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Free tickets for children one of many new initiatives planned by Cleveland Orchestra

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By Zachary Lewis, The Plain Dealer Follow

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Lisa DeJong, The PD

Last season's opening-night performance of Mozart's "Cosi Fan Tutte" with the Cleveland Orchestra attracted a full house to Severance Hall. The goal of the orchestra's new Center for Future Audiences is to fill every seat at every concert.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Taking the kids to a performance by the Cleveland Orchestra is about to become a much less costly proposition. Soon, in fact, their tickets will be free.

Young adults, too, are about to find seats at Severance Hall easier to come by, through special discounts available online.

It's all part of a long-term effort beginning Tuesday with the creation of a Center for Future Audiences, whose objective will be to engage more people with classical music and remove economic, geographic and cultural barriers to attending live

performances.

"Our intention is to begin to change the institution," said Gary Hanson, the orchestra's executive director, speaking prior to the center's public launch Tuesday, Oct. 26. "I believe we're well-positioned to manage the balance between excellence and relevance."

First among several programs to be enacted by the center most likely will be an online club for adults ages 18 to 34, whose members will have access to heavily discounted rush tickets.

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Next, beginning this summer, the orchestra plans to offer all children under 18 free admission to the lawn at Blossom Music Center. Currently, only children 12 and under are eligible.

Finally, the orchestra intends to extend the under-18 offer to include some or all of its performances at Severance Hall. Ross Binnie, the orchestra's chief marketing officer and director of the new center, said pilot programs featuring this offer will launch next season, with full implementation taking place later.

Details regarding this and the other plans have yet to be finalized. How these programs will be funded, too, is to be announced at the press event Oct. 26

Still, the larger mission is clear. "The goal is no seat left behind," Binnie said. "I'm going to push as hard as I can to make that a reality."

But the center will do more than arrange free and discounted tickets. To address the "geographic" and "cultural" barriers, the orchestra also plans to appear more often in local communities -- taking inspiration from the group that began playing recently at the Happy Dog bar on Cleveland's West Side -- and fill seats by literally bringing people to Severance Hall. Programming ideas will come in part from the musicians and music director Franz Welser-Möst.

"The drive toward increasing relevance is one endorsed by all constituencies in the institution," Hanson noted.

One such effort is already underway. Prior to last Friday's matinee concert, the orchestra sent buses to pick up listeners at Beachwood Place and Crocker Park in Westlake.

The same arrangement will be in place for every matinee concert this season. To sign up, call the Severance box office.

"We want to make sure there's no excuse about money, getting here or the welcome you get once you're here," Binnie said. "We're going to turn our plan on its head and say, 'You know what? Come check us out and *then* tell us you don't like it.'"

Behind the development of the Center for Future Audiences is a shift in philosophy, wherein philanthropy will play an ever larger role in sustaining the orchestra. Currently, gifts represent about 45 percent of the budget.

In that scenario, packing the house and nurturing a passion for music are more important than selling tickets. It's a model adopted long ago by universities, and a shift enacted with the goal of substantially increasing the orchestra's endowment in time for its centennial in 2018.

If the orchestra is to be "worthy of extraordinary philanthropy," Hanson said, "we have to demonstrate that the orchestra is prepared to change."

Further spurring development of the center, the first of at least three such entities to be created within the orchestra, are the sobering facts that attendance is declining while ticket prices have increased some 300 percent over the last 20 years, far outpacing household income. On average, it now costs about \$50 to attend a performance at Severance Hall.

"We're all well aware of the economic downturn," said principal horn player Richard King. "We're seeing fewer and fewer people in the seats."

What's more, consumer habits have changed. Increasingly, patrons are buying individual tickets rather than committing to season-long subscriptions, as they did in years past.

Even without need to increase fundraising, in other words, dramatic change is in order.

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"We need to concentrate on making sure as many people as possible have the chance to hear this orchestra," Binnie said. "I have enormous faith that, by 2018, we can have one of the youngest audiences in the country. It's going to change the conversation about us."

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eyehrtfood

October 26, 2010 at 12:40AM

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Hey Cleveland Orchestra... Your Fall/Winter/Spring programming is often SO serious and it's hard to draw a new crowd when they have no idea what's being played (but perhaps easier to draw a crowd if you get them in the seats for a concert they feel comfortable with - and then try and get them to return again...) Having some "greatest hits" weekends sprinkled in throughout the year, not just at Blossom in the Summer, in which the orchestra might play just well known pieces like Beethoven's 5th, The Firebird, Ravel's Bolero, The Four Seasons, etc... - but tunes the average listener might know, might work wonders. But you might have to get over yourself to do that... could be tough. Then perhaps you offer those listeners a bounce-back 50% coupon to another performance.

Also, your Blossom programming is becoming tired... Even your Broadway evenings don't bring in actual big A-list, headlining Broadway stars (LuPone, Bernadette, Brian Stokes Mitchell, etc...) - which one would think the Cleveland Orchestra could easily attract - but 2nd rate "concert-only" performers like "i might actually have been in the chorus of a Broadway musical once, but never had made it back" performers like Doug Lebreque and so forth. Do what Ravinia does and produce a staged musical each summer for a weekend, just as you're doing with opera now at Severance. Ravinia has been doing the Broadway star/musical thing now for about a decade and it's been hugely successful both artistically and with the audience - even leading to a revival of Gypsy on Broadway...

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omar4ever

October 26, 2010 at 2:49AM

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Though there may be something in what you say, I disagree completely with the notion that one of the top orchestras in the world should "dumb down" their programming in order to draw more people in. One of the hallmarks of the Cleveland Orchestra is that they can take some of the most complex music ever written and record it live in a manner that is internationally renown. Prestige is the name of the game, not necessarily ticket sales.

The escalating prices to attend the orchestra have made it difficult for many to attend as much as they would like to, there is no doubt. In this respect, the Orchesta is responsible for pricing themselves out of the typical family budget. But I agree with the article that there is a bigger

issue at hand. With the decline of the middle class in America (and in Cleveland), there has grown something of a cultural shift with respect to the definition of what the finer things in life are. I wonder how many people would attend a concert at Severance 3 or 4 times a year if they only knew the sheer sense of aesthetic fulfillment and community pride that can be derived from it. Judging from the crowds at the free concert on Public Square this last 4th of July holiday, I would say plenty.

I like the Orchestra's new approach. I love that they are reaching out and trying to (re-)introduce themselves to the general public again. This sounds like an approach that will work in the long run.

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realtruth12

October 26, 2010 at 6:40AM

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Wow I can't remember how many months ago it has been when everyone was yelling about their pay. Now look. They can't fill seats. I will say this, yes you are the second best in the nation, BUT if you do this job out of the love for the job than money should not matter. Now the owners are scrambling to solve the issues of how to pay you. Sad. Just do the job and enjoy what you do. A few lead the masses to argue about this months ago. I just pray they don't cause a shutdown do to their greediness. 100k+ pay to work half of what the standard population works isn't too bad...

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hrnplyr

October 26, 2010 at 4:54PM

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realtruth12: "100k+ pay to work half of what the standard population works isn't too bad... "

Really?? You think musicians only work half as much as everyone else?? So the members of the Cleveland Orchestra (one of the best orchestras in the world) magically perform outstanding concerts almost every week without working very hard? That's not much inspiration for students like me who spend 13 hours at school everyday perfecting their art.

Your comment is an insult to musicians who devote their lives to get into an organization like the Cleveland Orchestra.

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unpaysan

October 26, 2010 at 7:36AM

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One of the ways in which these could be paid for would be a large contribution by the union-- the union that continues to demand more and more.

It is not the audience, or lack there of, or the programing that is hurting the performing arts, it is the greed of the unions. Sadly, these organizations that are modeled after the mafia will do to he arts what they have done to our manufacturing, education and public sector employment.

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californie

October 26, 2010 at 9:18AM

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And from major conservatory did you graduate? Do you have any, ANY idea what it takes to become a instrumentalist good enough to play in The Cleveland Orchestra????

Well, I do. Let's start with Suzuki lessons at say, 4 or 5. Those run about \$6000 a year at CIM. Then after a few years you are found to possibly have the caliber to be a professional musician and the "serious" lessons begin, possibly with a member of The Cleveland Orchestra, or someone else of that caliber. Which is obviously gonna cost more than the Suzuki, although you may continue those lessons along side your lessons with the Orchestra member. You will also attend summer music camps like Interlochen,

which is several thousand dollars a pop. And don't forget your instrument. The price of that will go up as you get better and better and better. A high quality instrument worthy of someone who has the ability to play in a major orchestra is tens of thousands of dollars. And that is just for the student. Once you become a professional it may go into the six figures, depending on your stature and what instrument you play. Then there's the conservatory. Which is very, very hard to get into. You will travel around the country, at your expense, to audition for a place in a major conservatory like CIM, Eastman, Oberlin, Julliard, etc. These are all private schools.

Then you graduate, probably after spending considerable time in Europe for special sessions and classes and it's time to audition for a spot in an orchestra. You will compete against thousands of other people as well trained as you are and will probably play in second, or even third tier orchestra for awhile before you are able to get into an ensemble as illustrious as The Cleveland Orchestra.

Oh, and then you expect to be paid well for what you do????

Selfish monster!!

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realtruth12

October 26, 2010 at 7:45AM

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Wow unpaysan well put. I'm sure we are going to get a rash of backlash, but it is so true. I like how you tie it in with other points too. Thank you for the view point. Very poetic...
Most Respectfully

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elanebenes

October 26, 2010 at 7:56AM

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Union employees demand union pay, but they don't want to pay union wages. Union workers get their oil changed on their American cars at Walmart, Jiffy Lube. One union rep told me, "hee hee, it costs less to go to Walmart for an oil change...hee hee..." Union people are the cheapest people out there.

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cledirector

October 27, 2010 at 9:28AM

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It's this kind of nuanced discourse that really makes Cleveland a great place.

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hank44121

October 26, 2010 at 8:36AM

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I remember going to see the orchestra with my class when I was in the 4th grade. That, and the release of Star Wars with its spectacular John Williams score, ignited my passion for orchestral music. Soon, my tastes expanded to include broad swaths of the orchestral repertoire, along with instrumental and chamber music. Classical music is now an integral part of my life.

The attendance problems that the Cleveland Orchestra faces are hardly unique to Cleveland. Nearly every orchestra worldwide is facing this issue. Even for me, an adult with a steady job and decent income, the decision to attend concerts is balanced against the costs.

I am delighted that the Cleveland Orchestra is taking these steps to bring music to young people. It's one step among several that must be taken.

Now, how about adding some diversity to the repertoire? Mahler and Bruckner only go so far.

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dulynoted

October 26, 2010 at 8:43AM



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I remember quite well when I attended elementary school it was a yearly field trip to hear the Cleveland Orchestra perform...all schools did at that time and there was not an empty seat in the house. And, it was free.

For the orchestra to perform for school aged children again would be wonderful and allow them to hear music they probably have never heard before. And, hopefully some will be inspired.

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californie

October 26, 2010 at 9:35AM

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These are good moves by the Orchestra. The most important thing for any performing organization is to build audience and you've got to go after the kids. The kids are your future audience!

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realtruth12

October 26, 2010 at 9:38AM

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californie If your in this for the money your in it for all the wrong reasons!! It's people like you who make this industry look bad.. If anything you should be happy and not bitter about your story. Many unwealthy kids in the area would love to switch places and I bet not one would cry like you about it. Not surprising. I knew my lines would pull one of you selfish rich rockstars out of the woodwork. Keep your people all focused on what isn't imporant. Money. Those before you who started all this never cried about money. They did it all out of respect and love. Times have changed. Sad.

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Tom Klaber

October 26, 2010 at 2:44PM

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realtruth, what are you talking about? The orchestra is trying to developpe a future audience for its product.Why do you think it's just about the money? Is planning for a future now a bad thing. You're not making any sense at all.

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philipdeoliveira

October 26, 2010 at 5:57PM

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It's really a shame when pedestrian "music lovers" think one of the world's great orchestras should answer to their "tastes." The upper class is so dumb about so many things, especially art and classical music. But they subsidize it all, so orchestras have to play the same tired old Beethoven to keep them paying up. As for the general public, classical music isn't for you. Go listen to your brainless pop tunes, or else leave your amateurish expectations about classical music at the door if you ever go to hear a great orchestra.

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