

Sticks and Drones

Two conductors, on the beat.

March 10, 2008

The \$50,000 Question!



I mentioned in my [\\$50,000 Cupcakes](#) post that I would suggest a way to spend "no strings attached" money that might actually benefit an orchestra. I believe that the money should somehow benefit the audience profoundly and directly, but more importantly the children of those in the audience, with programs that have a chance of sustainability. By spending money this way, in the end it benefits all involved. Let's go shopping.....in Texas!

Our audiences are our lifeblood, but we so often put music on a pedestal, when we should be putting our audiences on a pedestal with music, and making sure there is a personal connection. Many of these so called innovative ideas focus on promotion over retention, or how we can sell more tickets instead of how to bring value to people's lives. There's an orchestra in Texas that gets it, and more people should know about them and consider following their lead.

The [River Oaks Chamber Orchestra](#) based in Houston is a trailblazer in the orchestra world. From their [welcome page](#), here is the introduction by Alecia Lawyer, Executive Director, Founder and Principal Oboist:

Welcome to the world of classical music.

I founded this orchestra to introduce to you the 40 most engaging and talented musicians I have met in my career. We have a unique approach and encourage you to experience classical music the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra way:

- Surprise pieces not listed in the program.
- "Inside the orchestra", chances for four audience members, through a raffle, to sit in on one of the pieces on the program.
- Commissioned and newly-penned pieces programmed amid classics for the audience to know the present and future Mozarts and Bachs.
- Take 5 instead of an intermission where ROCO musicians clip on nametags and come out to say hello. Our trumpets perform an original fanfare to call us back to the stage.
- Inviting program playbill with pronunciation guides to composers' names, interviews with performers, word finds, a kid's page, bullet-point take-home facts and a series called Field Notes - true stories from the lives of classical musicians.
- Art installations at the "mix and mingle" reception after the concert next door in Summers Hall featuring one artist each concert to collaborate with other art forms.
- [Roco Rooters](#) music education/childcare program for kids 10 and under that runs in tandem with and after the concert to allow parents an evening out (aka: Date Night).
- Other ROCO performances: [ROCOco](#) (ROCO company), a music tasting in wine bars; [Roco Salon](#), chamber music performances in your home; [Upstairs with ROCO](#), chamber music performances in our office for donors



All of it is great and is a genuine and sincere attempt to address many issues that continue to plague the concert experience elsewhere. One thing in particular though that really struck me, is their [ROCO Rooters program](#) (same link as above). This is not just childcare. There is true

interaction by having the children between the ages of 5-10 listen to the first work (and be personally welcomed), then all children participate in a music education program, followed by pizza and movies (I think some adults might be interested in doing the program!). In addition, since the concerts begin at 5pm or 5:30pm, and the Rooter program lasts until 9:30pm, it allows the parents to then go out after the concert and pick their children up later. There is so much thought behind this, even with the fee, which is around the same cost (or less) as regular babysitting. I would think it could work with concerts that start at 7:30pm or 8pm also, as the parents would be able to then do something before each concert.

Their performance location obviously must lend itself to such a program. With our performance hall and so many others I suspect, there would need to be at the very least a reconfiguration of space, but for many some major remodeling. I guess a nearby location could be sought but then that would take away the opportunity for the children to see the first part of the concert. Identifying the right people to be in charge of the program would also be of paramount importance.

If I had \$50,000 and it had to be spent on innovation and/or audience development, it would be to remodel space in our hall (it's not ours so I would have to ask first!), train care givers/educators buy equipment and materials etc... and start a similar program, I would even provide cupcakes...free!!!

Major kudos to Alecia and the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra for taking the lead!