

Convening the Classical Community

By Deborah Lein

Many classical stations sense that achieving their missions and sustaining their organizations requires more than presenting their broadcast service alone, and that there are opportunities for classical stations to be forces for good in their communities. Many also struggle against the limited “media partner” role they play within their local classical ecosystems, and seek a path to building new and robust community relationships for the benefit of the audiences they serve.

Community convening is one such path. Effective, affordable, and infinitely variable, convening is well-suited to become a core engagement function for classical stations. Convening techniques can be complex and expensive – but they can also be very simple, with low barriers to implementation. The potential benefits of regular, structured conversations between stations and their local music communities are many. By hosting well-designed convenings, stations can

- Collect intelligence about the “state of the arts”
- Identify shared goals and concerns
- Promote local collaboration
- Invite ideas for innovative public service
- Cultivate relationships that will open new doors and, eventually, lead to increased financial support.

The Back Story. The *Classical Station as Community Connector* working group examined the purpose and focus involved in effective outreach and engagement and highlighted interactions with community leaders that are especially useful in informing station strategies and building a case for philanthropic support. (See [Resources](#) below.) The group included:

KING, Seattle, Jennifer Ridewood (chair) KCME, Colorado Springs, George Preston
KDFC, San Francisco, Bill Lueth KXPR, Sacramento, Joe Barr and Paul Conley,
Minnesota Public Radio, Brian Newhouse WFCL, Nashville, Anita Bugg and Nina Cardona
WQED, Pittsburgh, Deborah Acklin

This Report. Nashville Public Radio and Capital Public Radio are two stations that picked up where the working group left off. Both are multi-station organizations whose newsrooms have established community engagement practices. Capitalizing on their in-house expertise, and drawing on techniques identified by the Community Connector group, these two stations are now turning their attention to adapting convening models to a classical music setting.

The Nashville case study details 91Classical’s first forays into classical convening with two lunch meetings, each attended by a group of carefully selected local musicians, music teachers, arts administrators, station Board members, and donors (40 community members in all). As a relatively new classical station with a small staff, the Nashville team took a “keep it simple” approach with their first meetings, limiting the guest list and keeping expenses to a minimum.

This modest, straightforward first effort paid off with rich and insightful discussion. The Nashville staff and senior management came away from the two conversations energized, armed with concrete ideas, focused on the potential and value of their classical service, and committed to making regular convening part of the ongoing work of 91Classical. By shifting their goal from “getting a seat at the table” to “inviting the classical community to our table,” Nashville’s 91Classical can reposition itself, one guest list at a time, in the minds of the classical community as an active classical colleague, expert facilitator, potential collaborator, and monitor of the “big picture.”

Classical convening is new territory for most stations. Capital Public Radio, headquartered in Sacramento, has made an impressive institutional commitment to community engagement, but the majority of their engagement work to date has been focused on news and information content. Like 91Classical in Nashville, Capital Public Radio held one-on-one community conversations while participating in the Classical Connector working group – individual

conversations that have already paid off in new opportunities and projects. The classical team is eager to continue the momentum.

In this report, members of Capital Public Radio's engagement and music teams share their early thinking about a potential classical convening project, employing techniques developed in other settings by Capital Public Radio's community engagement strategist.

Over time, classical convening can play a significant role in stations' long-term sustainability. Regular community conversations more fully embed the station within the classical ecosystem, provide the station with important intelligence, enable strategic alliances with and among classical colleagues, inspire philanthropic support, and provide a platform for strategic alignment across departments.

CASE STUDY: Nashville Public Radio (91Classical)

Interview with: Anita Bugg, Vice President of Content (anita@wpln.org) and Nina Cardona, Music Director (nina@wpln.org)

Overview

- **How long has your station been holding community convenings?**
This is our first time for classical music, but our news station has been doing this for some years.
- **Why did you decide to lead a conversation with members of the arts community?**
As part of the CMR's *Classical Station as Community Connector* working group last year, we held a series of one-on-one conversations with community leaders and found them useful and encouraging. It was clear that regular conversation with the music community would really benefit us.

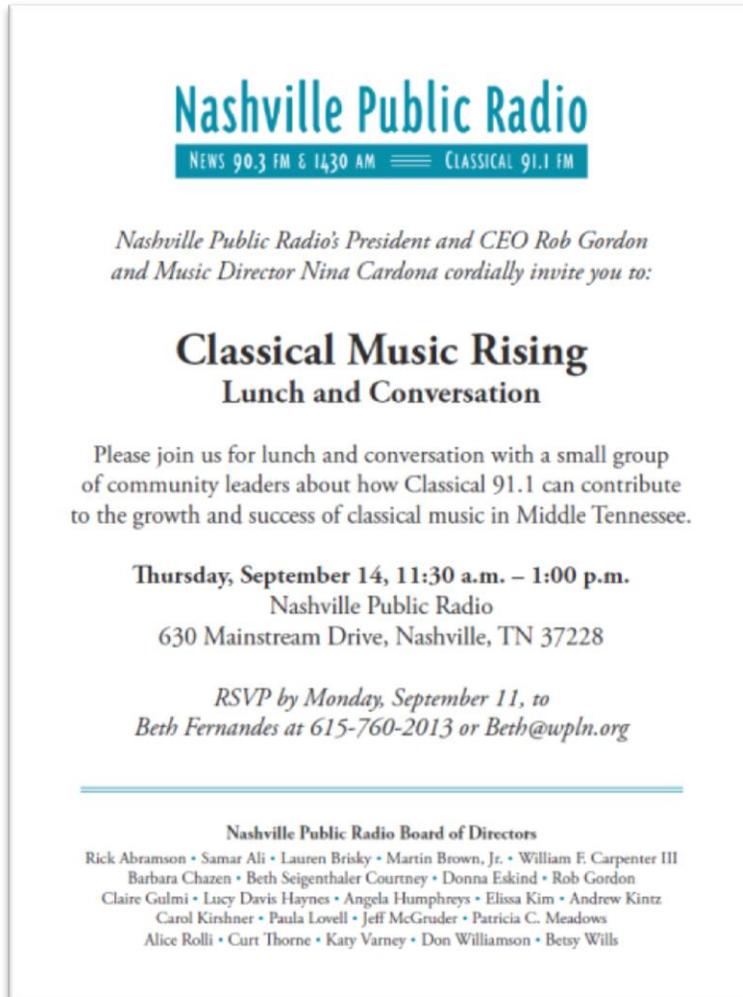
We initially thought that pulling together larger meetings was beyond our capacity. However, we recognized we had a successful convening model in our own newsroom and decided to try applying the same model on the classical side.

- **What's the upshot?**
This was a resounding success for us with some surprisingly far-reaching consequences. We have committed to holding four gatherings in 2018, and assume regular convening will become part of our core operations, as it is on our news side.

Planning

- **Who took the lead? How much staff time was involved?**
Nina Cardona led the initiative. Anita, Rob Gordon (our CEO), and our development department were involved in selecting the guest list, which is standard procedure in our news convening model.

The guest list research is time-consuming but we created a pool big enough to populate two groups, and used the same conversation structure for both meetings, so there was efficiency in planning. We estimate about 40 hours in total among 4 people to plan the first of the two conversations, with less time needed for the second one. We expect to get much faster.



What were the planning steps?

It was very straightforward.

The steps included:

- * assign point people from programming, development, and senior management
- * determine the guest list and the meeting dates and times
- * send out invitations (by email 5 weeks in advance and by postcard 4 weeks out) and manage RSVPs
- * order box lunches from a local caterer
- * hold the meeting
- * debrief

How many people were invited?

We held two meetings of 20 people each (not including staff).

● **How was the guest list determined?**

We referred to the “concentric circles” identified in the Community Connector report (see [Resources](#), below). Our goal was a strong mix of musicians from larger and smaller ensembles, music educators, and the local arts commission. There was a lot of overlap since many musicians play in multiple ensembles and also teach. We deliberately reached out to groups and individuals who were not currently looking to us for promotion.

We also invited some of our board members and some major donor prospects who we thought would have an interest (there was no fundraising “ask” involved, though).

- **What was the strategy behind timing of the gatherings?**

We held the meetings on convenient dates for us, but scheduled over the lunch hour because working musicians often have evening rehearsals and performances. We figured that it would be easier for people to attend during the work day – and that a free lunch would be a lure!

- **How was the conversation structured?**

We used the same structure for both meetings, following guidelines from the Community Connector report (see [Resources](#), below). We had used these questions in our earlier one-on-one conversations and found them helpful in generating discussion about “the state of classical music” locally, and about the station’s potential role. Nina was also familiar with community engagement discussions from her previous role on our news team (as Morning Edition host).

- **Which staff attended? What role did they play during the meeting?**

Nine staff members attended: four from the music department, two from senior management, and three from development. Nina led the discussions, while other staff members were observers. All nine staff members were part of the “meet and greet” before and after.

- **What was the room set-up?**

Room configuration is important. We set up the room as a hollow square, so that everyone could see each other and there was no implied hierarchy. Some of our news convenings are much larger and involve crescent rounds and a central dais with presenters, but for this smaller classical meeting we wanted an informal discussion among peers.

- **What were your direct expenses?**

Our only direct expense was box lunches for the attendees. We held the meetings at the station in the same room we use for Board meetings, so the logistics were familiar.

Results

- **What were the main takeaways?**

The biggest takeaway was that the classical music community WANTS to be convened – and that they are happy and grateful to see 91Classical step up to facilitate. We knew the various groups don’t work much together, but didn’t know how much of that was territorial. It turns out they’re just really busy. Over and over we heard them say how

happy they were to have a chance to talk with each other and to take a step back from the daily grind to talk about what's really happening in Nashville's classical scene. In fact, when the discussions ended many of them stayed talking together in the hallways, because it was such a rare opportunity.

On the "big picture issues" side, one major finding of these groups was a disconnect between their own sunny outlook and the concerns of music audiences about the future of classical music. There was tremendous enthusiasm and optimism in the room, but we need to bring that message to our station's listeners and to concert-goers. Classical audiences are concerned about the preponderance of stories in the media about "the death of classical music."

This is a unique role that 91Classical can play: we have a giant megaphone and can use it not just to showcase local performance but also to communicate the music community's real excitement about what's happening locally.

- **What surprised you most?**

Our development department has never been focused on classical music – they have concentrated heavily on major gifts for news. As we all watched current and prospective donors engage in the conversation around classical music, the lightbulb went off in everyone's heads: there's serious giving potential for our classical service! It really was a eureka moment. One prospective donor in particular got very excited about a potential contest for young composers – we'll see where that leads. Even though we knew from our newsroom's experience that it can be powerful to involve donors and Board members in these kinds of community discussions, we really needed to see it with our own eyes on the classical side.

- **Was there skepticism beforehand? Did that change as a result of the gathering?**

While we all believed the conversations would be helpful for the station, there definitely was skepticism going into these meetings (Anita counts herself as chief skeptic) about whether the classical community would be receptive. Would we be seen as "late to the party" – or worse, as gatecrashers? Would they think we were trying to take over?

But by the time we left, there really was no doubt in any of our minds that this is something we should do regularly. The insights we gained were genuinely valuable and our convening role was truly appreciated. (And the costs were so minimal.)

In addition to the new ongoing conversation about development potential, for the first time we are in serious discussion about recruiting a new Board member from the classical music community. That is a huge step in recognizing the power of classical music within our larger organization.



Some members of Nashville Public Radio’s Classical91 team that attended the first convening. Pictured from left to right: Will Griffin, Ed Lambert, Carl Pedersen, Kara McLeland, and Nina Cardona.

Looking Ahead

- **What will you change for future meetings, if anything?**

No real changes are planned. The format worked well with Nina leading off the discussion by explaining what is happening with 91Classical, describing our vision, and expressing our desire for greater communication and collaboration with other institutions. Both conversations were lively even as they went in slightly different directions because of the different set of attendees. Since we’ll have new invitees in 2018 we think we can continue to get plenty of mileage out of this same structure.

- **What are immediate next steps?**

We are now strategizing for 2018 meetings, this time with our Development department in the lead on researching the invitee list. We have barely scratched the surface of those “[concentric circles](#),” so we have lots of possibilities.

- **How will you set goals and evaluate success for the effort as you move forward?**

From a music staff perspective, success will be evaluated based on whether we get the quality of feedback we need to continue the process and have it evolve. And from a development standpoint, success will mean that the attendees see what we've been able to accomplish with the classical station's purchase and that they consider supporting the Capital Campaign, as well as supporting the station generally (if they don't already).

- **What advice or encouragement do you have for other classical stations considering community convening?**

Fear not! They've been truly engaging sessions. However, we repeat the following because we believe it was key and helped us get our sea legs in this first effort: we deliberately reached out to groups and individuals who were not looking to us right now for promotion. This really helped keep the conversations productive.



CASE STUDY: Capital Public Radio, Sacramento

Brainstorming: Convening Groups to Envision the Classical Future

A Report from Jesikah Maria Ross, Senior Community Engagement Strategist and Paul Conley, Managing Editor, Music and Arts jmross@capradio.org paul.conley@capradio.org

Like our colleagues in Nashville, we had great success last year with the one-on-one conversations we conducted as part of the *Classical Station as Community Connector* working group. We're now looking to convene groups of community members to deepen our current relationships, connect with new audiences and potential allies, and – maybe most important – build community among people who often aren't in the same room.

We're in the early brainstorming stages right now. We want to identify ways that we can work with the classical community on an enterprise that benefits the community at large as well as the station. One idea we're exploring is structured conversations around envisioning a stronger, more vital role for classical music in Sacramento's future.

As we think about the “concentric circles” identified in the CMR working group, we're considering two different approaches on the invitee list. We might tap into a single circle that's invested in the future of classical music (for example, music educators) to convene as many of them as possible, hear their ideas for a stronger classical future in Sacramento that we may be able to help facilitate, and forge stronger relationships among the attendees.

A different strategy would be to invite members from as many circles as we can, whether we have relationships or not, and discuss our community's classical ecosystem and its future together. It would be instructive and fascinating to hear the various perspectives from educators, arts presenters, business owners, public officials, musicians, and even audience members all in the same conversation.

The key will be to have small break-out groups so that people really have the chance to meet, connect and share their visions. For instance, if we convened a group of 20 - 50 we would break them into tables of 5 or 6 people. We've discovered on the news side that the smaller the group, the more time there is to dig into details or explore ideas with follow-up questions. If part of the goal is to get to details, smaller is better.

At CapRadio, we not only invest a lot of time up-front in curating who is in the room at these convenings, we also typically assign seats so that we can hardwire into table discussions a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds. We've found that the range of views and experiences not only makes for rich conversations; it also creates much-needed opportunities for people to hear one another across silos and build a shared vision or common cause.

Here's how we might sequence the conversation we have in mind:

1. First, a prompt: "Let's do a thought experiment. We want you to imagine your ideal classical music scene in Sacramento 20 years from now. The scene that would inspire and energize you. Who would be in that scene? What would they be doing? Where would they be doing it? What would be happening?"
2. After people have a few minutes to write ideas, we would pair them up to share what they wrote, circling key words or phrases that stand out because they are exciting, innovative, or especially evocative.
3. Then, we'd go around and have people report out the circled words and phrases, writing them down on a flip chart for all to see (and get excited about). Then they'd use the list to have a deeper conversation that will yield useful information for our goals:
 - What's missing? What else would you add?
 - What's needed to make some of these ideas happen?
 - Which three ideas would you prioritize in the next year? (That question is key to moving the conversation forward as well as identifying next steps.)

It's important to note that people don't easily go to the "imaginary" and "what if, big picture, blue sky vision" space. We may need to keep setting the scene by reiterating phrases like "Everything created must first be imagined, and that goes for the future of our communities. Today we are crowd-sourcing a vision of Sacramento shaped by the power of classical music."

The exciting thing about these kinds of visualization exercises that tap into the community "brain trust" is that we've found they usually generate multiple outcomes: feedback and appreciation for the station, which lead to new alliances and strengthened networks, which lead to funding. So our goal with these classical convenings would be to design the gatherings from the get-go to generate a range of outcomes for the station . . . *and* for the people who show up.

We've learned a lot about the importance of reciprocity. If we are asking for people's time, wisdom and expertise, we need to give them something as well. Creating that space for stakeholders who usually don't come together to build community is often perceived as a valuable gift. (Providing food and swag is also appreciated!)



RESOURCES

The following guidelines were used by Nashville's 91Classical in their community conversations. Excerpted from the [Classical Station as Community Connector](#) report (June 2017).

Constituency Groups for Classical Radio

Concentric circles of influence and interest, working from the station outwards:

- Board and station staff
- Classical music community: *performing arts executives, music collectives, individual musicians*
- Music educators and school administrators: *K-12, higher education, private studios*
- Other arts and cultural organization leaders: *arts councils and commissions, other music genres, theater, dance, spoken word, visual arts, creative writing, public libraries and museums*
- Philanthropic community: *local and regional foundations, 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

(Developed by Paul Conley, Capital Public Radio)

Guiding Questions for Discussion

“One approach...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?’”

(Recommended by Brian Newhouse, Minnesota Public Radio, and Bill Lueth, KUSC/KDFC)

A more detailed structure:

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 out-of-the-box ideas for making classical music useful and relevant in the community?"

(Developed by Paul Conley, Capital Public Radio, and George Preston, KCME)



About the Report

Both within the local arts ecosystem and beyond it, public radio classical music stations seek opportunities to step into more visible roles, where their civic value is recognized as a force for good by classical music lovers and non-lovers alike. Convening the Classical Community, the subject of this report, is one of three recommended community engagement activities that align with the core services, strategies, and sustainability of a public media classical music station.

The initial work in this area was carried out by a working group of station leaders, including: Jennifer Ridewood, KING Seattle (chair); Joe Barr and Paul Conley, Capital Public Radio, Sacramento; George Preston, KCME, Colorado Springs; Bill Lueth, KDFC, San Francisco; Brian Newhouse, KSJN, St Paul; Anita Bugg and Nina Cardona, WFCL Nashville, and Deb Acklin, WQED, Pittsburgh. The working group was supported by Wende Persons, former Managing Director of Classical Music Rising.

Deborah Lein, author of this report, consults with public media organizations and other nonprofits on strategy, project management, and convening. Deborah was previously Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Greater Public, public media's fundraising and marketing support organization.

Classical Music Rising is a project of the Station Resource Group, supported by participating stations and a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Terry Clifford and Tom Thomas SRG co-CEOs, and the CMR Steering Committee members Matt Abramovitz and Shannon Connolly, New York Public Radio, Brenda Barnes, KING, Nick Kereakos, MPR, and Judy McAlpine, KUSC, provided overall leadership for the initiative.

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