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- <http://TheSPCO.org/club2030>
- www.CrescendoProject.org

The Minnesota Orchestra and SPCO are trying to play to younger fans with markedly different approaches. Are they hitting the right notes?

By PATRICK LEE • Star Tribune staff writer

How many 30-year-olds does it take to keep an orchestra alive? For decades, music lovers have bemoaned the impending doom of orchestras, given their aging audiences and the reluctance of younger people to attend concerts. Several U.S. orchestras, from the San Francisco Symphony to the Cincinnati Symphony, responded years ago by forming groups for young professionals or launching discount-ticket programs to lure new audiences.

Although the 'Twin Cities' two leading orchestras long have done outreach to school-age kids, neither had taken coordinated action to target people in their 20s, 30s and 40s until last year, when the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra (SPCO) and the Minnesota Orchestra launched, respectively, Club2030 and the Crescendo Project.

Their strategies are decidedly different. Whereas Club2030 simply offers low ticket prices to draw a younger demographic to SPCO concerts, the Crescendo Project offers receptions, educational events and package deals to build a cohesive social network of younger classical-music fans.

Unlike past years when ticket sales often exceeded 30 percent of an orchestra's annual revenues, now that share usually plateaus around 15 to 25 percent, said orchestra consultant Drew McManus. Decreasing ticket sales mean that modern-day orchestras must rely on donations and endowment funds as their main sources of sustenance. Both Twin Cities groups need to develop a loyal, younger patronage that not only buys tickets, but also will age into their big-time donors by 2040.

Orchestras continues: Building "the audience of the future." **E14** ▶
Q&A: Violist Ben Ullery, 26, on ways to attract young patrons. **E14**

When you care enough to watch the very best

• Older viewers and actors alike are increasingly turning to the Hallmark Channel.

neal justin television



Hollywood is not a nostalgic town. The TV stars of yesterday might get a star on the sidewalk, but they are often shunned when it comes to what they truly covet: another

juicy role.

But in recent years, veteran actors have thrived on the Hallmark Channel, television's most popular "retirement" center. The marquee names — Ed Asner ("Lou Grant"), Corbin Bernsen ("L.A. Law"), Meredith Baxter ("Family Ties") and Greg Evigan ("My Two Dads") — may not get invitations to the Teen Choice Awards, but they're big draws for viewers of a certain age who still think Patrick Duffy is dreamy.

"I think the people watching the Hallmark Channel are happy to see us," said Donna Mills, best known for her role as Abby Ewing on the hit '80s soap opera "Knots Landing."

Justin continues: Westerns have helped bring in viewers. **E16** ▶



Expanding the conversation for book lovers

Today marks the first day of the Star Tribune's revamped books coverage, a weekly homage to books and reading. It includes more reviews, more local coverage and more recommendations, as well as a redesigned online presence. We want these pages, and our website, to be a place you can go to for a great weekly conversation about books. New books editor Laurie Hertzler explains it all on **page E7**. Then join the conversation at startribune.com/books.

Youth movement

• ORCHESTRAS FROM EI

The SPCO's Club2030 offers any self-declared 20- to 39-year-old — and a guest of any age — access to \$10, best-available-seated tickets to the orchestra's Ordway concert series. The lowering of ticket prices follows a similar move made in 2005 for the orchestra's neighborhood series, but Club2030 differs in offering the discount only to a specific age group.

Jon Limbacher, the SPCO's vice president and chief operating officer, described it as an "alarmingly simple" deal that attracts a younger audience, but with no frills, such as post-concert receptions or meet-and-greet events. During Club2030's inaugural season last year, the orchestra sold 1,100 \$10 tickets, and registered 2,000 members.

"We're not going to get caught in the trap of trying to provide a social experience," he said. "We fish drawing people for the wrong reasons ... [and] that's not our core competency."

Limbacher's remarks seem aimed directly at the Minnesota Orchestra's strategy. Its group for young professionals, dubbed the Crescendo Project, has no stated age range, but tends to garner interest from 25- to 45-year-olds. A \$120 annual membership fee (\$180 for couples) grants access to discounted tickets, two free member-only events and three concert nights discounted to \$25 apiece — each with a pre-concert networking reception and a post-concert round of drinks with orchestra members.

During its soft launch last season, the Crescendo Project hosted three trial events that attracted a total of about 250 people.

"It's more about developing long-lasting relationships with the music and these people. ... It's not so much about access to cheap tickets," said Scott Mays, advance officer in the orchestra's development department. "We want to encourage the next generation of community leaders to be involved with the arts."

Young and poor

Most orchestras would salivate at the chance to lower the average age of their patrons. More than 40 percent of the audience for both orchestras is 65 and older. But care must be taken, and balance achieved.



"It's a mistake to get too hung up on age," said Limbacher. "If the average age of our audience was 30, we wouldn't be raising \$2.5 million a year from gifts. ... We'd be out of business if that was the case."

Because ticket sales provide just 16 percent of the SPCO's yearly revenue, selling underpriced tickets to young concertgoers at the Ordway is a smart, long-term investment to build "the audience of the future," Limbacher said. But he emphasized that the SPCO did not start Club2030 specifically to convert sin-

gle-ticket buyers into subscribers and then life-long patrons. Instead, Club2030 reflects the SPCO's obligation as a community institution to cultivate interest among a younger audience — but if participants also develop a bond with the orchestra, that is all for the better, he said.

Megan Gardner, 32, board co-chair for the Crescendo Project, moved to the Twin Cities less than a year ago. One of the first things she did to get settled was join as many arts groups for young patrons as she could, since her previous homes — from New York City to San

Francisco to cities in Europe — all had vibrant arts scenes.

"There is a distinction between creating access for everyone versus creating access for a group of people who want to have that network, and value that education and volunteerism," she said. "You don't have to be 65 and have dumped a lot of dollars to have an impact on an organization."

The Crescendo Project caters specifically to people with enough cash and interest in classical music to justify the \$120 membership fee and attend several events a year. Most likely, members will be those who already have a connection to the orchestra and would like to take one more step in vowing loyalty — and funds — to the institution.

Even so, McManus remains skeptical that any program could produce big-time donors for an orchestra decades down the road.

"Betting whether or not you'll get a lot of money out of these people later on in life is like trying to project what the economic forecast is going to be in 40, 50 years," he said. "The core large donors — the people who give the really high seven, eight figures — are the people who will always be the target donors for orchestras, and those people aren't poor in their 20s, typically."

But the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra is satisfied with single-ticket buyers who take advantage of \$10 tickets once, twice or even eight times, without making a longer-term monetary commitment.

Jennifer Loupe, 35, lives in Fargo, N.D., about four hours from the Ordway. Already a regular patron of the SPCO, Loupe made it to only one or two concerts a season before Club2030 started; the cost of gas kept her from driving down more often. With discounted tickets, she upped the number to six concerts last season.

The SPCO's goal is not only to attract a younger audience, but also a newer one that might not have a reason to enter the Ordway except that at \$10, it costs about the same as a movie.

"We did very well on Valentine's Day," Limbacher said. "We had a younger couple in front of me, and they were kissing in between the pieces. We've found the formula, and I'm very optimistic."