

# Taking up Residence with Eighth Blackbird

For at least a few decades, the artistic residency has benefited small musical arts organizations. An artist-in-residence is an individual or group of artists who are given the space by an institution or a patron to develop and release creative work, while also satisfying the needs of the sponsor. Apart from this basic idea, an artistic residency may take a variety of forms. It could last for a specified period or could be held indefinitely. Despite the name, a residency does not always involve a physical relocation: a short visit may be claimed as a residency. This case study profiles a pair of contrasting artist residency agreements in the portfolio of a single musical arts organization—the contemporary chamber music sextet Eighth Blackbird. You will examine the nature and outcomes of the residencies, assess the merits of the organization's arrangements with their hosts, and consider new residency ideas for Eighth Blackbird, given the completion of one of them at the close of the case.

## EIGHTH BLACKBIRD

This case study was prepared by Michael Alan Anderson, Associate Professor of Musicology, Eastman School of Music. Eastman case studies are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.

## The Value of a Residency

Chamber music ensembles and small choirs have typically landed artistic residencies in academic, cultural, or ecclesiastical institutions, which have allowed these music organizations some financial stability and engagement with constituents, as they develop artistic projects. Partnerships with institutions work best when the entities hold similar visions in their affiliation. Artistic and institutional goals that align are more likely to generate close and enduring relationships between the organizations. If the partners' goals are not in harmony, the music organization may have to adapt its product or channel an untapped creative side to fulfill a patron's desires for the residency. Concerts, demonstrations, and teaching activities are key areas in which the sponsoring institution might have special requests that define the scope of a residency, provided the ensemble has the capacity to execute the needs of the host. The music organization may, in turn, have requests and needs that stretch the usual practices of the underwriting institution.

An artistic residency often emerges from an existing relationship between the musicians and the sponsor. The more that the relationship can be nurtured during the residency, the more likely it is to continue or expand the range of activities. Institutional residencies sometimes can be political in nature, so forming positive alliances with key decision-makers and supporters at the institution can help ensure the longevity and utility of a residency. Other relationships may develop in the course of a residency, as an ensemble becomes part of the fabric of the sponsor's world. Arts organizations may interact profitably with students in an academic setting, but resident artists may also identify future patrons and presenters. An artistic residency is an achievement that is usually absorbed into a group's standard "bio"; in some cases, the artist-host association may define an arts organization. The ensemble Eighth Blackbird has deftly produced short-term and

ongoing residency agreements with a number of institutions in the United States, two of which reveal the surprising breadth of activities that a musical arts organization can accept in a residency to achieve the goals of both sponsor and artist.

## The Birds Nesting

Founded in 1996 at Oberlin College, the GRAMMY-award-winning sextet Eighth Blackbird has set a high standard for the practice of "contemporary classical music." The group takes its name from the eighth stanza of Wallace Stevens's 1917 poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Eighth Blackbird coaxes a vivid yet indescribable sound world from traditional instruments—piano, flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and percussion. And it draws on an array of world musics to separate itself from historical western composition. The ensemble has commissioned hundreds of new works from a long list of ground-breaking modern composers including Steve Reich, Jennifer Higdon, Steve Mackey, and Amy Beth Kirsten. Eighth Blackbird's use of staging and multimedia in performance has defined its approach to twenty-first-century music-making, which has attracted audiences both learned and unschooled in contemporary art music.

The organizational structure of Eighth Blackbird is not surprising for a group of its size and its artistic concentration, but its \$1.2 million annual budget has caused management and governance of the group to be transformed since its inception. A Chicago-based operation since 2000, the enterprise offers full-time employment to its six musicians and has a small staff, including a managing director. All musicians in Eighth Blackbird function as artistic directors, a democratic ideal for shaping music in a close-knit group, which also has the potential to create gridlock in rehearsal or for larger artistic decisions. Self-administered for the first eight years of its existence, the players now have a board of directors that meets four times per year. All members of the sextet sit on the board, but