

Value ADDED

by Orli Shaham

SYMPHONY

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2005

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Have you ever felt at a loss as to how to convince a guest artist to do something extra for your orchestra? Frustrated by the inability to schedule one little special event with that prima donna? Or, worse yet, embarrassed and confused about why the one evening with your major donors that the artist did agree to turned out to be a big flop? Well, you've come to the right place (I hope), because it turns out this is a problem that artists think about, too.

Last season I spent an incredibly satisfying week working with the San Francisco Symphony, whose artistic administrator, Gregg Gleasner, is a wonderful colleague and friend. Gregg asked me (through my manager at ICM, who always encourages me to say "yes") to do all sorts of things besides playing my "concerto" with the orchestra, Leonard Bernstein's "The Age of Anxiety." In the course of the week's residency, I did a play/talk about the Bernstein work for a major-donor dinner, a half-hour radio interview, some of the usual small PR requests, CD signings, a chamber-music concert with members of the orchestra (which is a personal favorite "extra" of mine as well as often a great morale boost for all involved), and of course, four performances with the orchestra!

How much did all this cost the San Francisco Symphony? Only my usual fee plus enough to cover the hotel for the extra days I was there. Why did I agree to do so much? Because Gregg asked.

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J. Henry Fair

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Now, I know this sounds simplistic, but instead, think of it as *simple*: He asked early; he gave me the possibility to say "no" to some things while saying yes to others; he didn't insist; and he didn't get insulted if I said I was too busy.

I know what orchestras have to face in the present climate. I am aware how my own livelihood and how the fate of music is tied into all of this. I am delighted to help with existing audience members as well as finding new ones. And I am certain most of my colleagues agree! The caveat, of course, is that nobody likes to feel used. This means that there must be the possibility to occasionally say "no" without feeling that this permanently jeopardizes a relationship.

It may seem odd to think of guest artists as such, but we are temporary employees of your organization. We are also temporary employees of your community, who can connect with your audience in unique ways. We are even temporary members of your orchestra, who can help make the musicians feel special.

A couple of seasons ago, I spent a week in Lafayette, La., doing a residency through the local performing arts series. I played an orchestral concert with the International Sejong Soloists, with whom I was touring at the time. I also played

a solo recital, did open rehearsals, appeared on radio shows and at receptions, ate crawfish with donors, performed in a junior high school piano class and for a high school assembly, gave at master class at the University of Louisiana, and attended a meeting of something called Girl Power where I represented a career in music to a group of less fortunate young teens with ambition! Plus something I rarely do—I stayed at a donor’s house the entire time.

Now, this was an extreme week. If every tour stop was like this one, I’d never have a chance to learn new repertoire, practice, or see my family. But the whole week was well worth it. As one of the presenters said to me, “It may feel like you’ve been playing in the desert this week, but just remember you’re the annual rainfall.” You’d have to be pretty hard-hearted not to be touched by that.

Dos and Don’ts

When does this kind of ancillary activity *not* work? It’s all in the planning. Good communication with your guest artist and his or her manager is the key.

Asking at the last minute is always a mistake, particularly when you are asking for any type of additional performance. Instead, ask early—perhaps as soon as you book the date—and remind the artist, through his or her manager, a few weeks in advance.

Be flexible with your requests. An artist may not want to do a pre-concert talk on a day that they’re preparing to go onstage with the Rachmaninoff Third (warming up is important for the presenters as well as the performers!), but that doesn’t mean they won’t agree to do anything at all. Don’t be discouraged if they say no. Find something else that does work.

Any activities that guests do for you must be part of your overall plan. You must have a system in place—or an idea of what you’d like the system to be, if this is the first time—and make us aware of your expectations. For example, if this is the first meeting of your new club for twentysomethings, make sure you communicate your objectives for this club to your artist. Any relevant background on how the club came to be will also help us work toward your goals. If you have had past experiences in similar contexts which have failed, tell us why. Nobody knows your audience as well as you do, and I think you’ll find we’re quite willing to fine-tune what we offer to suit your needs. We know better than anyone that each community is distinct.

Ask your guest artists whether they have experience doing a particular kind of activity, and whether that experience has taught them how to make the activity as worthwhile as possible. For example, I’ve done many CD signings, with various settings and timetables. In my experience these work best right after the concerto, when enthusiasm for the performance and the guest artist is running high. Unless the concerto is the closer, CD signings are not useful for the audience or for the artists at the end of an orchestral concert, when the audience is thinking about the symphony they’ve just heard and about getting home. I am happy to do them at intermission, and even happier when we need to tell a few people at the end to come back after the performance if we’ve run out of time! (I might even have a few suggestions about where to set them up.)

Are you thinking that these are the sorts of additional activities only young artist would be willing to do? I think my colleagues would surprise you. There is not necessarily a cut-off age for those of us willing to help out. We're all in the same boat, hoping not to spring too many leaks, and often the most experienced artists are also the best sailors!

Too often artists end up doing a kind of "surgical-strike" appearance, where we parachute in for the rehearsals and are air-lifted out immediately following the final performance. Sometimes this is for the best. But all too often, we feel like our time, and everyone else's, could be put to better use. I can't tell you how frustrated I am to have a day off in between performances with no worthwhile event planned! So plan with us: Ask early, be flexible, and keep the lines of communication open. In this way, audiences, orchestras, and guest artists will all benefit.

Pianist Orli Shaham appears regularly as a soloist with America's most prominent orchestras. An Avery Fisher Career Grant recipient and a former artist-in-residence at National Public Radio, she has taught music literature at her alma mater, Columbia University. She lives in New York.