

## The Classical Station as Community Connector

Working Group Report

June 2017



More than 2,000 gathered at Bridge of Song, a community singing event organized by Minnesota Public Radio following a controversial police shooting.

*We share a strong sense that sustaining our mission and our organizations requires more than our broadcast service alone, and that there are opportunities for classical stations to be a force for good in our communities.*

Leading classical music organizations in public media, working together through the Station Resource Group's Classical Music Rising initiative, aim to create a strategic vision anchored in public service values, designed to reach more diverse audiences, and bridging the enduring strength of broadcast radio, the growing power of digital media, and the direct connections of offline and in-person activities.

Classical Music Rising is a project of the Station Resource Group, supported by participating stations and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. [www.classicalmusicrising.org](http://www.classicalmusicrising.org)

## Overview

THE CLASSICAL STATION AS COMMUNITY CONNECTOR explores how stations can build ongoing, robust relationships for the benefit of the markets we serve. Public radio classical music stations are one of many local cultural players. We believe that a radio station's services are more successful when we listen to and collaborate with partners in our communities of service. Both within the local arts ecosystem and beyond it, we seek local partnerships that provide opportunities for classical stations to step into more visible and valuable civic roles.

Our working group of executives from seven classical music stations worked to frame both an approach to practical, meaningful engagement with community leaders and, from that engagement, a path toward a broader vision of service classical stations can provide through more fully developed local operations. Working group members are:

KING, Seattle: Jennifer Ridewood (chair)

KCME, Colorado Springs: George Preston

KDFC, San Francisco: Bill Lueth

KXPR, Sacramento: Joe Barr, Paul Conley

Minnesota Public Radio: Brian Newhouse

WFCL, Nashville: Anita Bugg, Nina Cardona

WQED, Pittsburgh: Deborah Acklin

Our targets included:

- Highlighting opportunities for partnerships with other organizations and projects and among stations across communities.
- Building on our trusted relationships with listeners to forge new roles as trusted connectors within our communities.
- Designing approaches that can be used by stations in different circumstances.

The initial undertaking of the group was to sharpen the purpose and focus of our work and sort through the kinds of interactions with community leaders that would be most useful in informing station strategies and building a case for philanthropic support. We also designed baseline questions for conversations with various members of their communities. This report documents our work to date: the focusing process of the working group itself; the kinds of community leaders we met with; how goals and questions were presented; highlights of reactions and comments that were captured; and how the overall process has worked.

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Independent consultant Deborah Lein, former COO of Greater Public, public media's development and marketing support organization, prepared this report. It is based on working group documents and interviews with group members, and reflects the group's findings.

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### **Focus and rationale: what is the work, and why do it?**

Our working group is extremely diverse. Our seven organizations are home to Nielsen markets 4, 13, 16, 26, 28, 44, and 91, and our classical stations range in size from 36 to 5 employees. We have quite different mission statements. Some of us have active, longstanding community relationships; others of us are building them from the ground up.

Yet we share a strong sense that sustaining our mission and our organizations requires more than our broadcast service alone, and that there are opportunities for classical stations to be a force for good in our communities. We envision a vital role for classical radio, unique to each local market, that merits significant philanthropic support, and a future where our civic value is recognized by classical music lovers and non-lovers alike.

Classical radio is at a particularly important moment in the current political climate. On the one hand, proposed funding cuts to media, the arts, and social services at the federal level will, if enacted, put pressure on state and local funding from public and private sources. The need to increase and articulate the value of our local public service is urgent.

At the same time, classical music has the ability to bridge political divides and includes both liberals and conservatives in its audiences. Classical radio stations offer an always-available respite from partisan discourse and can provide a virtual or physical meeting place for music lovers from all backgrounds to share experiences. Classical stations can take advantage of this opportunity to help citizens find common ground, and to lead and participate in dialogues that build on our local public service.

In expanding our thinking beyond serving listeners – which remains fundamental – to strengthening communities, we recognize the need to develop our “listening muscles” in order to identify community needs and desires, build (or rebuild) critical relationships, identify promising opportunities outside our comfort zones, and develop language that truly resonates with our communities. For these reasons, the group chose to focus its energies primarily on high-value in-person meetings rather than less-personal digital surveys.

### **Community stakeholders: whose input are we seeking?**

Early in the process, the group agreed to focus primarily on interviewing community leaders (rather than individual listeners or station members). Paul Conley (KXPR|Capital Public Radio) outlined the following constituency groups, organized here as concentric circles of influence working from the station outwards:

- Board and station staff
- Music community
  - performing arts executives
  - music collectives
  - individual musicians
- Music educators and school administrators
  - K-12
  - higher education
- Other arts and cultural organization leaders
  - theater, dance, spoken word, visual arts, creative writing
  - public libraries and museums
- Philanthropic community
  - local and regional foundations (esp. arts and education)
  - VIP donors
- Non-arts municipal groups and nonprofits
  - parks and rec departments
  - service organizations (e.g. Rotary)
  - youth- and senior-oriented organizations (e.g. Boys Club/Girls Club, retirement homes)
  - law enforcement and public safety
  - hospitals, churches and social service charities
- Business community
  - business CEOs
  - Chambers of Commerce and economic development groups
  - major employers and anchor industries (tech, hospitality, manufacturing, agriculture, professional sports, etc.)
  - entrepreneurs and developers
- City, county, state, and regional elected officials

Over time, a station might plan to reach all of these categories, either in relation to overall public service strategy or in reference to a specific initiative. For this first phase, the working group stations each selected one or two categories for interviews. Several stations found their board members instrumental in identifying representative leaders within these categories.

### **Baseline questions: a place to start**

Our group considered two related approaches to structuring and planning our leader interviews. One approach, championed by Brian Newhouse (Minnesota Public Radio) and Bill Lueth (KDFC), is phrased as simply and directly as possible:

“What are your needs and how might our station be of service to you?” (Alternatively, depending on the context, this might be phrased: “What community needs keep you awake at night? How might our station help address them?”)

A more detailed structure was developed by Paul Conley and adapted by KCME’s George Preston:

1. From your personal and/or professional perspective, is having a strong classical music presence in our community important? Why? What are the benefits? (In other words: what does classical music do for a community?)
2. If classical music isn’t flourishing as much as it could/should be in our community, what in your view are some of the obstacles standing in the way?
3. What role do you think a classical music radio station should play in our community? Do you have ideas that go beyond just providing music broadcasts?
4. How can we connect classical music and [our station] to other arts organizations to advance all our efforts?
5. How do we expand interest in classical music and change perceptions that it’s stuffy, boring and only for certain people?
6. What are some crazy, out-of-the-box ideas for making classical music useful and relevant in the community?

While most of the working group used this second set of questions to guide their interviews, Brian and Bill’s “big questions” have become additional mental touchstones for several members to keep priorities straight and conversations on track.

### **The reality check: trying to get seats at two tables**

Gearing up for meaningful community conversations involves an unflinching look at two significant challenges facing most classical stations.

One is the funding challenge. All members of the working group acknowledge that while our on-air programming is unquestionably the core of our stations, there is a natural ceiling to the funds we can raise around music broadcast. We simply cannot get in front of many major philanthropists and funders – or potential board members – unless we take on an expanded role in the community. Jennifer Ridewood of KING describes the wake-up call she received when a board member told her bluntly that he would not be interested in staying on the board if the station did not develop a vision with bigger scope than broadcasting music.

At the same time, in all of our markets we are wrestling with a second, similar obstacle: overcoming the perception within the arts community of classical radio stations as media outlets only. Bill Lueth sums it up: “Classical radio expertise seems to not have much visibility when other kinds of classical conferences get together. Stations are not invited to participate as members of the music community unless the organizers want a ‘radio voice’ to introduce a panel. We need to be part of the larger dialogue on why classical music matters that the major arts presenters regularly have. They look at the radio station as media (to promote their events) instead of as a local arts institution. How do we change that perspective?”

These challenges are real. The good news is that the rewards of authentic community listening are also real: we received insights and ideas from our interviews that help illuminate potential solutions to both challenges. Nina Cardona of Nashville Public Radio puts it this way: “I come back from these conversations invigorated. It’s worth the time. I come back to the station more juiced to do something new and different and better work.” All of us ended Phase One more optimistic about our value – current and potential – than we were when we started, and convinced of the need to continue these intentional listening sessions as part of our ongoing work.

### **The big themes: our best bets**

Our collective interviewees have included musicians, arts administrators, nonprofit executives, political advisors, entrepreneurs, educators, Board members, and station staff. Our initial conversations in Phase One point to three opportunities for increased public service that resonated across very different markets. We will want to explore these further as our process goes deeper and wider with our community constituencies.

1. Music education. Most members of the working group reported this as a major priority identified in their listening sessions, whether in Community Connector interviews or in other very recent listening projects. Community concerns include:
  - guiding younger generations toward a lifelong love of classical music;
  - providing curriculum materials and visiting artist performances to under-resourced music teachers and school districts; and
  - deploying music education more effectively in efforts to shrink the “achievement gap” for low-income children and children of color.

Minnesota Public Radio is several years into a serious commitment to K-6 education; Brian Newhouse attests to the measurable impact, bipartisan recognition, and significant funding that is possible.

2. Classical ecosystem leadership. All but one of our group interviewed representatives of the classical music community; all came away with ideas for how classical radio can step into new leadership roles. In particular, interviewees identified ways that classical stations can serve as “arts hubs” or umbrella organizations to help the local classical ecosystem function more effectively and efficiently. One Colorado Springs leader put it succinctly: “Individual classical music and cultural organizations provide a quality experience, but they don’t always work well together.”



Summer Listening at Louisville Public Media. Photo Tyler Franklin

Based on our aggregated responses, an escalating ladder of distinct relationships to the classical community is starting to take shape (not all roles may be appropriate in all markets):

- *Media partner*: publicity for local music organizations (PSA spots, community arts calendar – many stations do this now)
- *Music presenter*: live concert broadcasts, in-studio performances and interviews with local and visiting musicians (many stations do at least some of this)
- *Coordinator*: one-stop clearinghouse for educators, e.g. maintaining teacher-friendly directories of instrument drives, artists-in-residence, or educational outreach programs across all local music or arts organizations

- *Resource to the field*: CD listening library for professionals, music curriculum development expertise, digital arts/music content, service on other music Boards
- *Convenor*: facilitate and lead the “classical conversation,” identify organizational needs in common (backroom collaboration), identify opportunities for collective impact in the community
- *Ambassador*: represent music community to local government, spearhead public relations campaigns about the value of the arts within the city and to the outside world (see below)

3. Civic vitality and pride. The role of classical music and the arts (and classical radio) in civic identity has been a recurring theme in our Community Connector interviews, though a less easily defined one. Some examples from our markets:

- Individual music supporters in Colorado Springs and San Francisco identified this role as part of classical radio’s current value to the community: “a must for a vibrant city,” “the soul of a community,” “builds a sense of belonging,” and “I couldn’t imagine living in a city that didn’t have this.”
- In Sacramento, developing the arts and culture community is a priority for the mayor’s office, while a state university notes that the local arts community is a selling point in its faculty and executive recruitment.
- A private developer and philanthropist is determined to “put Colorado Springs on the map” as a cultural destination, by starting a classical concert series featuring world-class visiting artists.
- In Seattle, a local group is pushing for a portion of property taxes to support arts and culture. Minnesota earmarked dollars from a 25-year sales tax increase to support the arts, arts education, and cultural heritage – a projected \$1.2 billion public investment in the arts over the life of the tax.

These all represent opportunities for classical stations to define and articulate their civic value *within the framework of each city’s vision and ambitions for itself*, and to step into more visible civic roles. In the process, stations will develop compelling case language for use with a different set of stakeholders: city planners and developers, major employers, Chambers of Commerce, tourism boosters.

Two additional themes were mentioned less often but deserve mention and possible further development: lifelong learning, and reaching diverse communities. To some degree, classical radio’s participation in music education and/or civic vitality efforts may be structured to address these goals.

## A smorgasbord of additional ideas

In addition to the themes that emerged across markets, our interviews resulted in a variety of freestanding ideas (especially in response to the “out of the box” prompt). Some examples:

1. Develop unique programs to target youth, on the radio and in person, partnering with presenting organizations (classical music in unexpected settings)
2. Provide and/or facilitate after-school programs.
3. Work with the local newspaper to establish multi-platform arts coverage/criticism.
4. Connect the music to “hipper” activities (dance, sports, local brewers and distillers, happy hours at already popular venues, outdoor music where people already are).
5. Promote crossover between other genres (jazz, theater, visual art).
6. Humanize the musicians and tell the story behind the music.
7. Launch a classical quiz show.
8. Find creative tie-ins with citywide or statewide slogans, themes, and events (e.g., "City of Roses," "Olympic City USA," "Crossroads of America," etc.)
9. Start a competition for local classical compositions.
10. Partner with local libraries to identify citywide book club (community reading) selections that intersect with music.
11. Launch a cooking program – menus paired with music.
12. Create rituals/traditions: become part of listeners’ lives with daily and seasonal “appointment listening” – classical music lends itself especially well to this connection to the “ebb and flow of the calendar”
13. Offer more activities for kids with their families.

## Our thoughts on the work so far

This project has been a journey and a learning process for all of us, individually and collectively. We offer the following insights and reflections.

*On the working group itself:*

“Music [station] people don’t know each other, and are working in isolation. We have no mechanism for sharing information. One of the best parts of the process has been simply getting a chance to hear what music colleagues are doing.”

*The rewards of authentic community listening are real: we received insights and ideas from our interviews that help illuminate potential solutions.*

“Lots of very busy people... sometimes it’s been challenging to all get on the same page.”

“This has been a good place to start. As the conversation broadens to include more stations, it may make sense to create peer groups of more experienced and less experienced practitioners.”

*On the engagement process:*

“The value for me has been going out there and having these community conversations. Making the case for our station and getting ideas from people in this community. It’s been a terrific process. For someone more reluctant to hit the pavement, I would say, ‘The payoff is not the final document; the real payoff to you is the process of actually doing it, so don’t put it off!’”

“This isn’t a project that you do once and have a report and you’re done. This is something we can do forever, as part of our DNA. It’s changing my perception of the goal of what we’re doing as a station and of what my job is as GM. It holds the potential to change our station culture moving forward.”

“This isn’t optional. Listening to your airwaves will not give people a sense of what you *aspire* to do.”

“This is hard work. You need time, bandwidth, a budget, and a strategy.”

“We need to do a lot more of this. I need to get out and do more of these meetings, but I need a COO [to free up my time]. If you look at a staff list and there’s no COO, the CEO is having to do too much day-in, day-out work.”

“People are flattered to be asked for their thoughts about your station. There’s lots of love out there – people want you to succeed. Having a script really helps as baseline for these conversations, so that you have at least a starting point to branch out from.”

“I can’t state this strongly enough: you cannot make a compelling case for support without a compelling vision for how you meet community needs. But the work of listening and of meeting community needs WILL eventually lead to significant funding.”

## Getting involved: suggested steps for interested stations

We strongly encourage other classical stations to hold their own community conversations, in order to develop local relationships and to add to our collective understanding. We offer the following advice in the hope that the lessons we have learned and the tools we have developed will give other stations a jumpstart.

### Self-assessment and preparation

- What is the status of your relationship with the categories of stakeholders (p. 4)? How deep and how current is your understanding of their views about your station's value to the community? Which groups are most important to hear from right now? Narrow down to one or two. You can and should conduct later waves of interviews in other categories.
- What questions do you most need answered to further develop your public service vision? "Baseline questions" (p. 5) is a good place to start – try to limit the list to four to six questions to allow room for the discussion to unfold organically.

### Getting started

- With target groups identified, ask your Board and other VIPs you know for names of others to call on.
- Identify a window of time for this effort, and set aside more time than you think you'll need for scheduling (especially), prep, and interviews. Don't forget a budget for any meetings held over meals.
- If possible, enlist the help of support staff to contact interviewees and set up meetings. Create a phone script and/or email template for efficiency (see Addendum A).
- If you are meeting in a quiet spot, consider recording the interview on your phone. If you are in a noisy location, plan to take notes.

### Overcoming nerves and fears

- Remember that people *like* to be asked for their opinion!
- Don't be concerned about receiving negative feedback or impractical ideas. You needn't commit to anything in the meeting; just listen, take notes, and thank them for their input.
- If you're worried that conversations may devolve toward requests for airtime, clarify that (a) you will be talking to a lot of people and (b) this is a "big idea" conversation, not a time when you can make promises about programming.

## Overcoming inertia

- Remind yourself that the pay-off is improved public service, durable relationships, and – eventually – philanthropic support. It’s worth it, we promise. Even a small number of these conversations will deliver real value.
- It’s easy to feel overwhelmed. Consider delegating some responsibilities during this period of time to free up your time. Do you have a staff member looking for a chance to excel? Now might be a great time to give them a brief opportunity to “test drive” a new assignment (and get something off your desk).

## Sharing the information

- Once the interviews are complete, share them with the appropriate group of your staff for analysis, evaluation, and discussion.
- Share the information with the Classical Music Rising group. We will continue to look for emerging themes across stations to identify opportunities for collaborative work and case development.

## **Summing it up**

We are in the early stages of a distinctive, continuing process. As station leaders, we are directly engaging with other community leaders – not through surveys, focus groups, or consultants, but in personal conversation. Our initial work is exploratory and open: at this stage we are listening to others’ ideas far more than testing our own. Within a general structure that we arrived at together, each of us has made personal, subjective decisions about where to place our first calls. We are already seeing both some important concepts and issues that cut across communities and some very local notions about how to begin addressing them.

We see ourselves as a team of pioneers. As we continue our efforts, and as leaders at other stations join us, our knowledge will expand and we will gain greater confidence around our shared findings. By carrying the work of the working group forward, we will lay the foundation for local initiatives, collective action, and significant philanthropic investment both locally and nationally.

## Addendum A: Sample e-mail template

Dear [name]:

I'm involved in a national project called "Classical Music Rising." It's a collaborative project of leading classical stations to shape the future of classical music radio as the field confronts evolution in delivery across multiple broadcast and digital platforms, demographic and cultural change, and significant disruption throughout the music industry. Here's a link for more information about Classical Music Rising:

[www.classicalmusicrising.org](http://www.classicalmusicrising.org)

Our group has developed a set of questions/topics to be used in interviews with community leaders, in the arts or otherwise, here in [city] and other cities, to solicit feedback and ideas about how [station] and other stations can be more relevant partners in the community. The list of questions is not long. It is intended to lead to a creative conversation, the results of which will help guide [station's] local mission and will be shared with other stations in the group across the country.

Can you get together with me sometime in the next two weeks to talk? I would very much appreciate your perspective.

All best,

[your name]

## Addendum B: An inventory of building blocks for implementation

Our three big themes represent rich territory with lots of opportunity for collaborative work. As a set of immediate next steps, groups of interested stations could pool resources and bandwidth by working together to gather and develop resources for collective use in these three areas.

### 1. Music education.

- Map out steps for additional waves of very focused conversations with music educators, other arts organizations' outreach staff, and music funders to surface more specific local needs
- Review and compile the existing research on music education in relation to cognitive development, student achievement and engagement, and 21st-century skills
- Identify smaller-scale methods of engaging young audiences and engendering a love of/appreciation for classical music (not necessarily through schools)
- Tackle success metrics for collective impact in education (classical radio working with local arts partners)
- Identify best practices for common activities
  - Instrument drives
  - Creating curriculum materials that meet local teachers' classroom needs
- Create nationally replicable digital platforms/templates for shared resources (e.g., a directory widget for listing and promoting all local instrument drives in a market)
- Create job descriptions for new educational outreach positions for more advanced stations (analogous to public television)
- Develop road maps for extension beyond classroom education to other youth-serving organizations (informal education, after-school groups, etc.)

### 2. Classical ecosystem leadership

- Identify best practices and tools for common activities:
  - Convening and facilitating engagement techniques may be helpful
  - Community arts calendars
- Jointly develop an approach to data-gathering on the local classical ecosystem and a communications/educational approach to the classical community
- Outline an expanded "media partner" role (technical expertise, social media innovation) beyond on-air promotion, as well as suggested "quid pro quos" for arts organization partners

- Research successful collective impact projects in the music space for inspiration (including funding models)
3. Civic vitality: A next wave of conversations based on civic identity and ambitions could be held with business leaders, developers, entrepreneurs, tourism groups, and recruiters for major employers. Small working groups could:
- Review and compile research on arts and economic vitality: the “arts ripple effect”
  - Explore large-scale engagement models for community input, such as public surveys
  - Identify best practices for effective participation in tourism events, such as “First Friday” gallery crawls and festivals
  - Support each other in developing vision statements that position each station within the life of its community. KING’s vision of a Pacific Northwest in which all residents experience one hour of classical music per week is an example.