

*Coming to America:
Immigrant Sounds/Immigrant Voices*
Case Study: American Composers Orchestra

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PREFACE

Coming to America: Immigrant Sounds/Immigrant Voices was a project of the American Composers Orchestra (ACO) exploring civic dialogue within the field of classical orchestral music. Spanning ACO's 2000-2001 season, it centered around chamber music concerts and informances at schools and cultural centers in New York City that brought immigrant and refugee composers and their music into communities, and immigrant and refugee communities into concert settings. The project sought to link through dialogue the music of four immigrant or refugee composers to questions central to immigration and cultural adaptation in American society. How do composers who are new Americans play a role in this drama? How do they contribute to, and how are they affected by, changing American culture and by larger questions of identity and access? How might their styles and music stimulate others to consider and discuss issues of immigration?

The impetus for the project, however, had little to do with an institutional interest to either engage in civic dialogue or in issues facing New York City's immigrant communities. Instead, the project originated from ACO's ongoing efforts to expand its audience base at its Carnegie Hall performances. ACO had initiated *Coming to America* as one of a series of thematic programs aimed at involving people outside its core audience. When ACO learned that Animating Democracy was funding cultural projects that could stimulate civic dialogue, it saw this as an opportunity to connect with new audiences even beyond its original aim and to experiment with civic dialogue—a practice new to the orchestra.

As a result, civic dialogue was overlaid onto a preexisting audience development program. But the adaptation of one type of programming to serve new goals made for an uneasy mix in a project with virtually no time to plan for the combined goals. Animating Democracy provided ACO with a sharper focus for identifying target communities of recent immigrants and refugees of low economic status in New York City. But as the project unfolded, ACO's expectations that dialogue would occur around issues of public policy, U.S. immigration law, and the refugee experience were not born out given where this audience was at.

Virtually all of the key learning from the project resulted from the many unforeseen difficulties that arose, and from the programmatic and organizational conversations and reassessments that these difficulties sparked. A particular value of *Coming to America*, then, is the light that it shed—and that programmers allowed it to shed—on ACO as an organization. The project came to illuminate ACO's mission and role within the civic sphere, and the challenges—especially in

terms of clarity of purpose and genuine community engagement and knowledge—that are intrinsic not just to arts-based dialogue work but to processes of creating active, sustaining culture.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Artistic and Institutional Context

American Composers Orchestra (ACO) distinguishes itself as the only orchestra dedicated to the performance, preservation, and promulgation of music by “American composers.” ACO was founded in 1977 to create a forum for living, U.S.-based composers because no other orchestras were providing these opportunities. ACO’s track record is impressive. It includes a commissioning program that has generated more new U.S. symphonic works since its commencement than any other (two works received the Pulitzer Prize); an ongoing professional development series for emerging composers; *Sonidos de la Americas*—a series of festivals celebrating Latin American composers; and ASCAP’s Award for Adventurous Programming.

But ACO’s unique artistic value has not shielded the organization from many of the challenges facing other working orchestras in the U.S. today: a small core audience and limited relationships with audiences beyond that core; an abstract art form whose participants—musicians, audiences—value that it is perceived as an anachronism in the wider world; a lack of training for artists in ways to effectively communicate with people other than in a formal performance or music conservatory setting, to facilitate audiences’ experience of music, and to connect the music to broader cultural contexts.

As ACO has debated these issues among staff, musicians, board, and artistic leadership over the past several years, the orchestra has made a deliberate effort to extend its institutional and artistic outreach by providing a range of thematic programs with related contextual, educational, and interactive activities. These are designed to involve people from outside its core audience. *Coming to America: Immigrant Sounds/Immigrant Voices* reflected this audience development effort.

An Opportunity for Civic Dialogue

Planning for *Coming to America* began in 1998 when Carnegie Hall invited ACO to develop programs for its millennium celebrations. The idea was developed and curated by music director Dennis Russell Davies. Four composers were selected by Davies to take part: Lukas Foss, German-American composer, conductor, and pianist; Jin Hi Kim, Korean-American composer and *komungo* (ancient Korean zither) performer; Tania Leon, Cuban-American composer and conductor; and P.Q. Phan, Vietnamese-American composer and educator. Implementation followed the orchestra’s usual planning pattern, with concert programs and repertoire largely determined first. After the concept was confirmed, ACO staff considered what types of contextual and educational activities would be suitable and, after that, who the potential targeted audiences should be.

More than a year after the curatorial development, ACO learned about Animating Democracy and saw an opportunity to relate the program more specifically to issues of immigration. Staff began to steer development of contextual programs toward the ideas and practices of civic dialogue, an endeavor new to ACO. Initially ACO envisioned project audiences as anyone interested in how culture shapes art. But Animating Democracy guidelines and experiences lead them to narrow their focus to immigrants and refugees from primarily lower income

neighborhoods. They felt these audiences would have the most natural cultural and experiential connections to the featured composers' lives and to immigrant concerns.

Having identified its dialogue audiences, ACO expanded project goals accordingly. These were to:

- Place American concert music in a contemporary context for discussion of issues surrounding immigration, utilizing the immigrant composer's experience as a catalyst and point of departure;
- Expose adults from communities of color, especially those not currently served by existing educational programs, to contemporary concert music and to a diversity of composers who write that music;
- Help audiences understand the process of composing and to build more varied, open-minded, and eclectic audiences for future programming;
- Create a model for orchestras and other concert organizations for the presentation of music in the contemporary political-social context;
- Build alliances with collaborating organizations outside the music field; and
- Build ACO's capacity for thematic programming, community partnerships, and civic dialogue.

Dialogue opportunities were added to the four types of events envisaged for the project:

Informances: performance/dialogue events, with professional dialogue facilitation in grassroots community settings

In-School Workshops: through the Music Factory, ACO's education program, interactive sessions with immigrant and refugee composers in two New York City high schools.

Concerts: by the American Composers Orchestra at the Japan Society, Joe's Pub, and Carnegie Hall—the last featuring a facilitated post-concert dialogue.

Forum: a discussion, at the New York Historical Society, of aesthetic and social issues raised by interactions of disparate musical cultures, featuring the composers, social scientists, and immigration scholars.

Finally, with the added focus on civic dialogue, ACO recognized the importance of having a partner familiar with immigration and refugee issues. Organizers invited the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) to provide outreach to various immigrant communities among its constituencies and to help define social issues, while ACO would deal with the artistic ones.

ACO completed its Animating Democracy proposal in the spring and, in the summer of 2000, now two years after the idea was originally conceived, ACO learned of its acceptance as part of Animating Democracy's Lab.

IMPLEMENTING COMING TO AMERICA

From Opportunity to Reality

Since *Coming to America* was slated to begin in fall 2000, ACO staff had to hit the ground running. The fall segment of the program featuring P.Q. Phan was set to go as Animating Democracy

funding deliberations were taking place. It would allow for some testing of civic dialogue formats, but mostly it would provide a chance to consider planning possibilities for dialogues related to winter and spring 2001 programs.

Unfortunately, NYANA informed ACO that it was no longer interested in the project due to shifting priorities and withdrew. NYANA, however, had led ACO to St. Rita's Center for Refugee and Immigration Services in the South Bronx. St. Rita's is a social service center providing English classes and advocacy for new arrivals to the U.S. ACO saw St. Rita's as providing a test setting in which to try out the informance format of combining music and dialogue.

At St. Rita's, two groups of about forty adults each attended sessions scheduled as part of their English as a Second Language classes. The groups included refugees from Vietnam, Albania, China, Kosovo, and Iran; and immigrants from Ecuador, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, and India. ACO pianist Peter Basquin played Phan's *Banana Trumpet Games*, recalling the composer's youth in Vietnam, and a CD of Phan's chamber work *Beyond the Mountain* was played. Phan then spoke about the music and his struggles as a refugee and a professional in America. Although attendees responded little, they were clearly riveted by what Phan had to say and visibly enjoyed the live performance. St. Rita's staff later suggested that some attendees would have been embarrassed to speak poor English in front of individuals of other ethnic groups.

While P.Q. Phan turned out to be adept in his ability to communicate, inspire, and articulate links between his music and his experience as an Asian and a new American, difficulties surfaced. Not enough time was spent forming a relationship with St. Rita's Center in order to better understand their constituencies and needs. Scheduling back-to-back informances in one morning with two groups of adult English classes didn't allow enough time for dialogue. ACO had not arranged for a dialogue specialist to help facilitate the conversation, and the challenges language would place on communication at informances were underestimated. ACO evaluated the experience and decided to try other venues and audiences for the rest of the project.

Getting Partners and Composers on Board

With the intensive task ahead to design the spring programs, ACO hired Ted Wiprud as project coordinator. Wiprud, a composer, educator, and former head of National Composer Residency Programs at Meet the Composer, also served as Director of ACO's Music Factory arts-in-education program. ACO hired Tracy Fredericks as the dialogue facilitator after the St. Rita's informances. Fredericks brought extensive dialogue facilitation experience to the project and had formerly worked with the National Conference for Community and Justice, an organization devoted to civic dialogue on inter-group relations.

Wiprud immediately set out to identify partner organizations where informances, satellite performances, and pre- and post-performance discussions could take place. He used the following criteria to develop a final list of partners and host sites:

- Whether they provided significant services to either homogeneous or diverse immigrant and/or refugee populations;
- Preparedness to partner with ACO in a proactive manner—to identify relevant issues, schedule events most appropriate for their community, and market the event vigorously among their constituents; and
- Capacity to present small-scale performance with discussion.

In December 2000, four partnering organizations that found resonance between the project ideas and their own individual goals were selected for the informance component of *Coming to America*:

Newcomers High School, a partner in ACO’s Music Factory, is a public high school for new arrivals to Queens who have been in the U.S. for one year or less, preparing them for mainstream schools. The entire parent population is composed of immigrants and/or refugees from all over the world. Themes relevant to these students and families and that had potential connection to the project’s composers included:

- Unfulfilled promises in the “land of dreams”
- School’s responsibility to fulfill the dream of education
- Maintaining a sense of personal identity and value no matter who you are or where you are from
- Difficulty of being lumped in the same societal category in the U.S. with other immigrants when you are very different
- Separation from one’s culture and support system

Hostos Community College Center for Arts and Culture, a partner with ACO in its Sonidos de las Americas Festivals during the late 1990s, is a bilingual two-year college where 85 percent of the student body is Latino; the largest group within this being Dominican, and with increasing numbers of students from Mexico and from Central and South America. Hostos is a two-year degree granting college whose students complete school in three years because they are also frequently working full time and raising families. They targeted students in music appreciation, visual arts, Latin American studies, and social sciences for Tania Leon’s part of *Coming to America*.

Henry Street Settlement, a historical social service and arts center and a new partner to ACO, has for nearly one hundred years served the evolving immigrant populations of New York’s Lower East Side, currently three widely diverse communities: Latino, Asian, and Jewish. Henry Street Settlement wanted to connect the project to its social services department and hold focus groups with leaders within these three different ethnic communities prior to the informance in order to shape the dialogue at the informance. However, the staff ran out of time to provide the project with this level of support.

Lehman College, is a four-year college serving students from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, including many graduates of Hostos Community College. It is also a former partner with ACO on the Sonidos festivals, serving a largely Latino population, including many immigrants. They have a public performance series/class in place that matches ACO’s “informance” requirements.

Planning with each venue took place in January 2001, with the first activities beginning in February and the culminating performance at Carnegie Hall following soon after in March. It became apparent that planning for dialogue required more time (time to understand connections between the issues and group and individual experiences and perceptions) than planning for the typical informance or lecture-demonstration. In addition, in this “arranged marriage” of civic dialogue and composers’ work, the western classical music field had not prepared ACO for what it needed to know about the impact of race and class on participants’ experiences in a dialogue process.

As planning progressed, ACO's executive director Michael Geller expressed his hope that the composers would be willing to raise issues about their own immigrant experiences in order to help audiences identify with the project's goals, break through the formality of the informance setting, and find ways to stimulate sharing about some of the project's broader civic themes. He hoped audiences would help decode emotional and social messages in abstract music. Geller was concerned, though, that the composers might have difficulty relating to the intent of the project and participating fully in it. Experience taught Geller that composers, generally, are reluctant to describe their work in words. They can be disinclined to help an audience translate their responses to music from the personal realm into another, such as the intellectual, or that of civic issue. In fact, the composers' varying levels of connection to, or interest in, addressing issues of immigration did pose significant challenges.

Fredericks was as concerned about the project's successes as Geller but for different reasons. She did not believe she would be able to facilitate dialogue integrating the personal and public policy implications of immigration and transculturation in the U.S. because the project's activities were not structured to establish conditions for trust and exchange about such intimate and difficult issues. Repeat exposures with the same, small group of people over a period of time are essential to any successful dialogue process. Each *Coming to America* activity took place with different audiences of varying sizes and a different lead artist. Most importantly, ACO staff expectations were not grounded in any experience of facilitating community interaction around difficult issues while Fredericks' experience and training taught her it would be inappropriate to push audiences and artists into close examinations of difficult topics, such as the reasons they had become refugees or their experiences of U.S. racism, when the project did not provide the time to safely consider these issues outside of the performance or lecture-demonstration setting. With these hopes and conflicting views among the project's key organizers and artists, the series of informances was launched.

Informances as Occasions for Civic Dialogue

Informances were the primary format for dialogue and the first point of contact for *Coming to America's* intended audiences at each host site. Each informance featured ACO musicians in a live performance of a chamber work by the composer in attendance. The featured composer described his or her experience as an immigrant or refugee and how that experience is reflected in the music. Fredericks facilitated dialogue between the composer and the audience (with interpreters, when needed) to draw out audience experiences and invite reflection and discussion. Sign-up sheets were available at each event for free tickets to hear the culminating orchestra concert of works by all four *Coming to America* composers at Carnegie Hall. (See sidebar for a snapshot of each informance.)

At each informance, participants found several questions, in Spanish and English, in their printed programs. (It proved unfeasible to create versions in Mandarin, Urdu, or other languages.) The format and questions were designed based on communication between Wiprud and composers about how their immigrant or refugee experiences were or were not reflected in the music played at the informance. Wiprud found that the composers and partners wanted to explore the personal more than the public policy realms of immigration. The questions, which evolved included: What does it mean to be an American? Which is more important—to maintain your home culture or to become part of American culture? Do people sometimes expect certain things from you because of where you come from? Is America everything you ever dreamed it would be? Did (title of music) say something about your experience in America? Fredericks referred to these to help spark discussion.

Questions were also created for a feedback form for evaluating the events. These appeared on a program insert which participants were asked to complete and return. Return rates varied, depending on how clear the instructions and drop-off spots were, and on the inclination of the participants. The survey questions included: Please tell us what you thought about the concert and dialogue. What do you think was the most important thing anyone said? Did (title of music) say something to you about *coming to America*? Were there any topics or issues that weren't discussed that you wish were included?

Informances proved to be a work in progress and a learning ground for ACO staff. As ACO and Fredericks did each one, they evaluated its effectiveness and tried to adapt the format to address perceived problems or shortcomings. Wiprud, Geller, and Fredericks experimented with the balance and sequence of music, presentation, and dialogue, looking for ways to trigger dialogue that went beyond personal story exchange to consider the broader public dimensions of immigration issues. The team sometimes disagreed with the focus of questions and have differing perceptions of who ultimately most influenced the direction taken.

A key question that repeatedly emerged was, can or should the focus of dialogue be preconceived, or should it follow what is on the minds of the participants? The questions framed to keep discussion focused on immigration issues sometimes seemed to get in the way of participants' interests in the music, the composer, or their own experiences. Finding the appropriate balance was difficult knowing that, except for Newcomers High School, ACO and Fredericks had only one opportunity with each group.

Language presented a greater challenge than ACO anticipated, and the dialogues were easier, if not more meaningful, with the more homogeneous groups. Although interpreters were scheduled, they did not always show up. Artists did not always remember to pause for the interpreters or to speak in shorter, simpler sentences. As anticipated, artists' interest in participating in dialogue was uneven. Informances moved from site to site, involving different audiences and artists each time and larger groups than the dialogue field would encourage. Even at Newcomer's High School, the only site with three informances, the audience largely changed with each informance (although a core half dozen people with strong interest continued through the series). This made it difficult to sustain or extend dialogue with each successive session.

Despite these difficulties and less than optimal conditions, promising glimpses of engagement and exchange could be seen and the quality of audience engagement with the music was outstanding at each event. Of the four composers, P.Q. Phan most clearly demonstrated an interest in testing deeper issues with Fredericks and Wiprud. Phan remarked: "Deep down, I must be true to myself. Who am I, a Vietnamese or an American? Perhaps, I am both! If I were Caucasian, that question would not be needed. However, my hair is black, my skin is dark, and my nose is flat, so my music should be somewhat similar. Frankly speaking, if I didn't think or care so much about my immigration status, then none of this mess would happen! But I have a hard time separating music from social issues. After all, that is what my music is all about." Unfortunately, Phan's schedule allowed him to do only one informance in the spring set of programs.

Tania Leon and Jin Hi Kim, while somewhat open to connecting their work to the themes of the project, were still reluctant to take on issues as described by ACO. Said Leon: "The term 'immigrant' is just another way of labeling people, and though I am proud of my roots and my adopted homeland, I have been placed in so many categories in my life that I am looking forward to the day I am introduced only as 'Tania Leon'." Kim's view was a more pragmatic one. "There will always be difficulties for a musician everywhere, so I don't talk about difficulty too much! For me, I have to be where I can be supported in my music. Compared to Korea, the United States has a much more supportive system for creative music. . . . If people notice I'm Korean, it

doesn't bother me at all." The strongest resistance was expressed by Lukas Foss, who insisted that he was not an immigrant at all, just a New Yorker who happened to have also lived in Berlin and Paris at other points in his life.

INFORMANCE SNAPSHOTS

Newcomer's High School

The first of three informances at Newcomer's High School was held in a music room immediately following an evening PTA meeting. The event was held at dinnertime, so ACO provided a light buffet. The room eventually overflowed with about fifty parents and a few students. ACO concertmaster (violinist) Eva Gruesser and pianist Peter Basquin played Lukas Foss's *Three American Pieces*, composed in 1944 at the age of twenty-two during his first years in America. Using prepared questions, facilitator Tracy Fredericks talked with the composer about his experience as a refugee from Nazism, despite Foss's sense that, having arrived so long ago, he is no longer an immigrant at all. Several attendees offered observations about their own experiences, with two students and a faculty member serving as interpreters.

Two weeks later, the second informance took place at Newcomer's High School. This time it was not tied to a PTA event, and attendance was down to about twenty, including several who had attended the first one. Tracy Fredericks and composer Jin-Hi Kim met the day before to discuss the event and changed the format. It took place in the auditorium, but this time on the stage, with chairs in a large circle. Light food was again provided. Fredericks began by inviting attendees to discuss what can one save from one's culture and what must one change? She introduced Kim, and the two talked about her music and ways it mixes Korean and Western cultures. Then Kim (on komungo) and the ACO String Quartet played her work *Nong Rock*, combining Korean philosophy and musical language with Western instruments. Many commented that the music made them feel peaceful and contemplative. Discussion focused on the "American dream" and what it can mean to different people. At this gathering, ACO was gratified that discussion moved a step beyond individual stories, placing them in a broader concept of the American dream.

Music teacher Jordan Sandke finds that ACO's Music Factory program and *Coming to America* both helps students become familiar with instruments and music as a way to interpret their feelings and improve language learning by encouraging them to communicate in English. *Coming to America* offered the added value of providing students with opportunities to talk about their own experiences through interaction with immigrant and refugee composers as well as providing the school with activities to engage parents.

Lehman College

The fourth informance at Lehman College was part of a weekly series of midday performances, attended by many as a for-credit course. An audience of over one hundred from five classes came to hear P.Q. Phan. The classes included the concert class, American History and Immigration, General Humanities, and two English as a Second Language classes. P.Q. Phan and Fredericks sat on the edge of the stage, and Phan talked about his experiences and what motivates his music. A trio from ACO played Phan's composition, *Unexpected Desire*. A lively dialogue about racism, identity, homeland, self-expression, bi-culturalism, violence, and cultural absorption followed involving individuals who had immigrated from various countries, with musicians taking part as well. About twenty-five people stayed on for an additional forty-five minutes of dialogue. At Lehman College, it was helpful that students were studying issues and had a common facility with English.

INFORMANCES (cont.)

Hostos Community College

The fifth informance was a free-standing event at the heavily Latino Hostos Community College. Beforehand, Fredericks, Wiprud, liaisons from both Hostos and Lehman Colleges, and three students, met to identify issues important to immigrant students. The planning meeting became emotionally charged as participants shared experiences about how immigrants with high levels of education in their home countries end up with blue-collar jobs in the U.S. for different reasons such as the different accrediting expectations for lawyers. Those same students came with friends to the informance itself. They and others in a music class sat on stage with the composer and performers. Following the successful talk-music-talk format, Fredericks and Leon spoke about Leon's experience as an immigrant woman of color in the music profession; Fredericks requested comments from the audience; a duo played Leon's *De Color*, for violin and marimba, which is about a combination of different color and cultural ideas; and discussion followed. Many students asked Leon questions about her career and afterward lingered to talk with her. Clearly, her presence as a successful role model was moving to many young women there. Despite these successes, Hostos' music appreciation teacher reported back that some students found the event reinforced their impressions of classical western music as incomprehensible and inaccessible.

Henry Street Settlement

The final informance at Henry Street Settlement involved three composers in a new format. The evening comprised four musical experiences surrounding three dialogue activities. First, Jin Hi Kim played her contemplative *Nong Rock*. Tracy Fredericks talked with Kim and elicited discussion about saving things from one's own culture. Although P.Q. Phan was not in attendance, his *Banana Trumpet Games* was played. Then the audience was assigned a task: come up with one thing they do or think of to maintain their hold on their home culture. After intermission, Fredericks invited the audience's answers to the question, what do you think are the most pressing issues facing immigrants today compared with immigrants of past generations, then was joined by Tania Leon for dialogue about carrying forward in a new environment. Leon's *De Color* was played, and a final dialogue segment involved Lukas Foss about his immigration experiences in the 1930s. A dialogue was initiated about the audience's experiences, and the evening concluded with Foss's *Three American Pieces*.

The Henry Street informance, because it included three composers rather than just one, was the most production-oriented, observing a strict timetable. Dialogue was limited to fifteen-minute exchanges that aired some points of view but tended towards musicological questions. Before intermission, Fredericks asked the audience to consider the questions, what do you think are the most pressing issues facing immigrants today that are different from previous generations of immigrants? An elderly woman responded with dismay that new immigrants do not try to assimilate the way that her grandmother did, for example learning English. Although Fredericks asked the audience what they thought the reasons might be for hanging onto one's first language, with more of the music program yet to follow, there was no time to allow this conversation to play out.

CIVIC DIALOGUE IN CARNEGIE HALL

Coming to America culminated in a concert at Carnegie Hall featuring works by Kim, Leon, and Foss. (Phan's work had been featured at Carnegie Hall the previous fall.) In a first for ACO, and possibly Carnegie Hall, this formal orchestra concert was followed by a facilitated dialogue on immigration issues. Promoted to ACO's regular audience via subscription and single ticket sales and to informance participants via a free-ticket offer, this was the only dialogue designed to combine ACO's core audience and the project's dialogue audiences.

A pre-concert panel discussion was held with the three composers focusing on their experiences as immigrants and how those experiences may be heard in their music. The hope was that the panel would get people thinking about issues of immigration, encourage participation in the post-concert dialogue, and move the conversation further. As an additional effort, ACO inserted a survey in the program book quizzing the audience on factual immigration questions. Questions asked were:

- How many immigrants arrive in the United States each year? (850,000)
- Which is the largest group of immigrants coming to the U.S. in the last year? (Mexicans)
- What proportion of each year's immigrants enter the United States illegally? (1 percent)
- True or False: Immigrants are a net drain on the economy of the United States. (False: a distinct boost to the economy.)

Three different versions of the insert asked three different questions:

- What changes would you like to see in U.S. immigration laws, policies, or social climate?
- Should new immigrants focus more on maintaining their traditions and languages, or on blending in with the culture of the United States?
- What do you think are the most important issues and challenges facing immigrants today?

About 30 of these inserts were returned at intermission. Wiprud and Fredericks prepared summaries of responses and earmarked strong opinions. At the end of intermission, the audience was reminded of the dialogue to follow.

After the concert, about forty-five people came down to the front of the hall to talk. These included groups from Newcomer's High School, Hostos Community College, Lehman College, and Henry Street Settlement. People who chose to stay for the dialogue were people who had something to say. The dialogue proved lively, with commentary from both immigrant and nonimmigrant groups. Excerpts from survey forms provided good fodder for discussion. Despite the distance created by the imposing stage, Fredericks kept the dialogue moving and involving. Discussion referred in about equal parts to the music on the program (musical issues) and questions raised by survey forms or by composers on stage.

From ACO organizers' perspectives, this was one of the most successful dialogues. Geller found the surveys helped give the post performance discussion a stronger and more issue-based focus. Wiprud believes the quality of the discussion proved that Carnegie Hall's imposing space did not detract from the intimacy of the event but helped give the discussion a sense of importance.

KEY LEARNINGS

A Window on the Music

Coming to America's efforts toward civic dialogue “provided . . . a window on the music,” says Geller. It was also exemplary audience development. “Many of us involved . . . have worked to promote composer-audience interaction for a number of years,” observed Ted Wiprud. “For depth of communication and diversity of audiences reached, *Coming to America* has proven the most successful forum yet. . . .”

Audience surveys offered insights into listeners’ experiences and their reflections about “how life changes in a new land.” One young woman at Lehman College wrote, “The music that I heard on Friday reminded me of when I came here, sad without any friends. Then, through the years, I have been feeling myself part of this country. After the music goes on to the happy and emotional part, I feel happy, too. In this country, I feel my freedom more than in my country.”

Some students at Hostos Community College heard in Tania Leon’s piece, *De Color*, immigration-related ideas: “It talks about our own sorrow and being afraid to go to a country you have no idea of.” “It’s different, like the many cultures we have in America.” “It gave me a common bond with immigrants about life’s personal challenges.” Others’ impressions were more about personal challenge and achievement: “No matter where you come from you can be yourself.” “We can manipulate what we receive in life.”

Composers’ opinions differed. Kim felt the music provided an “arena” for dialogue, although it did not particularly contribute to it. Leon was unsure whether or not the music informed the dialogue. In order to have any impact, a project like this must be longer and “spread out across the nation,” she said. Phan, however, thought the music had a strong impact on listeners. “I think the non-composers have a deeper insight,” he said. “A child from Vietnam approached me and thanked me—I think it made him feel more comfortable. . . . They know they can offer something.” Phan felt strongly that, “One cannot take art out of [the] context of society.” He saw a need for “more dialogue, not just teaching. . . . Don’t warm it up and just cool it down.” Finally, he urged extending dialogue on immigration to nonimmigrant “American” audiences, as in his Midwest home, not only to immigrants and refugees.

Dialogue affected the audience’s experience of music in a way that ACO had not experienced before. This was the project’s greatest impact. The intent for dialogue informed how ACO worked to help audiences listen to the music. “People listened as if it mattered,” recalls Michael Geller. Pre- and post-performance discussion opportunities “advanced the relevancy of the music in people’s lives” by being both incredibly personal and universal; by being both inward-looking toward the art and artist, and outward looking toward the audience and the world around them.”

Participants’ experience supports the notion that music has potential to create a conducive public space for listening, reflection, and exchange. But, perhaps the greatest outcome of *Coming to America* was the organizational learning that occurred for ACO about its own position in relation to the issue, what distinguishes civic engagement from audience development, just how far orchestra institutions have to go to meet the challenges of connecting their artistic resources for civic engagement, and the role audience development can and can’t play to support genuine civic engagement.

Reorientations

ACO took a huge leap into the unknown with this project. Its willingness to venture outside the programmatic conventions of the orchestra world, and outside interpretive and educational models of audience engagement, enabled it to seize the opportunity as a learning moment. ACO organizers readily admit that they had no idea of the depth possible in a project like this or of the organizational commitment required to support it. After the project was over, Michael Geller more than once sounded the refrain, ‘We now know enough to do it the next time!’

Given the project’s initial and prevailing basis in audience development goals, it is not surprising that it succeeded most in fostering a strong connection between audiences and the music. Despite conscientious effort, though, it proved more challenging than expected for ACO to shift from an audience development orientation to a civic one. Overlaying civic dialogue goals onto a largely predetermined program, already on a fast track to implementation by the time new goals were introduced, kept the project from meeting its fullest dialogue potential.

In the limited time at hand, Wiprud talked with host institution leaders to help orient the project around actual immigrant issues. But more time was needed to effectively develop a mutuality of purpose as well as trust. The project struggled with setting clear and reasonable civic goals and expectations for dialogue. The project was never propelled by current issues within local immigrant communities or targeted populations, or linked strategically to other public discourse. Consequently, dialogue design was never sufficiently adapted to the needs of particular audiences—immigrants, refugees, or ACO’s core audience. Notably, for example, *Coming to America* broadly embraced both immigrants and refugees and assumed all were of lower economic status in the U.S., and yet the experiences, concerns, and economic classes of immigrants and refugees may be quite different. Each different setting—school, college, community center, concert hall—raised different expectations and demanded a specific understanding of who would be participating and what would be meaningful to them.

By focusing primarily on disenfranchised populations gathered and served by its community partners, ACO may have missed some important connections with immigrants and nonimmigrants well-educated in orchestral music who were already a part of its core audience. Efforts focused considerably less on integrating its core audience into the project’s dialogue activities. However, the Carnegie Hall audience proved to include several dozen people who were eager to speak up and hear others, especially composers. This suggests that dialogue-based programming should not be exclusively geared toward audiences new to the organization. It supports P.Q. Phan’s observation that dialogue on immigration needs to take place within nonimmigrant audiences as well as between immigrant/refugee audiences.

Although ACO made some attempt to inform the design of dialogues with partners, the effort was too limited and too late to enable a true partnership to emerge. Partners provided venues, promotion, and connection to audiences. But they were unable to guarantee that audience members would participate beyond any single informance or truly influence the issue focus or design of the dialogues as they would if the project had the time to incorporate more dialogue techniques. ACO learned that a project such as this requires engagement of partners at the earliest planning stage. Critical, too is a commitment to mutuality of purpose, rather than what may have seemed to partners to be a project driven mostly by ACO’s programmatic interests and timeline leading up to its scheduled Carnegie Hall performance. In each community, a longer planning period would provide opportunities to build relationships with mutual or complementary goals for collaboration, determine what forms dialogue takes in different cultures, and how dialogue might best be framed and implemented in different situations.

Finally, ACO staff now echoes what Fredericks urged early on—that arts-based dialogue, on whatever civic issue, must first begin within the cultural organization before diverse communities can be successfully engaged. A board and staff’s own understanding of, feelings about, and relationship to, the issue can significantly impact project design and implementation, for better or worse. Geller agrees that at least staff, if not also board members, and participating artists should first go through the process themselves before attempting to guide others through it, if an institution wants to maintain a serious commitment to civic dialogue in its activities.

Design Tensions and Considerations

For both ACO and Fredericks the learning curve was steep. As they earnestly tried to become versed in each other’s world, they were forced to design dialogues to keep up with impending informance and concert dates. These pressures, combined with Fredericks’ and ACO’s contrasting views of the project’s potential, led to difficulties in trust and communication among the core leaders. While ACO believed it was possible for its music-based dialogue to address the complex and sometimes painful issues raised by immigration, Fredericks did not share this view. ACO organizers recall, “Fredericks, from the outset, warned that conditions for true dialogue were lacking in most of our Informance formats—too many people, too few visits in each place, too little prior conversation with people in the communities.”

Throughout the project, the ACO team considered the source of these tensions and returned to the question, what is civic dialogue? ACO project organizers acknowledged,

We began from a position seeking opposing points of view on public policy questions related to immigration. Certainly there are many, and they are in the newspapers everyday. We hoped for some movement within each dialogue session, some sense of someone’s mind being changed, someone deciding on a course of action—something contributing to democratic grappling with difficult issues.

The topics that received most discussion, however, were personal ones. Public policy came up only tangentially; more frequently, general attitudes and realities were cited. Little blame was levied for immigrants’ challenges. In general, participants on all levels—musicians and community members alike—accepted a complex reality and discussed what the personal consequences were. And in the best moments, options appeared, often through the career examples of the composers. These were people who had mined their roots and their personal experiences for artistic expression. They demonstrated a constructive, healthy way of dealing with difficulty. They had maintained their identity and in so doing found a way to flourish personally and economically.

But, ultimately, it is clear from surveys and interviews that a valuable form of dialogue—or several forms—took place in these events. It was not what any of us had envisioned. It certainly did not conform to the “doing dialogue” movement’s expectations, nor did it impact on democratic institutions. But people were touched and inspired and opened to new possibilities on a personal level, an outcome impossible to quantify but unquestionably valuable.

Impacts and Implications

ACO organizers believe the organization has come away from *Coming to America* with new skills. All of its lessons have led to a better understanding about the resources that civically engaged arts programming takes to do well.

ACO's music director conceived of *Coming to America*, but as civic interests were introduced, the orchestra's artistic leadership and musicians did not connect to the project's civic dialogue goals and activities. At a forum with other Animating Democracy Lab peers, Geller admitted that it is not unusual for his or other orchestra artistic directors to see this work as a "distraction" from the core musical purpose. Community engagement is not seen as "absolutely a part of the mission." Getting artistic directors, musicians, and the board of directors, as well, to see how such activities can be institutionalized is "still a struggle."

From an Animating Democracy perspective, the question remains: when are activities such as the informances and the pre- and post performance Carnegie Hall discussions more than just audience development activities? Did any of the project's activities realize their dialogue intent or simply help new audiences find something personally relevant in an unfamiliar art form? As a first attempt at delving into the civic dialogue realm, the project's challenges helped ACO begin to understand Animating Democracy's intent more than it provided strong illustrations of how art and civic dialogue are interrelated. Just as dialogue demands a slow and measured process, this single experiment is too little in too short a time frame to draw comprehensive conclusions about how civic dialogue and the orchestral world best connect to one another.

ACO "was forced to accept limitations in its own organization's knowledge base and ability to carry out its plans." The degree of internal preparation and skill needed was intensive and stretched capacity. ACO administration underscores the importance of having someone in Wiprud's role who can expand staff capacity, in terms of time and skill, to effectively work with partners, translate the civic dialogue intent to programmatic activity, translate between and facilitate on behalf of the artists, ACO, and community partners, and help carry out an assessment of the effort in the end. Wiprud's experience in coordinating music education programs and in working with composers in communities provided a good basis upon which to build. Dialogue facilitation skills were not found internally and, despite a bumpy experience with this project, ACO would likely look again to the outside for this expertise.

CODA

A strength of ACO as a classical western orchestra is its willingness to reflect on its own organizational and cultural assumptions and its place within the classical music and wider arts fields. This candor and openness, in part, drew ACO to arts-based civic dialogue experimentation in the first place. ACO was exposed to new approaches for orienting its work to the world. The orchestra's arts-based civic dialogue experiments opened up promising perspectives for rethinking the social dynamics, as well as the content, of programming within the classical music field. ACO continues to consider the impact of *Coming to America* on the organization and more broadly its implications for the orchestra field. A year after the project ended, ACO executive director, Michael Geller, offered his extended reflections on the *Coming to America* experience in the accompanying essay, "*Coming to America* and Civic Dialogue: Implications for ACO & the Field."

This case study was written by Kim Chan, Animating Democracy’s project liaison to American Composers Orchestra, drawing upon project reporting written by Michael Geller and Ted Wiprud.

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Coming to America & Civic Dialogue: Implications for ACO & the Field

MICHAEL GELLER

Coming to America: Immigrant Sounds/Immigrant Voices proved to be a tremendously rewarding endeavor: one that provided several examples of stunning successes in reaching audiences, particularly new audiences, for contemporary concert music, in a very direct and personal way. As such, *Coming to America* has already enlightened ACO's own artistic and administrative endeavors, and may well serve as an important case study for orchestras and other concert music enterprises interested in embracing and employing civic dialogue into their programs.

The project was also one that presented challenges and frustrations, some anticipated and some not, that clearly demonstrate that a civic dialogue project of this type is complex and not to be entered into lightly. Throughout our implementation of *Coming to America* we were forced to accept limitations in our own organization's knowledge-base and ability to carry out our plans, as well as challenges working with artistic and community partners and consultants to the project. Often, a hoped-for goal proved elusive, as dialogues took unanticipated turns, sometimes heading in an equally rewarding, but parallel direction, and sometimes reaching rather uncomfortable dead ends. Still, our experience shows the risks were well worth the effort.

CHANGE AND THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Change is not generally something that comes easy in the orchestra world. Orchestras are among the largest and most complex of performing arts organizations. Their size and bureaucracy alone, makes change a slow process at best. The orchestral art form itself is based on an historic outlook and standardized collection of works (the standard repertoire) to a much greater extent than in the other arts. In addition, orchestras often function as pillars of civic pride in a city or community--making them one of the last places one would expect to find progressive change. Often with conservative boards and moneyed patrons, it would probably be fair to say that orchestras may well be the most risk-averse arts organizations in existence.

As a tool for change, civic dialogue, then makes for a somewhat uneasy fit in the orchestra world. Even with its a progressive mission, relatively flexible low-to-the-ground administrative structure, and mandate to serve as a catalyst for change within the field, American Composers Orchestra encountered significant obstacles in planning and implementing a civic dialogue project such as *Coming to America*.

Some of the difficulties we experienced and would anticipate in implementing a civic dialogue project into other symphony orchestras would include:

- The concepts and practices of arts-based civic dialogue require fairly extensive education for artistic and administrative leadership. It is a difficult concept to grasp upon first introduction.
- The challenge presented by a nonrepresentational art form can make conceptual program development problematic; conversely there is, among concert musicians and composers, a general distrust of the overly-representational in music.
- The needs, skills and knowledge required to plan and implement a program are not generally found among orchestra artistic and administrative staffs; the project may not

easily mesh with existing administrative departments and functions within the orchestra’s administrative and artistic staffs.

- Orchestras may be reluctant to commit the extensive planning and resources required to adequately plan and carryout the project.
- Identifying and working with community partners can be challenging; each organization may have differing needs or expectations.
- Conductors, boards and/or administrative personnel may view civic dialogue efforts simply as a community relations endeavor of little true artistic merit.
- It may be difficult to find all the expertise—musical knowledge, grasp of salient public policy or social issues, dialogue facilitation, and administrative know how—required to make a successful project.

Still, most enlightened orchestra artistic and administrative professionals, and even boards, recognize that the world is a changing place, and that in some ways orchestras can, should and must change too.

CIVIC DIALOGUE AND RELEVANCY

A more fundamental concern in the concert music world might be broadly defined as “relevancy.” As an art form so focused on the past, many have begun to question whether orchestras are relevant in the 21st century. (Of course, ACO’s answer to this question must be a resounding YES!).

It would be fair to say that many orchestras have been searching for a way to make what they do relevant. The rise of “thematic” programming, whereby music is organized around a central concept, has been an obvious example of one way orchestras have sought to make a relevant that connection. The development of “crossover” musical genres which forcibly integrate classical traditions with more audience-friendly sounds from the pop world would be another. The rise of orchestra Education and Outreach programs are yet other examples, whereby orchestra’s seek to make their art and services accessible and meaningful to a wider public (or at least pay lip-service to the idea).

The experience of ACO through the *Coming to America* project is that civic dialogue, when properly conceptualized and implemented, can be one of the most powerful and successful mechanisms by which to advance and confirm the relevancy of this music to people’s lives today. Civic dialogue achieves this by being both incredibly personal and universal; by being both inward-looking toward the art and artist, and outward looking toward the audience and the world around them.

Interestingly, there have been several recent incidents in the orchestra world, that would point to the possible application of civic dialogue. The Boston Symphony Orchestra recently made the controversial decision to cancel a performance of “The Death of Klinghoffer” by John Adams. That work, which deals explicitly with terrorism, cut “too close to the bone” some; for others the cancellation amounted to an abdication of artistic leadership. Clearly, topic is ripe for dialogue. Another example would be the New Jersey Symphony, which recently commissioned and premiered “God, Mississippi and a Man Called Evers” by composer Hannibal, a new piece based on the life of civil rights leader Medgar Evers. The performance integrated a post-concert discussion and reached a new and largely African-American audience.

THE COMPOSER, CONCERT MUSIC AND CIVIC DIALOGUE

Within the arts-based civic dialogue movement, many have questioned whether a fundamentally nonrepresentational non-narrative art such as concert music can be effectively employed to encourage dialogue. Certainly the practical application of music in civic dialogue will be very different from what it might be in the visual or theater arts for example. However, our experience suggests that it is precisely the nonrepresentational, ambiguous nature of music that can help to liberate both the dialogue and the art, making both more effective. In fact we would argue strenuously against the notion of creating future music-based civic dialogue programs that would seek to limit the musical presentations only to so-called “programmatic” or text-based works that have explicit political, social or policy agendas: to do so is to negate the transcendent nature of music that is its defining beauty (to say nothing of eliminating an awful lot of good music from consideration). Further, we doubt that such limitations are truly in the best interest of developing a rich and truly nuanced dialogue.

It is incumbent upon us to mention the central role of the composer in *Coming to America*, and its implications for other music organizations. The composer’s role in orchestra music is without parallel in the arts world. Generally speaking, the composer, though the primary musical creator, is not an integral part of the orchestral enterprise: yet the composer is dependent on the orchestra for the realization of the art. This situation does not exist in other arts: in dance the choreographer plays a central role in the company; and the playwright’s words exist in a tangible and intelligible way, separate from any particular staging.

Yet the design of *Coming to America* placed composers in the pivotal artistic and dialogue roles. The involvement of the composers is, in our view, key to the entire music-civic dialogue construct. The composer’s voice is crucial because it is intensely personal, regardless of whether the composer addresses a civic or public-policy issue either explicitly or subliminally in his/her work, or even if he/she professes to reject such issues altogether. The composer became in *Coming to America* both the creative lens that focused our attention, and a mirror in which individual audience members could see themselves and their own life experiences. The presence of the composer is so powerful and important, that we are tempted to modify our terminology to call our project “artist-based civic dialogue” rather than merely dubbing it “arts-based”.

THE FUTURE OF *COMING TO AMERICA* AND CIVIC DIALOGUE AT ACO

With the Animating Democracy Lab now completed, ACO has begun to contemplate both the future of the *Coming to America* project and the integration of arts-based civic dialogue concepts in other areas of its programming and activities.

ACO named new artistic leadership: conductor Steven Sloane has been appointed Music Director, and Robert Beaser, a composer, has been appointed Artistic Director. Early in their tenures, the *Coming to America* project was reviewed by the new artistic leadership, with management encouraging a continuation of the project into future seasons. Central to the discussions were the success and impact of the project at reaching and involving audiences, and the extensive and continually growing body of music and composers that could be embraced through *Coming to America*. In short, a consensus developed that a project that enhanced audience participation, expanded upon ACO’s work to commission and perform the ever-evolving and infinite variety of American music, and created a more central, relevant role for this music, was an endeavor worth nourishing within ACO.

There has also been a keen interest in keeping alive several of the relationships developed with composers and community partners in and around New York. Due to ACO's own budgetary and program limitations, it is unlikely that ACO will continue an annual intensive grouping of concerts, informances, forums and workshops. It is probable, however, that ACO will continue to keep *Coming to America* alive as a thread that weaves in and out of ongoing activities for the foreseeable future, and that living composers would be employed in Informance and dialogue settings as part of this activity. The backlash now being experienced by immigrant Americans as a result of the events of September 11 make this type of activity more even more compelling.

Beyond *Coming to America*, ACO's administration feels that it has come away from the project with an enhanced understanding of arts-based civic dialogue, and new skills that may help it to develop new program concepts in the future. Recently, for example, ACO has begun to consider developing a dialogue component around a composer and work on an upcoming program that is pertinent to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is only now, with the activities of the *Coming to America* behind us, and the many lessons learned, that we (the team that planned and implemented the project) now feel ready and equipped to produce a well-rounded, maximally effective and high-quality music-based civic dialogue project. There is no question that the exercise of conceiving and implementing such a project adds greatly to the knowledge and experience that artists and arts administrators bring to the full range of their endeavors.