



Checking Out the Competition, Part I: Why the Symphony Gets Bigger Gifts than Your Classical Public Radio Station

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Case language is near and dear to my heart. I love writing case language. Because I've been doing it for a couple of decades, I know that one easy mistake is to write as though your case for support exists in a vacuum. A successful philanthropic case not only describes what you're doing in compelling language, it also takes into account the interests and expectations of the donor or funder on the other end. Those expectations are shaped in part by what everyone ELSE is doing and how they describe it.

And the "everyone else" in our Classical Music Rising context is other arts organizations.

This seems obvious, but it has implications for our fundraising, our community engagement, and our digital presence that need careful consideration – more than we're currently giving. Classical stations may compete with other broadcast and digital media for listening audience, but **in philanthropy we're primarily competing within the arts.**

To be clear, this is not a zero-sum game. I am not suggesting that classical music radio try to take funding away from our colleagues in the arts, whom we support in so many ways. Instead of thinking about receiving a larger slice of the pie, I find it more helpful to think about ways to make the funding pie bigger – and there is donor research about untapped giving potential that supports this view, detailed below. At the same time, classical stations do need to understand the crowded and sophisticated context for our fundraising, and need to look for ways in which we can learn from the success of others.

In getting started on case language for CMR, my first goal was to get to know the competition better. I identified 15 classical music organizations for review (I've listed them at the bottom of this article, if you're interested) ranging from some of the biggest in the country to semi-professional organizations in smaller markets. The list includes symphonies, opera companies,

music festivals, and chamber ensembles, with budgets ranging from \$310 million (the Metropolitan Opera) down to about \$2 million (the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival). I looked at every single page on their websites. I went through their financials – IRS 990s, audited financials, impact reports. I clicked on their “donate now” buttons. I read through their recent press releases. I looked at any published donor lists I could find.

I also looked at the donor side of our classical music public radio equation. Here, the best resource I found for the purpose was the most recent [Cygnum Research donor survey](#) by Penelope Burk (full disclosure: Penelope is on the Board of Greater Public, my former employer). The 2017 survey of more than 13,000 donors is useful because it is recent, and because 45% of the respondents give to public broadcasting and 70% give to the arts generally. This is our tribe.

And last but not least, I’ve reached out to the major gifts staff at Classical Music Rising station partners that raise significant philanthropic gifts and grants, to get a sense of what they’re hearing from big donors and prospects. With all of this information in hand, you can imagine that I have a “take” on the age-old question: **“Why do people of means give tens of thousands to the symphony but only pocket change to our stations?”**

Let’s dig in.

I’ll start by saying: the highest level of excellence counts as table stakes – what you need to show up with if you’re going to play at all. Every serious classical music organization on the planet claims musical excellence in their case for support, so that’s a baseline expectation rather than a differentiator as you seek gifts and grants. At this level of case-building (for the “five-figure-and-up” crowd) excellence is a given.

So why (else) do donors of means give more to the big performing organizations?

1. **Because those organizations take childhood education seriously.** If you spend time looking at a lot of other music organizations, this really starts to hit you between the eyes. They ALL have some kind of education program aimed at kids. All of them.

Education is not a side project for other classical organizations. It’s not only in their mission statements; they’re putting serious resources against it. **Education is part of what they consider themselves to be in the business of doing in and for their communities.**

A [recent report](#) from the League of American Orchestras focused on the education activities of 98 orchestras (including many in Classical Music Rising partner markets). Their average investment in education ranged from about 10% of the operating budget for the largest orchestras to nearly 30% of the operating budget for the smallest. In other words, the smaller the organization, the *larger* the percentage of the operating budget they're devoting to education.

Education is a major part of their case for support and a major driver of philanthropy for their organizations. Ask your own major gifts officers what donors are concerned about, and the question “what are you doing for kids?” will be right up there.

Think I'm exaggerating? Take a look at the most recent [Impact Report](#) for the San Francisco Symphony (a nicely designed one-page infographic). As you'll see, impact stats for education programming are given equal billing (visually) to concert performance. That's how important education is in demonstrating the community impact of SFS to donors.

2. **Because the symphony provides lots of face time.** Performing arts organizations have some built-in advantages for major giving: live performance gives donors plenty of opportunities to see the work and the artists they're supporting, to see each other, and to see the major gifts staff. Radio, of course, is less tangible than a symphony or opera performance. **We have to work harder to help donors understand why it costs money to produce great radio. We have to work harder to create high-value, in-person experiences** that enable upper-end donors to see each other and be seen, to observe our work in action, and to get to know not only our development staff but also our on-air talent and our senior management.

The good news? Classical Music Rising stations that perform well in major gifts and philanthropy, not all of which are huge, have creative major giving teams. In addition to organizing donor events at the station, several have come up with clever ways to piggyback onto the performance calendars of other local organizations, gathering with donors for cocktails or desserts before or after live performances – and sometimes offering ticket discounts as a donor benefit. But overall, **face time is harder for radio than it is for the performing arts** (so please do everything you can to support your development team's efforts).

3. **Because they're asked.** “They give because they're asked” is axiomatic in fundraising circles, and it is anything but glib. From everything I know right now, **this may be the**

single biggest hurdle at classical stations. Let's break it down, based on what I'm seeing in responses to the recent Classical Music Rising survey of major gifts and philanthropy (in which we heard from 26 of our 28 CMR partners), as well as what I'm hearing from classical station staff.

- ***Is your development staff asking specifically for classical at all?*** At larger organizations that operate other formats in addition to classical (especially news, TV, or both), the major gifts team may simply not be spending time identifying, cultivating, and **soliciting donors whose primary or sole interest in your organization is in classical music.** News seems more urgent... television's numbers are bigger (and the team has to make goal)... the classical service isn't a top priority for the station... there are many reasons your development team may not even have classical music on their radar. These reasons may be perfectly valid, but the donors are not the problem here.

Donors for the arts are out there. They're giving thousands to the symphony, remember? Even in rural areas, there can be serious wealth – though it may not be widely advertised. And the passion is there among donors who are already giving big dollars to classical organizations. But significant and transformational gifts generally do not come in over the transom. **If a station wants truly major gifts, at a bare minimum someone has to ask. If the only fundraising appeals your donors ever hear are in membership drives, they may give membership-level gifts even if they have the capacity to give much, much more.**

I will also mention in passing that very few CMR stations are receiving foundation grants in the \$10K+ category, which is my specialty. I believe this is an area of considerable opportunity for classical stations in many markets (especially for those stations looking to invest in education), but you can only get the grants you apply for.

- ***Is your major giving staff (and senior management) actually convinced that you are worthy of the highest levels of support?*** This is a serious question. It is common among nonprofits everywhere, as well as within public media, to have a team-wide crisis of confidence when it comes to the really big asks. Strong case language can give you a real shot in the arm (and it's my job to help create some for you!) but ultimately someone on your development or senior management team needs to be able to look a very wealthy person in the eye and ask for a much bigger gift than you've ever received – maybe from anyone. If you're not

convinced your station merits that level of gift, you'll come up with a thousand reasons not to make the asks even if you're cultivating the relationships. Looking at the CMR philanthropy survey, I suspect this scenario may be in play at some stations. It's worth noting that our CMR survey did not track numbers for capital campaigns, where stations are often (temporarily?) more confident in making significant requests.

- ***You're asking, but are you asking for enough?*** As major gifts consultants will tell you, it's common for nonprofit staff to assume that current donors won't or can't step up, which becomes another excuse not to ask them to. Donors are grown-ups and will make that decision for themselves. The CMR numbers tell me that stations that put the work in on the relationships and expect more, are getting more. If you're skeptical, let this data point from the Cygnus research inspire you: **40% of public media donors in the survey said they had the capacity to give more in 2016 than they did.** Of public media donors whose total annual giving across all charities they support was over \$10,000, a full third said they could have given more. I believe we really can think bigger, once the relationships are in place.
- ***You're asking, but are you asking for the right things?*** The strong long-term trend in philanthropy (both foundation and individual donors) is toward designated gifts: **gifts earmarked for specific needs or initiatives.** These initiatives can be within the operating budget or outside of it or a combination. Proposals for designated gifts can include language that speaks to specific donor interests while still allowing some flexibility in how funds are spent. These requests require carefully worded, hand-crafted proposals and collaboration across development, finance, and programming or other departments – but they can result in unprecedented levels of financial support and donor passion for the station.

Right now, many Classical Music Rising stations by their own descriptions are making brand-level requests that are one or two levels removed from where classical-specific donors can really connect. From where I sit, this is a huge missed opportunity. If a station asks for support of “the whole organization” (which may include TV and one or two other formats), it's not only not connecting donors to specific initiatives where they can achieve satisfying impact, **the request is not even acknowledging the donor's primary interest in classical music.** In some cases, this may be the equivalent of not asking at all.

“Show me you know me” is the byword.

A station *brand* may encompass any number of things beyond (or within) your classical service, but a station’s *solicitation strategy* of an A-list donor or prospect should ideally provide, or at least frame, giving opportunities in line with those things the donor cares most about.

So let me summarize. There is a key strategic investment that other classical music organizations are making (education), which drives a significant portion of their philanthropic revenue, deepens their impact, and grounds these organizations in some of the most profoundly held values of their communities.

And there's a key strategic orientation that their development departments adopt (at least the best of them), which is to take the giving potential and individual interests of wealthy classical music lovers as seriously as possible.

I realize that not every classical music station will choose to make the same strategic choices for themselves. I strongly suggest, though, that every station should think about them.

The other details I have recommended? Basic best practices – always deserving of periodic review, at every nonprofit under the sun.

My goal is to help classical public radio stations be more competitive with the classical music organizations that routinely receive “big money,” and I’ll try to keep that lens firmly in place as I shape my reports on recommended community engagement and education activities (yes, I’m going to be a broken record on that front). Most of all, I look forward to working with leading Classical Music Rising development professionals to give you language that helps you put your best foot forward as you make your case for support to your community’s top arts donors and funders.

Next up: I’ll make some observations about patterns I’m seeing on the websites of those 15 classical organizations I researched (list below). Stay tuned.

Metropolitan Opera
San Francisco Opera
San Francisco Symphony
Chicago Symphony
New York Philharmonic
Philadelphia Orchestra

Cleveland Orchestra
Minnesota Orchestra
Santa Fe Opera
Aspen Music Festival
Rochester Philharmonic
Spoleto Music Festival
Lyric Opera of Kansas City
Chanticleer
Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival

Links:

- Cygnus Research donor survey: <http://cygresearch.com/shop-the-burk-donor-survey-2017/>
- League of American Orchestras report: Of and For the Community: The Education and Community Engagement Work of Orchestras: <https://americanorchestras.org/knowledge-research-innovation/youth-education-and-community/of-and-for-the-community-edce-report.html>
- San Francisco Symphony Impact Report: <https://www.sfsymphony.org/SanFranciscoSymphony/media/Library/PDFs/16-17/2016-16-Impact-Report.pdf>

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