

looked ahead by looking at its audience.

Does Binnie think that what has worked in Cleveland could be successful elsewhere—or that such tactics could be adapted? "There is so much classical music in this town relative to its size, and it's all good, too," he says. "Cleveland also has a heritage of outstanding music schools. So I think what we did might work in cities that share the same orchestral traditions and perhaps have the same number of students within reach.

But even if these conditions don't exist, I think every orchestra has some hook it can use to attract its own target audiences."

Friends and Families

Binnie says the first order of business was to build up single-ticket sales: "When we started to review our local markets, we found that we had 60,000 students living within 30 miles of Severance Hall. The idea manifested itself quickly that we needed to open the doors to this young audience. Now we have over 30,000 households participating and they're buying more single tickets than at any other time in our history. In fact, we sell more tickets on a single-ticket basis than we do on subscriptions. That's all due to the influx of young people."

The first new program to be established

under the CFA was the Under 18's Free initiative, introduced at Blossom in 2011 and expanded to Severance Hall in 2012. At Blossom, two under-18s receive free Lawn Passes when accompanied by an adult ticketholder. At Severance Hall, each full-price adult ticket entitles the ticketholder to one free ticket for a young person age 7 to 17 for the orchestra's Fridays@7, Friday Morning at 11, and Sunday Afternoon at 3 concerts, as well as Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra concerts, Family Concerts, and PNC Musical Rainbows, which are for ages 3 to 6. Access to this program is available to everyone—you don't need to join a program.

The spark for this idea came largely from Binnie's wife. "She told me, 'You should make Blossom concerts free for our four kids—it's a far better value than going to a movie, where we'd spend \$100. We could have a picnic, enjoy the music, and have quality time as a family.'" Binnie says that it struck him that classical music has no barriers in and of itself, other than those that people historically put up to make it an elitist activity: "It's been wonderful to open the doors at Blossom and see so many young parents who have been keen to bring their kids and enjoy that moment together."

The results were much in evidence on Saturday evening, August 26, when a crowd full of families descended on the Blossom Lawn to enjoy a concert of music by Dvořák and Holst. Hoby and Sara Randrianasolo and their two children from Green Township—just south of Akron—were attending for the fourth time this season and planned to return for the next weekend's showings of *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* with live orchestra. Hartville resident Jon Gerbetz was bringing his two children for the fourth time in two summers. Parents and children of both families said that they love coming to Blossom. The parents added that the Under 18 program plays a major role in their ability to attend multiple times, and noted that the concerts are a wonderful way to spend time together as a family, as well as exposing young people to great music.

At Severance Hall, the orchestra offers even the best available seats to participants in the Under-18s Free and Student Advantage Program—including those in the dress circle, some of the most expen-



The Cleveland Orchestra

As part of the Cleveland Orchestra's programs for young audiences, the Grand Foyer of Severance Hall is put to uses that were unimaginable when the building opened nearly a century ago. In photo: yoga class for the Circle, the orchestra's young-professionals group, 2017.

sive in the house. "We don't cordon off a kids' section," Binnie says. "Even if we could sell a concert out in advance, I try to protect some seats for students, because those are the concerts they want to hear. I want those seats full of people who are energized for the performance. Our do-

Orchestra's classical concerts except holiday concerts and "At the Movies." Ticket availability is emailed to members at the beginning of each week.

"What's nice is that there is no limit to how many times someone can attend," says Jim Sector, the orchestra's director of marketing. "The exact seat locations are left to the discretion of the box office, but seats are available on the floor, the dress circle, and the lower and upper balconies. The students are mixed in with the rest of the audience, which I think makes the crowd feel younger."

The program is a hit with students. End-of-season surveys include comments like these:

"The Cleveland Orchestra has added a unique aspect to my college experience. The pricing for students makes enjoying the Orchestra much more manageable."

"I have been able to go to concerts almost every weekend I've been in school, which has helped me grow in terms of my exposure to repertoire and my musicianship. It is a price I can afford, and I've considered going to concerts just as important a part of my music education as my college courses."

Another opportunity for young people, the Frequent Fan Card Program, was rolled out in 2012-13. The orchestra sold 396 cards during the first year, and by 2016-17 that number had quadrupled to

1,755. The Frequent Fan Card functions somewhat like a Netflix or gym membership. Sector explains, "Students can purchase a card for \$50 at the beginning of the season, and they can attend any concert for free throughout the year. They can come as many times as they want and whenever they want. This program is what I think set off the big explosion of average student attendance from 1.8 to 5.5 times per year, a pretty serious increase. We see subscribers attending at the same rate."

Closely related is the Student Ambassadors Program, introduced in 2012 and designed to grow student engagement through peer advocacy. In the 2016-17 season, a record number of 32 Student Ambassadors participated in the program, which over the years has included students from eight local colleges, universities, and conservatories, as well as universities in Michigan and New York. "The Ambassadors promote the Frequent Fan Card and



The Cleveland Orchestra

"The Student Ambassadors promote the Frequent Fan Card and recruit groups to come to concerts through their social media networks," says Jim Sector, director of marketing at the Cleveland Orchestra.

"It's a nice way of getting the word out."

recruit groups to come to concerts through their social media networks," Sector says. "It's a nice way of getting the word out, because students tend to change addresses each year, and they often are not in tune with the traditional ways that we communicate with audiences." And students can exert more of a personal influence on their peers than marketing campaigns. As one Ambassador put it, "Telling classmates about the great atmosphere and the variety of music—even if it isn't that familiar—really drew them to come."

CFA's newest program allows students to maintain their relationship with the Cleveland Orchestra as they move on in their lives. The Circle, launched in January of 2014, engages with young professionals from ages 21 to 40. "We want to make sure that people who have participated in the student programs can continue their access to the orchestra after they graduate," says Andrew Singer, who volunteers as Circle

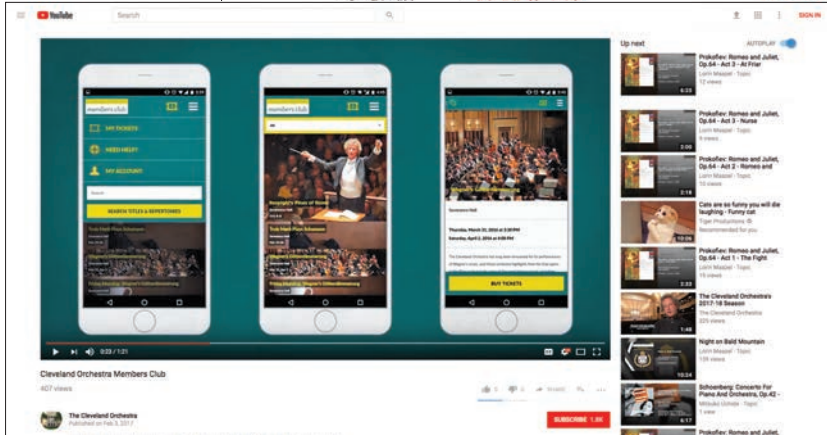


The Cleveland Orchestra

"I think every orchestra has some hook it can use to attract its own target audiences," says Ross Binnie, the Cleveland Orchestra's chief brand officer and director of its Center for Future Audiences.

nors just love that. They think it's great fun and that it's the future of our business. It's important as an institution to make the number of young people who attend a concert count as much as the ticket sales. We want to make them fall in love with what we do."

The Student Advantage Program is designed to provide students with discounted tickets for performances at Severance and Blossom and exclusive invitations to masterclasses, post-concert receptions with musicians, and behind-the-scenes open rehearsals. Membership is free for full-time high school and full-time college undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students. In 2016-17, the program signed up more than 7,600 members, who are able to buy \$15 tickets to any of the Cleveland



Online marketing materials of Cleveland Orchestra programs for young people

president. Benefits of membership, which costs \$20 per month, include CFA-subsidized tickets, behind-the-scenes access to the orchestra and its musicians, and networking and volunteering opportunities. The program currently serves 285 members. “One of our goals is to make sure that area young professionals are engaged with classical music and the orchestra, and there are so many ways to make that happen,” says Singer, whose day job is senior program coordinator at Cleveland’s Civic Leadership Institute.

Many orchestras have young professionals groups, and the Circle takes full advantage of resources unique to the Cleveland Orchestra. “We’ve had behind-the-scenes tours of Severance, and recently we held a scavenger hunt in the Hall, which was a fun way to learn about the facility,” Singer points out. “We’ve watched a screening of *Amadeus* in Severance, and we’ve planned trivia nights with other arts organizations like the young professionals group of the Cleveland Museum of Art. Once we heard a presentation about the European tour and all the details that go into taking an orchestra on the road. That was fascinating.”

Equally fascinating for young audi-

ences, it seems, is challenging repertoire. Binnie says that these initiatives have shown him that “we don’t have to curate special concert programs to appeal to a young audience. They just need a break on price.” Among the events that proved popular with young audiences last season: an all-Stravinsky concert which included *Apollo*, *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, and *Threni, Lamentations of Jeremiah*; Jörg Widmann’s *Trauermarsch* with pianist Yefim Bronfman, and Anton Bruckner’s Symphony No. 7; Pierre-Laurent Aimard in György Ligeti’s Piano Concerto along with the premiere of Anthony Cheung’s *Topos*; and the wild combination of Hans Werner Henze’s *Il Vitalino raddoppiate* with violinist Julia Fischer, and Felix Mendelssohn’s Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. “We’re still just as esoteric in our repertoire as we’ve ever been,” Binnie says, “and the students want to come and participate as much as everybody else. This is a new atmosphere, and I think it’s kind of cool.” **S**

MIKE TELIN is executive editor at *ClevelandClassical.com*. Additionally, he team-teaches classes in music criticism at Oberlin College and Conservatory.

Andersen Arts Group.....	54
Carnegie Hall.....	8
Cherish the Ladies	27
Colbert Artists Management	23
Tony DeSare.....	53
Greenberg Artists.....	55
Kelly Hall-Tompkins, violinist.....	17
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.....	1
League of American Orchestras.....	18, 34, C3
Marilyn Rosen Presents.....	51
OnStage Productions	22
Jaimee Paul – At Last/Bonded.....	C4
Janice Martin.....	14
Peter Throm Management.....	12
Roosevelt University.....	26
Robert Swaney Consulting, Inc.....	C2
Schiedmayer Celeste GmbH.....	5
Thea Dispeker Artists.....	11
University of Colorado Boulder College of Music	19
Video Games Live.....	Cover
Wallace Foundation.....	3
Word Pros, Inc.....	11
Yamaha Corporation of America	13