

Preserving the Rural Soundscape

Case Study: Wintergreen Performing Arts

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INTRODUCTION

This case study explores a year-long project in rural central Virginia coordinated by Wintergreen Performing Arts, Inc. (WPAl), a music presenter primarily known for its summer classical music festival. In 2002, *Preserving the Rural Soundscape* linked together three separate elements: first, the commission and world premiere of *Singing the Blue Ridge*, a suite of songs by Dr. Judith Shatin, scored for electronic music, voice and orchestra. The second element was a community dialogue process using a study circle to explore issues of land use, planning, and development, potent topics in a county known for its scenic beauty and threatened by rapid change. The third element was a school residency project in which fifth graders created original songs and explored sound as a science and an art. All three elements were stitched together through “soundwalks,” an opportunity to listen deeply to the rich layers of human and non-human sounds in the rural landscape—“soundscapes.”

Preserving the Rural Soundscape holds lessons about the impact of organizational growth and transition on program implementation. The case study explores some of the socio-economic tensions inherent in a retirement community/resort development located in a rural community, with implications for audience development and civic engagement. It also documents some of the aesthetic conflicts that can arise during a civic engagement process when artistic quality is one of several goals. And finally, the case study contains cautions about working slowly and intentionally to expand organizational capacity and the sometimes-invisible role of embedded organizational culture.¹

SETTING THE STAGE

Wintergreen Resort and Nelson County, Virginia

The Wintergreen development is hard to see in the luxuriant leafy green of summer, despite hundreds of houses and condos scattered over its Appalachian mountainside. “Virginia’s Premier Blue Ridge Mountain Resort” (according to recent promotional literature) is home to about 1,000 year-round residents, with twice that many second-home residents or seasonal guests. The winter season attracts skiers to its 20 slopes; warmer weather beckons visitors to 45 holes of championship golf, swimming, horseback riding, and a top-ranked tennis academy. Six restaurants, an extensive nature preserve with hiking trails, and a spa complete the resort experience. With its own police force, fire department, water supply and a gated entrance, Wintergreen is distinctly different from the surrounding villages and farms.

¹ The case study draws upon material in from WPAl’s Animating Democracy reporting, written by Mike Tapager and Judy O’Brien, minutes of study circles, e-mail correspondence, and telephone interviews. Quotes are drawn from these sources unless otherwise noted.

A three-week-long Summer Music Festival is Wintergreen's chief cultural attraction, produced by Wintergreen Performing Arts, Inc. (WPAI), a separate nonprofit entity. Open-air concerts are held at the Evans Center, a spacious white tent perched on a hillside, commanding a beautiful view of the Shenandoah and Rockfish River valleys, the farmlands and the forests of Nelson County.

Nelson County, with 15,000 residents, is predominately rural; two-thirds of its 471-square-miles is forested (with 19,000+ acres in a National Forest). About one-quarter is farmland, including more organic farms per capita than any other county in the state. The two largest towns are Lovingson (the county seat) and Nellysford (closest to Wintergreen); each has a population well under 500; there are no incorporated towns and no stoplights in the entire county. With the highest waterfall east of the continental divide, clear rivers, lush orchards and vineyards, Nelson County is widely considered to be one of the most beautiful counties in the region: its northwest boundary runs along 30 miles of the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway.

The predominately agricultural economy of Nelson County suffered a devastating blow in 1969 from Hurricane Camille's floods, and property values dived. The availability of beautiful acreage at a (relatively) low price attracted many new residents who, predictably perhaps, were in conflict with the "old-timers," primarily around issues of appropriate development. As Mike Tapager wrote in his final report for *Preserving the Rural Soundscape*, "Rural Virginia has a long tradition of property rights... 'a man has a right to do anything he wants with his own property'...this becomes a mindset that is averse to participating in public hearings regarding land use issues."

Rural Nelson suddenly changed in 1974, when Mr. L.F. Payne (later a Congressman and also developer of resort property in Hilton Head, SC), created Wintergreen Real Estate Company, bought 11,000 acres of undeveloped forest, and began to build a resort and upscale housing development.

While bringing new jobs to Nelson County (primarily in construction and service sectors) and stimulating new economic development (restaurants, shops and art galleries near Nellysford), Wintergreen was not universally welcomed by Nelson County residents. Some people may have envied the life-style of the new land-owners (half of the county's total property value is based in Wintergreen); others resented the influx of new-comers: as the saying goes, "folk comin' down here and tryin' to tell us how to do our business." Tapager writes of the "naysayers who form an important component of the old-timers. They resent anyone making good on anything. The success of tourism is 'all due to Wintergreen' over which they have no control...Anything different 'from the way we do it around here' is suspect and, therefore, invalid. In this respect, Nelson County is no different from anywhere else."

Regardless of how long they might have lived in Nelson County, other citizens merely mourned the resulting loss of animal habitat and the visible scarring of the mountainside, clearly apparent in the long, leafless winters. The distance between Wintergreen and Nellysford is only about six miles, but visitors must then pass through the guarded front gates, and up a steep and winding, often fog-bound, road for another couple of miles. The physical distance is a metaphor for the economic gulf that separates the folk of Nelson County from the people of Wintergreen, who now reside on the county's highest ridges.

Wintergreen residents, lured by the county's beauty and serenity, are mostly well-educated professionals, relatively affluent and able to afford second or retirement homes. Good hospitals, renowned universities and a regional airport are nearby in Charlottesville, about 30 miles away. Many residents bring a desire for cultural experiences, and particularly a love of classical music.

One such resident was Dr. Sarah McCracken, who with her husband Dave, built a retirement home in Wintergreen after several years of renting a condo during the Appalachian summers and falling in love with the area.

Music in the Mountains

Sarah McCracken is widely acknowledged as the founder and driving force behind the creation of Wintergreen Performing Arts, Inc. (WPAI) in 1995. Having vacationed in Snowmass Village (Aspen CO) since 1978, McCracken was familiar with the world-class Aspen Music Festivals and the Aspen Institute, with its lectures and humanities programs. Once settled in Virginia, McCracken quickly sensed that “something’s missing here,” and invited 15 neighbors to discuss some possibilities. Sitting around the McCrackens’ new living room, several people suggested a music club, but McCracken urged them to “think bigger.” This group subsequently conducted 100 telephone interviews with Wintergreen residents, which revealed a strong interest in classical music.

With McCracken’s encouragement and volunteer administration, WPAI offered three concerts in private homes late in 1995. These concerts reflected an early commitment to a wide range of music: programs included a piano/vocal duo, a children’s choral ensemble, and a Celtic duo of violin and recorder. Energized by the success of the in-home concerts, WPAI produced an ambitious season in 1996 with a classical and a popular series: a total of 12 concerts for a budget of \$18,000. WPAI quickly incorporated, established a board and obtained its nonprofit status.

In its second year of programming (1997), WPAI mounted its first Summer Music Festival. The Festival began to truly flourish when Maestro David Wiley was hired in 1999 as Artistic Director and Conductor. Wiley, concertmaster Roger Frisch, McCracken and others used their extensive national contacts to entice a cadre of musicians to the mountains. The 60+ musicians, coming from major orchestras all across the country, built a critically-acclaimed Festival Orchestra. The repertoire is predominately classical: Brahms, Stravinsky, Dvorak, Schubert, Saint-Saens, Haydn, Mozart, with an occasional 20th century composer such as Copland.

The Evans Center, with 400 seats under the tent and ample lawn seating, was acquired in 1998, and the Festival began to tout the magnificent view in addition to the quality of the music. Contributing the use of the tent site, marketing/promotion support, as well as resort amenities for the musicians, Wintergreen Properties Association is a critical partner in WPAI’s success, as is the Wintergreen Property Owners Association, whose members provide housing for the musicians. By 2002, WPAI audiences had grown to 6,000, with a budget of \$325,000.

Reaching Out, Stretching Beyond

From its very beginning, WPAI sought to provide cultural opportunities to the students of Nelson County. To take advantage of funds offered by the Virginia Commission for the Arts, WPAI persuaded the County Board of Supervisors to provide matching funds for a school arts program. Guest artists routinely performed in the county’s two elementary schools before their WPAI concerts; teachers selected other artists from the state’s roster. Six to 10 artists a year visited the schools, but programs were generally limited to “one-shot” workshops or assembly programs, with little or no continuity or integration into the curriculum.

To further fulfill its educational mission, in its second year (the same year it launched the summer Festival), WPAI initiated an intensive three-week Performance Academy for outstanding “pre-professional” musicians, studying piano, voice, and instrumental chamber music. Academy

students from across the country take private lessons and master classes, are coached and mentored by orchestra members, and perform as part of the Festival.

In addition to the 10-12 Festival concerts, WPAI also presents another six to eight performances during the year, either in the Evans Center or at Rockfish Presbyterian Church in Nellysford, an acoustic jewel seating 120+ people. (The Evans Center tent is dismantled in November for ski season, as it sits on a beginner's slope.) In 2002, a typical year, these performances included opera highlights from the Ashlawn Opera Company, two performances of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* (presented by the Four County Players of Virginia), a night of Celtic music, an appearance by the Charlottesville Municipal Band, a Christmas concert with the Virginia Consort, and "The Fabulous Hubcaps" a nostalgia show band from Washington DC that plays music of the '50s and '60s (complete with an exhibition of antique cars).

WPAI does not often present, much less commission, new work, although it was Virginia's representative in the Continental Harmony Project, a national Millennium celebration sponsored by the American Composers Forum and the National Endowment for the Arts. WPAI had also never presented electronic music of any kind.

But in 2001 WPAI made two exciting artistic advances. First, it commissioned a new work by Dr. Judith Shatin which received its world premiere at the 2002 Summer Festival. *Singing the Blue Ridge* was scored for electronic playback, baritone, mezzo-soprano, and orchestra. Secondly, WPAI collaborated with Nelson County Schools in a project that significantly shifted the usual "one night stand" model of school arts programming. Both these advances were part of *Preserving the Rural Soundscape*, a major initiative funded by the newly-formed Animating Democracy Initiative.

Wintergreen Takes the Challenge

In 2000, McCracken, then serving as chair of WPAI's Outreach Committee, learned about Animating Democracy and its intention to explore the artistic process as a catalyst for dialogue on issues of civic concern, with opportunities for public dialogue deeply embedded in or connected to the arts experience. "Dialogue," as Animating Democracy defined it, encourages speaking with an authentic voice, suspending assumptions, promoting inquiry and curiosity, and deep listening. Projects would be funded based in part on their plans for community dialogue that would go beyond mere post-performance discussion or standard audience talk-backs.

With her original inspiration of the Aspen Institute, McCracken saw that Animating Democracy's framing of dialogue matched her belief that arts had an important role in democracy. "It seemed like a good fit," she says, an opportunity not only to bridge the gap with Nelson County, but also to create a partnership with the Wintergreen Nature Foundation. Building on WPAI's embrace of nature as part of its character, Maestro Wiley suggested using Beethoven's *Symphony #6*, "The Pastoral," as the artistic centerpiece, and thus McCracken proposed 'In Concert with Nature' to Animating Democracy and convened a study circle to meet and talk on the opening night of the 2001 Festival. The proposal was not funded and the effort to integrate dialogue into WPAI's artistic vision might have gone no further, but for a series of lucky coincidences.

McCracken had been searching for someone to write grant proposals for WPAI. David Wiley's mother introduced McCracken to a friend who was an experienced writer, Dr. Judith O'Brien, who also just happened to be a trained practitioner of dialogue, having studied with the MIT-sponsored Boston Urban Dialogue Project. With O'Brien's experience and interest in leading the dialogue component, McCracken began to re-design the project for a second try. Animating Democracy staff encouraged her to consider a living composer who could be part of a public

dialogue—perhaps someone like Judith Shatin, who had completed a similar music and community engagement project in Shephardstown, West Virginia (*COAL*, a folk oratorio for chorus, Appalachian ensemble, synthesizer and orchestra). “Oh, yes, Judy Shatin...” McCracken replied, “...isn’t she at the University of Virginia? Just up the road in Charlottesville?”

Indeed, Dr. Judith Shatin, Chair of UVA’s music department, was also an acclaimed composer, with fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, commissions from the Kronos Quartet, Ensemble Barcelona Nova Musica, and Meet the Composer. And she was very interested in such a project. For some time Shatin had been interested in the notion of “soundscapes,” the non-human and the human sounds of the habitats shared by all living creatures. She imagined a process whereby community members could harvest sounds from nature, developing an ear for the subtle sounds that often escape the ears of harried and hurried humans; she would then use those sounds as the basis for her composition. The basic philosophical connection between Shatin’s interests and the goals of Animating Democracy was simple but profound: learning to listen is as important to the process of gathering of sounds as it is to engaging in dialogue.

Shatin and McCracken began a conversation that quickly led to the concept of an original composition inspired by the wealth of natural sounds in the rural landscape. Shatin embraced the opportunity to creatively explore the use of field recordings (both professional and amateur); McCracken saw the project as a way to lead the organization into a new realm of community engagement. *Preserving the Rural Soundscape* could be a catalyst for organizational growth, enriching WPAI’s relationships with the schools and with Nelson County. O’Brien would serve as the project director and take responsibility for managing the dialogue aspect of the project.

As O’Brien and McCracken worked together, they realized that a project of this scope would challenge the capacity of WPAI and its board. They strategized about how to address organizational development within O’Brien’s scope of work. So while developing the Animating Democracy proposal, O’Brien also conducted an organizational assessment of WPAI, and in her report, she urged the organization to renew its attention to its strategic plan and to re-examine its vision.

WPAI thus took major organizational *and* artistic leaps: it commissioned a piece of contemporary electronic music, expanded outreach activities in the schools, initiated an intensive community dialogue process and, at the same time, worked internally on its vision, mission and goals for the future. After five years of steady and manageable growth, suddenly WPAI stepped into a world of significant challenge and change with its Animating Democracy-funded project, *Preserving the Rural Soundscape*.

PRESERVING THE RURAL SOUNDSCAPE: PROJECT ELEMENTS

The project had three basic components: a study circle whose members had been trained in the principles of dialogue, a Soundscapes Aural History project with fifth-graders at the county’s two elementary schools, and the world premiere of Shatin’s new composition. The three arenas shared the element of “sound walks” led by Shatin, designed to encourage deep listening to the subtle sounds of nature (human and non). The three arenas intersected in the culminating activity of the school project on June 30, 2002, with a preview of one of the four songs from *Singing the Blue Ridge* and original songs written and performed by students, followed by a Supper Dialogue.

Study Circle and Dialogues

McCracken consulted with local leaders and identified 15 community members to participate in a study circle which first met in the summer of 2001, before the Animating Democracy grant was approved. Members included two WPAI board members, a teacher, the public relations director from Wintergreen Resort, a real estate developer, and several community activists. Significantly, one-third of the circle's members were government staff and elected officials: two of the county's five Supervisors, the County Planning Director, the County Administrator, and the county director of Tourism and Economic Development.

McCracken saw that the county's state-mandated Comprehensive Plan, and the related issues of land use, would be directly relevant to the environmental themes of Shatin's music. The connection between the two topics was simple: "when the landscape goes, the soundscape goes."

The study circle had three goals, according to O'Brien's progress report in January, 2002: 1) to learn the practice of dialogue, 2) to learn the art of dialogue facilitation; and 3) to plan opportunities for dialogue in the Nelson County community for the purpose of examining feelings, beliefs and ideas about land use, zoning changes and citizen participation. She reported that while "one of the original project goals was to write the Plan with more broad-based engagement on the part of Nelson citizens...[but] early on in the project it became clear that the Land Use Plan itself was less important than the zoning changes that needed to follow the Plan...We framed it for the community in the following way: "What are the sounds of Nelson that would be lost if economic growth were not managed well?"

The link between the art and the dialogue was subtle, but O'Brien saw a clear connection: "through music and sound, we are teaching people how to listen....to nature, to their own aural history, to each other. Dialogue is first and foremost about listening....listening without an agenda, listening with new ears, listening to understand, listening for one's own prejudices. According to the ancient Greeks and our founding fathers, democracy will not work unless people are participating, and the way they need to participate is to listen to one another and each other's ideas. Only then can citizens make 'sound choices.' So we are teaching a lost skill necessary for democracy....listening."

During their monthly two-hour meetings (which took place over nine months, starting in September 2001), the study circle learned the elements of dialogue and engaged in dialogues around questions relating to land use, responses to the poetry selected by Shatin for her new work (Shatin and Wiley visited the study circle to acquaint them with the musical process), and a new question: "How can we use music to engage more citizens in civic affairs generally, and in land use decisions specifically, which will allow citizens to feel empowered and heard?"

This final question led the study circle to consider how to use dialogic practices to involve community members in an exploration of land use through music. The philosophical and the practical aspects of this question became the group's focus for several months. As Mike Tapager wrote in WPAI's final report, "The challenge to the study circle was to try to integrate the composition into a civic event without distorting the work, and to use the artistic ideas expressed in the work to spark civic dialogue." Their challenge was heightened by the fact that the composition was still a work-in-progress.

The study circle saw the culmination of the school project as a prime opportunity for public dialogue. As Tapager writes, "One of the most intractable problems the group grappled with, was how to entice members of the 'old-timers' to even come out for dialogue." They agreed

that smaller groups would be preferred, which required multiple facilitators; in preparation, they planned a training session for April 2002, and invited three high school students (including one home-schooled student) to be trained as well. In addition to reinforcing what study circle members had already learned about dialogue, the training by Dr. Rogier Gregoire, with O'Brien assisting, gave the emerging facilitators a variety of techniques for getting a dialogue started and on track.

The design, a Supper Dialogue, slowly emerged. According to Tapager, “the musical performances by WPAI would be free, but circle members thought that by including a meal and a musical performance involving the schools, we could attract a wider cross section of the community...The idea was to appeal to concerns that cross the various cultural boundaries. Breaking bread and sharing family relationships would bring out the community. The performance would provide a safe context. Discussing the performance would lead to dialogue. On the other hand, some members of the circle viewed this as entrapment, misrepresentation and operating under false pretenses.”

The Supper Dialogue was the subject of intense discussion among the study circle, and the structure of the evening reflected their concerns: to avoid the appearance of coercion, people were not assigned to a particular group, but were allowed to go where they wanted, to sit with family members, or not. As a result, the dialogues were less satisfying than the study circle members had hoped: families sat together, people sat with their friends, and the presence of divergent points of view, necessary for a rich and engaging dialogue, was mostly absent.

On a separate front, another frustration was the reluctance of the WPAI board itself to learn the dialogue skills. O'Brien strongly encouraged the board to take the training, but was met with resistance from a small number of board members who saw such endeavors as marginal to their role as trustees. As WPAI's coach for organizational development, O'Brien advocated dialogue as a powerful tool to resolve some of the internal tensions within the organization about its mission, its aesthetic values and its role in civic engagement. This tension had been evident in earlier friction around the board's process of revising the mission statement, which broadened the mission from 'providing entertainment for Wintergreen residents' to 'cultural education for the people of Virginia.' O'Brien believed that other inherent tensions, between classical and popular music, between concerts and school programs, could have been better managed through a dialogue process. The board's unwillingness to engage in dialogue training may have been one of the precipitating factors that led to O'Brien's early resignation from *Soundspaces* in June 2002, before she was able to complete the project evaluation.

An intriguing prospect for a practical application of dialogue emerged at the end of 2001, when the two County Supervisors in the study circle reported that the heads of every county department had agreed to be trained in dialogue as part of the “new public contract of how we talk to each other.” The dialogic approach would provide a less-polarizing alternative approach to public hearings. Unfortunately by the time of the county's retreat, political winds had shifted and the dialogue training did not happen. However, one of the supervisors in the study circle, Connie Brennan (now president of the Board of Supervisors) expressed an interest in using Dialogue in smaller meetings with her constituents to discuss specifics of zoning ordinances. Although her recent election (and the steep learning curve entailed) has prevented her from hosting the in-house meetings to date, it remains her intention: “It's a big disappointment for me: I very much love the process. But it takes a lot of time to organize them, and major issues in the county have taken priority right now.”

The Supper Dialogue was the last of the study circle meetings until the end of 2002. In December McCracken tried to reconvene the study circle, proposing a new focus as a

programming committee for WPAI. Initial discussion centered on a second arts-based civic dialogue project for the winter of 2003 at the new high school (a production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*). But the study circle's relationship to WPAI was ambiguous. "We weren't clear about the mission or focus," said one member, and the WPAI board was not sure how much authority it wanted to cede an outside group. The *Amahl* project was cancelled, and the study circle remains in limbo.

Soundscape Aural History

Betty Tabony, coordinator of the gifted program for Nelson County Schools (and a study circle member) worked with fifth-grade teacher Bev White to create a science and language arts unit incorporating state curriculum standards. Students at the two elementary schools recorded sounds on a digital audio recorder, wrote poems based on those sounds, made their own instruments and studied the science of sound production. Judith Shatin conducted workshops with the students, teaching them about rhythm, contrast, melody, volume and tempo, exploring the possibilities of their hand-made instruments. In school assembly programs, the students used their instruments to create an improvisation guided by Shatin. The 5th graders' compilation of sounds gathered on recording equipment and in journals were later displayed at the high school and at Wintergreen.

At the same time, Lyrics Alive, a husband/wife team of Tennessee musicians (Mary Bomar and Tom Ritter) reviewed all the fifth-graders' poems and selected twenty students from each school. Bomar and Ritter spent four days in each school collaborating with these students to transform the poems into lyrics, writing original melodies, and then teaching and rehearsing the songs. Lyrics Alive and the students in each school performed the original songs for their peers and teachers on May 30, along with the student instrumentalists from Shatin's workshop. Selections from the school concerts were reprised for the public at the Supper Dialogue on June 30, and again on the Festival stage at Wintergreen on Sunday afternoon, July 7, prior to a family concert. More than a dozen area businesses sponsored the participation of Lyrics Alive.

For the June 30 concert, Judith Shatin shared a brief sampler of animal sounds to introduce the *Soundspace* concept, followed by the student improvisation, and the students singing four of their original songs, accompanied by Lyrics Alive. Baritone Tom Barrett (also co-director of vocal performance at the Academy) sang one of the songs from Shatin's new song cycle, *Singing the Blue Ridge*; the program was completed with Festival musician Ashley Hall's virtuoso trumpet solo. Then, to provide a transition and introduce the concept of dialogue, the facilitators performed a clever skit on "How Not to Have a Dialogue," featuring Treehugger and Hunter who illustrated the usual polarized arguments over land use. Over a simple supper, audience members then participated in a dialogue about "Development and Preservation in Nelson County," led by members of the study circle and others (including one high school student) who had attended the April training.

The June 30 Tye River concert was itself the result of an intense artistic negotiation earlier that spring: McCracken and O'Brien initially wanted the Festival Orchestra to premiere Shatin's composition "off the mountain," in order to counteract Wintergreen's image as "an enclave of elitism and privilege." Maestro Wiley's concern with finding an acoustically appropriate site was augmented by uncertainty about how large the ensemble might be, since Shatin was still completing the work. When Wiley could not agree to an off-site premiere, a compromise was crafted: give an advance hearing of one of the songs, possibly with a chamber ensemble accompanying the baritone. In the end, Wiley's piano was the sole accompaniment.

SoundWalks

Study circle members and elementary school students alike had participated in “SoundWalks,” short, completely silent walks through field and forest, ears attuned to the slightest sounds of man and nature. Two SoundWalks were also offered on the weekend of July 6 following the premiere of *Singing the Blue Ridge*. Dan Philippon, an environmental ethicist and humanities scholar from the University of Minnesota and a former Charlottesville resident, joined Shatin for these SoundWalks. His participation was supported by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, as a match for the Animating Democracy grant. Dr. Philippon’s book, *The Height of These Mountains*, had made a huge impact on Shatin as she researched background for the composition. Philippon offered the walkers the analogy of “soundmarks”—distinct sounds that define our environment as clearly as a landmark does. The SoundWalks were presented in conjunction with the Wintergreen Nature Foundation to “explore how the Soundscape reflects and reveals the changes that are occurring in our natural environment. And consider the ways this land has been valued and used.” Participants in the two Festival SoundWalks quickly grasped the heart of the matter: the critical difference between *hearing* and *listening*.

The Academy students participated in a SoundWalk as part of their improvisation workshop with Shatin. Divided into quartets and encouraged to use their instruments in creative and unorthodox ways, the young musicians used improvisation to explore communication. Shatin and O’Brien then led a dialogue about “improvisation as dialogue,” which elicited the themes of the importance of listening, suspending one’s own conclusions, and leaving room for silence. The original proposal to Animating Democracy suggested that a ‘meta-language’ linking dialogue and improvisation could be developed, perhaps an ambitious goal for the limited amount of time available, but the students responded with great interest and enthusiasm to the challenges of improvisation.

The Concert and Dialogue

Shatin set to music four poems by Barbara Goldberg, a poet she had met a decade earlier when both were in residence at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, another beautiful rural setting near Sweet Brier College. “Green Frog and Tree” is a joyous celebration of spring peepers; “Frogs Fate” is a darkly ominous poem about the (literal) collision of people and frogs. The ferocious “Night” describes the natural cycle of predators, and “Miracle of Stars” explores the “havoc wreaked by humans through greed or carelessness, as well as the hope for better stewardship to come.” The 15-minute suite seamlessly integrates animal sounds (birds, bull frogs and spring peepers, wolves, deer, raccoon, river otter), pre-recorded and manipulated, with orchestra instruments and voice.

In its two performances during the Festival (July 5-6, 2002) audiences received *Singing the Blue Ridge* with warmth and enthusiasm. Another aesthetic conflict arose when Wiley designed the sequence of these concerts. The project’s original intention was to have a post-performance dialogue immediately following the piece, which suggested that the premiere be placed last on the program. But Wiley was wary: ending with a piece of yet-untried music was an artistic risk he was not willing to take: the final selection of most concerts is usually a strong and proven work, in this case a long-anticipated performance of Brahms’ *Double Concerto for Violin and Cello*. He insisted that *Singing the Blue Ridge* be placed right before the intermission.

Believing that people would not remain after the concert for a dialogue, Shatin compromised by giving a short pre-concert lecture, sharing the process and themes of the composition, as well as a ‘sneak preview’ of the animal sounds. Although well-attended on both nights, the lectures did not involve significant audience participation. A dialogue was planned for intermission, but

conditions were less than ideal: various audience members approached the edge of the stage where Shatin stood, and some asked questions, but Shatin was deluged with friends and fans who wanted to congratulate her on the piece. According to the interim report, WPAI had also planned another dialogue on July 6, in collaboration with the county to explore “the piloting of a zoning workshop that will be dialogue-focused,” but this dialogue was cancelled in the absence of a trained facilitator.

The Charlottesville University and Community Symphony presented the work again in October 2003. Although Nelson County inspired the work, the issues of growth, loss of habitat, and the cycles of nature give *Singing the Blue Ridge* a broad appeal. Shatin is working with other orchestras for future performances of the piece; she reports that the most common obstacle is the added expense of hiring professional singers.

OUTCOMES

Preserving the Rural Soundscape can be considered a success in three ways:

Young audiences were exposed to serious contemporary music, and new music was embraced by “classical” audiences. The Wintergreen Summer Festival commissioned a fresh and accessible modern composition. Other orchestras will surely perform *Singing the Blue Ridge*; its skilful blending of voice, instruments and recorded sound is an excellent introduction to electronic music. The theme of the piece, about the balance of nature and man, will have appeal to nature foundations and environmental groups: astute symphony orchestras who seek community partnerships with such groups will find *Singing the Blue Ridge* a fitting artistic centerpiece.

WPAI reached beyond its usual constituents to a broader public. WPAI came “down into the valley” and began to grapple with the concerns of the people who live and work in Nelson County, and board membership was expanded beyond Wintergreen residents. Most of the board became more aware of the power and potential of community engagement. Shortcomings in this arena reveal some key lessons (see below), but first steps were made, and the board may now have more commitment and will to continue the public dialogue.

WPAI continued to develop and evolve as new leadership emerged. The board re-examined its mission and vision through the lens of community participation and civic engagement.

REFLECTION AND LEARNING

When study circle member Mike Tapager wrote the final report for *Preserving the Rural Landscape*, he identified these key learnings:

- Dialogue is an ongoing, time-consuming process
- The project director is vitally important
- Large-scale civic dialogue events must be broken down into parts, with a role for youth, and the necessity to have a cross-section of viewpoints in the groups
- Artists must be integrated more closely into the Dialogue; the art must drive the program, and the dialogue must be organic (not “patched in”) to the art

- WPAI needs to take the music programs to the county, and not “wait for the county to come to us”
- To build capacity for music-based dialogue and outreach, the organization needs an ongoing [staff] position
- Partnerships provide phenomenal leverage (evidenced by the school partnership)

Preserving the Rural Soundscape suggests areas for further discovery and inquiry.

Intentions and realistic expectations—*Preserving the Rural Soundscape* had high ambitions for involving large numbers people (and in particular, influential decision-makers) in deep dialogue about land-use planning, growth and development in the county. Expectations were repeatedly raised that far outstripped WPAI’s capacity to deliver: impacting the Comprehensive Plan, helping to shape zoning ordinances, changing the very way the county did its business. The Supper Dialogue involved lots of people, but not with the depth that was desired. The WPAI board did not learn the dialogic process, and dialogues planned in conjunction with the concert never happened.

Good community engagement is far more time-consuming than most people expect, and many organizations severely underestimate the focus and time it requires. Balancing reality and ambition (adjusting anticipated outcomes to organizational capacity) is a difficult but critical skill. In retrospect, *Preserving the Rural Soundscape* was an ambitious project that would have been better served if WPAI had more basic experience in community engagement and understood the on-going commitment of time and energy.

Continuity and impact—The study circle disbanded after the Supper Dialogue and its struggles, and did not reconvene until December. They had no opportunity to apply the lessons they had learned, to refine their approach and try again with another public event. Momentum was lost while new leadership was identified, and there have been no follow-up activities in the community. Connie Brennan, now president of the Nelson County Board of Supervisors, saw the project as a “good training ground, but to have any real effect, it must be an on-going effort.” She, and others, saw limited value to the Tye River Supper Dialogue: “it didn’t have a major impact on the issues facing us right now. It’s something that needs to be built on...You need small groups to talk on a deeper level.” WPAI’s final evaluation acknowledged that “momentum was lost...by not having another event to follow-up this first presentation of dialogue as a tool for civic discourse...whether before or after the event, two or three smaller events involving small group dialogue may have provided more traction for a movement.” Yet (as Tapager writes) “seeds were planted that might yet bare fruit,” with people like Ms. Brennan now on WPAI’s board. Brennan is pursuing discussions with the University of Virginia’s Women Studies and African-American Studies departments, to bring Urban Bush Women (a nationally-recognized dance company skilled in artist-led civic dialogue) to Nelson County.

Continuity might also have been maintained through tighter correlation and inter-relatedness of the three arenas of the project. Each was basically a “stand-alone” endeavor. A more integrated approach is frequently more sustainable, as more community resources are brought into play when folks can see their piece of ‘the big picture.’ Theoretically the curriculum unit on sound and language arts could be used every year; the presence of Lyrics Alive makes the poems sing (literally). WPAI and Nelson County supported a return engagement by Lyrics Alive in 2003.

Long-term impact and continuity depend not just on good follow-through, but also on identifying and building leadership from within. WPAI took a risk in hiring someone from out of town to

take key responsibility for dialogue in the project. In addition to her distance from Nelson County, O'Brien was the sole 'expert,' in spite of the study circle's training. With O'Brien's departure, a vacuum was temporarily created, with no consistent advocate and coordinator for the dialogues. Winter Lantz, a WPAI board member consistently engaged in the study circle, was interested in moving it forward, but family health issues delayed his involvement for months after the culmination of *Soundscape*. With only a part-time paid administrator, and no other staff dedicated to education, marketing, outreach, community relations or programming (other than Wiley and the musicians on seasonal contracts), the responsibility for maintaining such initiatives lands squarely with the board or its volunteer committees.

The tension between a founder's vision and the board's direction—McCracken's earliest vision, realized in WPAI's school programs and the Performance Academy, included the ideal of meaningful community engagement. This commitment was institutionalized in WPAI's new strategic plan ("create programs that stimulate public dialogue, connect the community and meet educational needs"), and with the vision statement of "Resounding Music. Stimulating Dialogue. Enriching our Lives." But dialogue never became part of the board's own process, in spite of O'Brien and McCracken's best efforts to keep board training on the agenda.

O'Brien in particular was keenly disappointed by the board's (non) action, but the board was perhaps too absorbed in its own internal transitions. WPAI displays the dynamics of a maturing organization, evolving from founder-driven (having power and decisions residing largely with one person) to a more broadly held vision. In this critical organizational transition, communicating the founding vision is key, in a way that board members can support and advance the vision, and over time, let it grow and change, according to the needs of the community. A parallel development is the move from a working board to a policy board, and from part-time administrative staff to a full-time executive director.

The evolution of organizational culture and practice—The majority of the board is retired, relatively wealthy, white men who ran businesses and commanded troops. For most of them, being in an organization that values dialogue and devotes resources and precious time to it, is a major shift in organizational culture. WPAI seldom holds board retreats and orientations, and like many organizations, rarely sets aside time to discuss its values and principles in detail. Furthermore, 'dialogue' can sound vague and nebulous; with only two board members active in the study circle, it was difficult for the un-initiated to understand how dialogue could actually benefit the organization. WPAI may be making its first tentative moves toward being a 'learning organization' that values reflection and sees conflict as a productive avenue to change.

The tension between "artistic excellence" and community value—Two of the project's most contentious issues were framed as artistic choices: positioning *Singing the Blue Ridge* in the concert program, and selecting a venue for the premiere. In effect, the project had two artistic forces, Shatin and Wiley, who had no prior history of working with each other and somewhat different interests at heart. Their negotiations are not unlike the dance between the art and the dialogue component of most Animating Democracy projects: not always comfortable and a challenge to the mode of 'either/or' thinking. One way of re-framing the challenge is to learn from the Academy musicians. During their improvisation workshop with Shatin, they observed that one musician leads, then another; at times no one knows who initiates and who follows. But this kind of flow is hard to reach, and harder to maintain, especially for an organization in transition, grappling with change. WPAI stepped into the dance with little experience but huge confidence. Time will tell if they are willing partners for future encounters with the community.

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