



Checking Out the Competition, Part II: How the Symphony's Website Speaks to Major Donors

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What role does a website play in major gifts fundraising?

As I described in my previous article, [Why the Symphony Gets Bigger Gifts Than Your Classical Public Radio Station](#), I've examined 15 symphonies, opera companies, music festivals, and chamber ensembles across the country, comparing the scope of their work and their major gifts fundraising practices (as far as I'm able) with those of approximately 30 partner stations in the Classical Music Rising initiative. In this article, I'll share some observations and ideas about **how classical music performing arts organizations use their websites to support the cultivation of major donors** in ways that could be effective for classical music public radio.

Good to Know: You're Being Researched!

You may be thinking: we already have a Donate button for membership gifts, support pages for our Sustainers, and contact information for our Major Gifts Officer for those who want to explore giving at higher levels. If major gift fundraising in our industry is conducted face-to-face, **why should we be concerned about major gifts** in relation to our websites at all?

Because **your major donors are checking out your website**, that's why. Research tells us that a sizeable percentage of individual and institutional givers research the nonprofits they consider supporting. In 2012, about a third of [donors and funders said they conduct online research](#) on charities. In 2014, the Cygnus Research Donor Survey (which has a large proportion of public media donors) [reported](#) that 60% of those surveyed said that "they spend more time today than they did five years ago researching nonprofits either before giving for the first time or renewing their support, and that **charities' own websites are their most important source of information.**" There's every reason to believe that percentage has continued to rise. Researching online before taking action – whether in charitable giving or in making purchases – has become the norm.

Smart nonprofits have been aware of this trend for years, and **design their websites specifically to anticipate donors' questions and spark their interest.** For many nonprofits, raising money is

the primary function of their websites. Performing arts organizations also sell tickets and CDs online, of course. But generally speaking, arts organizations consider fundraising to have a more central role in the design and purpose of their websites than we do in classical public radio. More attention is given – sometimes subtly, and definitely not just on the donation page – to the types of information that major donors may want and need, as well as to **visual and copy elements that foster a strong emotional connection**.

A little tough love here: broadly speaking, when viewed through a major giving lens, classical public radio websites look painfully utilitarian in comparison with our classical performing arts colleagues' sites. This is especially striking when the sites are viewed back-to-back – a bit like comparing an elegant wedding invitation to your electric bill. Both of them result in your spending money, but boy, does the “ask” feel different!

The content and design of Classical Music Rising partner websites appear specifically geared, perhaps unintentionally, toward people who are already familiar with our broadcast service and who have already heard a pitch for support during an on-air pledge drive. Given that target audience (people already fully in our tribe), it's understandable that our sites are designed for efficiency – helping listeners find the live stream or the playlist quickly and helping members renew their pledges with minimal friction during a pledge drive. Streamlining these transactions is rightly a priority.

But to my eye, our sites are far less accommodating to those who have different informational needs, such as major donors (incidentally, the very people who might help pay for that digital investment). **Classical station websites often do little to illuminate the full value and breadth of the station's work – important positioning that would resonate not only with major donors but also with newcomers.** Our Support pages are especially... shall we say, *bald*? I looked at more than a few public radio websites that do not provide a single reason to give, or put another way, that include no messaging on *why* the station merits support at any level. Just a form for entering a credit card number. (This is true among other public radio formats as well.) It's not surprising that wealthy music donors – who are used to being wooed with gorgeous visuals and enthusiastic, celebratory requests for high-level support – might not view us in the same light as they do the symphony.

In short, **we are currently positioning ourselves online as media services, not as arts organizations. But I believe we're in a great position to do both**, and that adopting some best practices from both worlds could play a significant supporting role in improving our fundraising.

What separates our websites from our arts funding competitors has little to do with site functionality and a lot to do with messaging. Most classical station websites could be improved greatly for major donors right now with nothing but staff time and some good writing, taking cues from some of our most successful classical competitors. A little further investment in visual collateral would be transformational.

If you're thinking of improving your site's resources for your A-list donors and prospects (or at least thinking about how to appear more competitive with local arts organizations), **here is a list of common practices and "best-of-class" ideas gleaned from 15 classical performing arts organization sites** (listed at the bottom of this article). I've organized them according to the resources needed for implementation, and have provided several examples from my research to illustrate the range of real-world application.

These recommendations focus on three main areas for improvement: anticipating donor questions in their research process; providing more emotional "points of entry" through copy, testimonials, and visuals; and actively promoting and facilitating higher giving levels.

No cost:

1. Pull together all of the **organizational information** a major donor needs to research your station: recent annual reports, IRS 990s and audited financials, Guidestar profile links, and Charity Navigator ratings. Track down your federal Tax ID number and information on requesting a copy of your 501(c)(3) determination letter.

Dust off your Mission, Vision, and Values statements and grab (or create) a public-friendly version of your station's current strategic plan. Make sure your organizational history is an interesting read.

Consider crafting a **one-page Impact Report** (ideally an infographic, if you have the capability) that summarizes your accomplishments over the past year in big type and simple language, with an emphasis on things that can be quantified: numbers of listeners, donors, hours of locally produced programming, live remote broadcasts, in-studio performances, event attendees, donated instruments, etc.

Post all of this information (or link to other spots where it is already posted) in the Support section of your website, **so donors can find it easily and all in one place.**

Examples: Cleveland Symphony's [Impact Report](#), Santa Fe Opera's [Mission](#) and [History](#) pages, Philadelphia Orchestra's [strategic plan](#)

2. Make sure there is an actual **case for support** – substantive but brief – on the landing page for your Support section (and/or on the donation form itself). Consider also linking to a separate "Why Give?" page with a more detailed philanthropic case for support that addresses the **role and value of your station in the larger community.**

Examples: Chicago Symphony Orchestra's [donation page](#), Philadelphia Orchestra's [Annual Fund landing page](#), Chanticleer's [Why Support](#) page

3. Get creative about providing “**social proof**” to inspire major donors (and lower-level donors as well). Prominent major donor recognition acknowledges the donors you already have and inspires the donors you don’t yet have, through endorsement. Your approach could be as simple as creating a page to recognize donors by name in your major giving tiers, or it could include major donor profiles and/or testimonials in your Support section or throughout the site. (Many public radio stations do this for Planned Giving and could easily adopt the same tactics for other types of significant gifts.)
Examples: Chicago Symphony’s [Faces in Philanthropy profiles](#), Lyric Opera of Kansas City’s well-placed [donor testimonial](#), New York Philharmonic’s [patron roll](#)
4. Add some brief copy (a headline, or a sentence or two) up top on each of the main pages of your site to position the content that follows (tell ‘em what they’re looking at and why it’s great). **Make your entire site contribute to the case for support** by consistently affirming your value.
Examples: [San Francisco Symphony landing pages \(click through the main tabs\)](#), [Lyric Opera of Kansas City landing page headers \(click through the main tabs\)](#)

Some financial investment:

1. Commission **professional-quality photography of your team at work** (on-air, behind the scenes, and out in the community) and incorporate the photos liberally throughout your website. You want photos that **illustrate the scope and craft of your work, put a human face on your station (especially your on-air talent), and spark positive emotions**. Many CMR station sites make great use of publicity headshots of featured artists, but include few or no pictures of the station’s own work, team, or location. The examples below are lavish with photos – your approach can be more restrained, but don’t be invisible on your own site.
Examples of beautiful sitewide photography: [The Metropolitan Opera](#), [Chanticleer](#), [Chicago Symphony](#), [Santa Fe Opera](#)
2. As resources permit, create **video testimonials from major donors**, instead of or in addition to text. Promote these short, well-produced videos on social media as well as on the site.
Example: Santa Fe Opera’s [Discover the Magic video](#), San Francisco Symphony’s [Music Matters: You Make it Possible video](#)
3. If you have ongoing initiatives for kids and education, such as free family concerts, in-classroom programs, instrument drives, youth talent contest, or kids’ podcasts, create a **separate Education tab** on your website to house this information. Photos and

testimonials from kids, parents, and teachers are fundraising gold here.

Examples: Chanticleer's [education programs](#), Rochester Philharmonic's [education programs](#), Chicago Symphony Orchestra's [Institute](#)

Strategy is required:

1. If you're involved in education, can you articulate why? What is your station vision and growth plan for this work? Where is your current focus, and why? Donors care deeply about music education for many reasons (not the least of which is the future of the entire classical music enterprise, including audiences, performers, and composers). How are you measuring your success? A brief rationale on your website for the educational work you do can be a powerful component of the institutional information you provide for donors.

Examples: Rochester Philharmonic's [case for music education](#), San Francisco Symphony's [education overview](#)

2. Are there online resources you might develop specifically for those **new to classical music**? Is it worth thinking about a **Young Professionals giving circle**? Promoting these resources and opportunities on your site serves newcomers *and* keeps your donors informed about **your commitment to audience development**.

Examples: San Francisco Symphony's [First Timer's Guide](#) (this copy also used by several other orchestras), Spoleto Music Festival's [Spoleto Scene](#), San Francisco Opera's [Orpheus group](#), Aspen Music Festival's [Salon](#)

3. Do your **giving ladders** extend far enough to incentivize significantly larger gifts and to demonstrate your station's sense of its own worth? Other classical organizations offer **structured giving circles** thousands... or tens of thousands... or hundreds of thousands of dollars higher than the \$1,000 upper giving level typically listed on public media Support pages. Do you have enough major donors – or giving potential in the community – to add at least another rung or two at the top to actively **encourage larger gifts**? Do you have the staff capacity to manage more giving circles? Can you develop exclusive donor benefits appropriate to higher levels?

If you already have established giving circles for major donors that are not listed on your site, consider posting them with a description of benefits, and include those giving levels on your donation form. Note that some classical organizations provide separate online donation forms for membership gifts and major giving circles, which streamlines the process for both groups.

Examples: Lyric Opera of Kansas City [giving levels](#), Spoleto Music Festival [giving levels](#),

Santa Fe Chamber Music [donation page](#), New York Philharmonic's [giving levels](#), Aspen Music Festival's separation of [lower-level and upper-level donation forms](#) (toggle between Crescendo and National Council)

4. Is it time to discuss **designated gifts** – those gifts that are earmarked for special initiatives or areas of operation? This is a strong trend in philanthropic giving, and fully $\frac{2}{3}$ of the classical organizations I looked at allow some form of gift designation (typically a choice between the annual fund and an education fund) on their online donation form. If you're ready to take the plunge, what are some broad evergreen categories or funds that could be developed within your operating budget? What's on the wish list outside of the operating budget? How do you feel about allowing donors to designate a gift on your online donation form, as opposed to negotiating such gift restrictions on a one-on-one basis?

Examples: Cleveland Orchestra's [donation page](#) (choose "one time" to access designation options), Chanticleer's [Support page](#) (scroll to Special Gifts), Metropolitan Opera's [special gifts page](#)

5. Are there **larger community issues** for which your station is considering developing a music-based healing response, such as political or racial divides, poverty, immigration issues, hospice care, mental illness, addiction, etc.? A number of classical music organizations are investing resources in serious, long-term community engagement along these lines. If you're involved in this kind of work (or plan to be), how might these initiatives best be represented on your website to make donors aware of your efforts?

Examples: Chicago Symphony Orchestra's [Partnerships with Youth Prisons](#), Philadelphia Orchestra's [Health, Education, Access, and Research \(HEAR\) program](#) (more detail [here](#)), San Francisco Opera's [Voices for Social Justice](#), Santa Fe Opera's [Pueblo Opera Program](#)

To repeat: your donors are using your website to research your station's financial stability, your vision, your accomplishments, and, yes, your donor benefits and recognition options – but not necessarily to make their gift online. For the most part, the above additions to your site (should you choose to make them) are unlikely to result in large gifts coming in through your donation page.

But by providing more complete – and more inspiring – detail about the breadth of your station's work, and by setting higher expectations during a donor's research process about the levels of giving you seek (and feel you merit), your website can play a crucial supporting role in the donor cultivation process led by your major gifts team.

Want to explore more? Here are links to the homepages of the organizations reviewed in this article, along with the approximate sizes of their operating budgets:

[Metropolitan Opera](#) (\$310 million)
[San Francisco Opera](#) (\$77 million)
[San Francisco Symphony](#) (\$75 million)
[Chicago Symphony](#) (\$74 million)
[New York Philharmonic](#) (\$57 million)
[Philadelphia Orchestra](#) (\$51 million)
[Cleveland Orchestra](#) (\$34 million)
[Minnesota Orchestra](#) (\$32 million)
[Santa Fe Opera](#) (\$24 million)
[Aspen Music Festival](#) (\$15 million)
[Rochester Philharmonic](#) (\$11 million)
[Spoleto Music Festival](#) (\$10 million)
[Lyric Opera of Kansas City](#) (\$7 million)
[Chanticleer](#) (\$3 million)
[Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival](#) (\$2 million)

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