

UMS Renegade: **Building a Brand of Cutting-Edge Performances**

How do arts organizations successfully program groundbreaking, challenging, and forward-thinking performances? This case profiles the University Musical Society (UMS), a performing arts presenter based at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Throughout its history, UMS has programmed uncommon and contemporary works of many kinds. In 2011, these efforts took a significant step forward with the launch of Renegade, performances that feature provocative artistic works. The case traces the development of Renegade, detailing its genesis, programming process, and marketing tactics. In April 2015, Renegade received national attention when UMS was awarded substantial funding from The Wallace Foundation to study trends and develop initiatives for building sustainable Renegade audiences. As UMS's new Renegade project manager, you will be charged with assessing the current status of the program, interpreting the results of the Wallace-funded research, and charting the future of Renegade. What are the best practices for programming Renegade works and how does UMS create an experience-based Renegade brand?



This case study was prepared by Eric Michael Laprade. 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.

UMS Background

Founded in 1879, the University Musical Society (UMS) is a performing arts presenter located at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. One of the oldest performing arts presenters in the country, UMS has its roots in a choral organization known as the “Messiah Club,” which constituted a group of community and university members who gathered to study and perform Handel’s iconic oratorio. The club gave its first performance in December 1879 and shortly thereafter was renamed the Choral Union. Given that a large number of Choral Union members were also connected to the university, UMS was officially established in 1880. UMS originally included the Choral Union and the University Orchestra, and it presented an annual series of concerts featuring local and visiting artists. In 1880 UMS founded the Ann Arbor School of Music, which it led for sixty years. In 1940, the school was gifted to university, and it has since evolved into the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.

UMS maintains a strategic affiliation with the University of Michigan. While UMS is a stand-alone, not-for-profit organization, it receives between 10% and 12% of its annual budget from various departments within the university. The majority of UMS events occur in university performance venues. The presenter regularly collaborates with members of the college community, and university leaders serve in ex-officio positions on the UMS board.

From the initial performance of Handel’s *Messiah* in 1879, UMS programming has expanded dramatically. In the 1960s, UMS started to diversify its portfolio of offerings beyond the confines of standard orchestral works. It instituted the Chamber Arts Series in 1962. And while jazz and dance programs were offered sporadically beginning in the late 1960s, formal series were initiated in the early 1990s. A theatre

series arrived at the turn of the twenty-first century. In 2011, UMS initiated “Renegade,” a collection of performances that offers “challenging artistic works that are often edgy, sometimes controversial, and always surprising.”¹ Currently, UMS presents between 60 and 75 performances per year and more than 100 free educational activities each season. Under the direction of President Kenneth C. Fischer, UMS’s commitment to artistic excellence was recognized in 2014 when the organization was awarded the National Medal of the Arts, the highest public artistic honor the government bestows. UMS was the first university-related arts presenter to receive the honor.

The UMS mission is “to inspire individuals and enrich communities by connecting audiences and artists in uncommon and engaging experiences.” Annual programming is diverse and of the highest artistic merit, as demonstrated by the 2015–16 season brochure ([Appendix 1](#)). Audience engagement initiatives have included post-performance “Artist Q&A” sessions for dance and theatre events, post-performance “Breakfast Download Discussions” following dance performances, and pre-performance “Tune In” discussions before Renegade offerings. “UMS Night School” is an annual six-week program that meets once per week and seeks to broaden audience members’ understanding of UMS performances. UMS regularly integrates its performing artists into the U-M community through their participation in the Penny W. Stamps Speaker Series and Saturday Morning Physics program. The organization is equally committed to education programs, offering school-day performances, in-school workshops, professional development opportunities for educators, and residency learning opportunities for U-M students and the community. Since its earliest days as an informal group of music lovers, UMS has evolved into one of the

¹ UMS 2016–17 Season Brochure.