

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

How Much Would You Pay to Hear Great Music?

With ticket prices for performing arts rising, could fresh approaches like pay-what-you-can increase access and foster more adventurous programming?



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Sept. 23, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET

“I’m a cellist, and I have played in orchestras my entire life,” Blake-Anthony Johnson, the president and chief executive of the Chicago Sinfonietta, said recently. “I used to ask the other musicians, ‘What is the most you would pay for your ideal concert?’ And it was nowhere near what our patrons actually pay.”

Johnson was describing a slow-moving crisis in the performing arts: Ticket prices have risen far more precipitously than most Americans’ earnings — to say nothing of the seductively low cost of streaming services at home.

This rise doesn’t just trouble short-term sales. It also affects the long-term health of arts organizations, which depend on the philanthropic support of patrons who have generally built close relationships with the objects of their giving.

“I have long been concerned that ticket prices present a barrier to newcomers who are curious, and a barrier to inciting habitual attendance,” said Marc Scorca, the president and chief executive of the trade organization Opera America, noting that kind of habit can lead to later giving.

“High ticket prices are a disincentive to experimentation, and they raise the level of expectation,” he added. “And the higher the price, the less likely that expectations will be met, leading to disappointment.”

It’s axiomatic: High ticket prices are barriers at a time when organizations need their doors to be open ever more widely. And dependence on ticket sales also hobbles programming innovation. (In Europe, where arts institutions receive sometimes substantial public subsidies, ticket sales are a far smaller percentage of budgets, so artistic decisions don’t have to prioritize attendance.)

But could new approaches to ticketing work to increase access and foster more adventurous programming?

“Removing socioeconomic barriers is one of those things we have to be ahead of,” said Johnson, whose Chicago Sinfonietta introduced a pay-what-you-can ticketing approach last season. “I sleep really well at night, to have someone say, ‘I’m able to bring my family to these concerts.’”

Experimentation in this area has been spreading in the theater world. Most recently Ars Nova, the prominent Off Broadway incubator, announced that it would move to a pay-what-you-want model for the coming season.

In classical music, this kind of initiative has been far rarer, with the Sinfonietta leading the recent charge. But a much larger and more influential institution, Lincoln Center, threw down a gauntlet this summer, when it made the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra’s brief season choose-what-you-pay.

The results were heartening. According to the center, 90.5 percent of tickets were sold for the concerts, which took place at Alice Tully Hall since the orchestra’s usual home, the larger David Geffen Hall, was being renovated.

The suggested ticket price was \$35, but the average paid was just over \$19 — compared with almost \$60 during the orchestra’s 2019 season, when face value ranged from \$35 to \$90. Sixty-three percent of Mostly Mozart ticket buyers this summer were first-timers to a Lincoln Center presentation (though not, perhaps, to the center’s constituents, like the Metropolitan Opera or New York Philharmonic).

Of course, many institutions have reduced-price tickets available for students or seniors, or for last-minute buyers. And increasingly some have subscription-style programs that make cheaper tickets available for a monthly or annual fee. But those programs effectively penalize newcomers and occasional ticket buyers. And what about those who *aren’t* students or seniors, but are still challenged by rising prices?

“I find it really odd that we subsidize tickets for youths and senior citizens,” Johnson said. “There is a very large group of people in between. What I’m suggesting is that we have the kind of relationship with the community in which we are a public service and want to be a part of your life regardless of whether you’re giving us money.”

As Renee Blinkwolt, the producing executive director of Ars Nova, told The New York Times when that company's new pricing policy was unveiled in August: "It's not income based, it's not age based, there's no demographic basis. It's just radically accessible — the doors are wide open to any and everyone to pay what they will."

The rise of dynamic pricing — in which ticket prices fluctuate based on demand — is spreading beyond the commercial theater world. This can help maximize revenue for institutions when they have a hit.

But it can also do a disservice to audiences and the long-term fate of presenters. Aficionados are probably less likely to be purchasing tickets at the last minute, when in a dynamic pricing situation they'll be most expensive. So relative newcomers will disproportionately be the ones stuck needing to pay a premium, when they should be most diligently targeted with discounts. (For this reason, the Metropolitan Opera did not employ dynamic pricing during its highly successful run of "Fire Shut Up in My Bones" last season.)

The obvious solution would be for institutions simply to systemically lower prices — without expecting patrons to comb through websites for special ticketing programs or know how to game the dynamic pricing system.

One way to lower prices is to eliminate ticket revenue as a factor in budgeting. Yes, that sounds extreme: When Emilee Syrewicze, the executive director of Opera Grand Rapids in Michigan, told her board earlier this year that their company was going in that direction, there was a little freakout.

"Their first thought was, We're no longer selling tickets," Syrewicze said.

What she was envisioning, though, was something different. Syrewicze had realized that the company's ticket sales, as at many small and midsize institutions, were bringing in only a small portion of the budget: in the case of Opera Grand Rapids, around 15 percent. She also saw that the company consistently lacked a steady source of income to direct toward new projects and new works.

What if, she thought, the opera reorganized its finances — and juiced its fund-raising to compensate — so that all of the money from ticket sales would be devoted to creative programming? In other words, as she put it: "What if we had a couple hundred thousand laying around?"

When she explained to the board that the company was not simply disappearing the ticket revenue, but was planning to put it into other programs — and that the change would happen gradually over a few years, starting this fall — the members calmed down.

"The freakout was only momentary," Syrewicze said with a laugh.

In Grand Rapids, the goal is not to lower prices, which are already cheap and addressed by several accessibility programs. But other organizations could use the same strategy as a model for price reductions: If ticket revenue doesn't matter, tickets can be cheaper.

Small or midsize institutions may well have an easier time experimenting, because if changes to ticket strategy are going to work without cutting budgets, donations will need to rise to fill the gap. That said, smaller organizations also tend to have less fund-raising prowess; the Stavros Niarchos Foundation supported the Mostly Mozart pilot program this summer, and Syrewicze and her new development director are confident that their city — which has a notably strong philanthropic record — will support their experiment.

But it is still a gamble, and it requires a rethinking of the entire organization around a goal of lowering prices.

For larger companies that sell more tickets, and those that still look to ticket sales as a bigger percentage of their budgets, the losses — and increased pressure on fund-raising — might not be workable. And as Johnson pointed out, the very configuration of most concert halls, in hierarchical tiers, resists truly democratic approaches to pricing.

But Lincoln Center has shown that even the biggest organizations can at least experiment in this area, embracing the radical accessibility espoused by Ars Nova and opening the door to broader audiences of their own while providing inspiration for the rest of the field.

There is still work to do. Syrewicze said she didn't know of other organizations doing truly creative thinking in the pricing area, though a couple of her colleagues approached her to learn more after she had presented what she was working on in Grand Rapids at an Opera America meeting.

"They liked the sound of it, but we like the sound of a lot of things," she said. "How things translate to a budget is totally different. Because of our size and because we keep ourselves lean, we're comfortable experimenting with this."

Of course, even if ticket prices came down, it wouldn't solve all of the problems faced by orchestras and opera companies seeking to build their audiences and secure their donor bases.

"When we're talking about folks who have not come to the opera generally, price is not the only barrier," Scorca said. "We should not kid ourselves that lower ticket prices will make people feel totally comfortable. But it is a potent, tangible, identifiable barrier."

Just the same, it would be unfortunate if the fact that lowering prices won't solve everything keeps it from solving anything.

“Let’s see what happens,” Scorca added. “It doesn’t have to be all or nothing in an experimental mind-set.”