

The Eastman **Case Studies**

ANALYZE | QUESTION | ANTICIPATE
ASSESS | STRATEGIZE | SOLVE

Omaha Under the Radar: Localizing an Experimental Arts Festival



INSTITUTE FOR
MUSIC LEADERSHIP



EASTMAN
SCHOOL OF MUSIC
UNIVERSITY of ROCHESTER

Omaha Under the Radar: Localizing an Experimental Arts Festival

Founded in 2014, Omaha Under the Radar is an experimental arts festival that seeks to empower leading-edge performers in Nebraska's largest city and educate local audiences through avant-garde programs. The early success of the summer festival has rested on its innovative programming, venue partnerships, and community education. In addition to the local artists it promotes, Omaha Under the Radar solicits performers from around the country to contribute to the festival. This study examines how the festival organizers continue to focus on the local community in the face of increasing national interest from outside performers. The case concludes with a scenario involving a large, unrestricted gift that could challenge the organizational priorities of the festival.



This case study was prepared by Phil Pierick. *The 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.

Forging a New Festival

In the summer of 2014, Omaha Under the Radar (OUtR) held its inaugural festival dedicated to experimental performance. The festival has since offered the widest variety of live contemporary

"For us, it was really important to share that Omaha has its own music scene—not just famous artists from outside. You need to really care about the community."

*—Kate Campbell,
Artistic Director of
OUtR*

dance, music, and theatre programs ever presented in Nebraska's largest city. More than 200 artists from over a dozen American cities have presented at the festival, which annually features around ten multi-set events over four days. Despite the geographic diversity of its performers, the organization is markedly different than other summer music or arts festivals throughout the country because its principal focus is to present local performers from Omaha. OUtR views

itself as a community arts organization drawing from—and building upon—both a local scene and a local audience. It resists categorization as a "destination" music or fringe festival aiming to attract a national following. The mission of the organization hinges on a desire to elevate and empower Omaha-based experimental performers within their own community as well as to connect them with a second community of like-minded performers from around the United States.

OUtR was founded by soprano and Omaha native Amanda DeBoer, a member of Quince Contemporary Vocal Ensemble and the Chicago-based Ensemble Dal Niente. Omaha-based composer-pianist Stacy Barelos teamed up with DeBoer, followed by two Omaha natives who have since come aboard—composer Aubrey Byerly and pianist Kate Campbell. This volunteer team of organizers would become

the four-member board of directors for OUtR when it was designated a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in 2016.

In small non-profit organizations, it is not uncommon for members of a board to also occupy executive roles. Serving as the festival director, DeBoer manages venues and artists for OUtR as well as the festival's marketing and advertising. Campbell oversees programming as artistic director, while Byerly manages the organization's finances and development. As education director, Barelos coordinates outreach events to bridge the gap between performers and audiences. She further involves local students and adults in organizing creative projects. In this way, community members with an interest in experimentation and the arts can engage as creators, not just as members of the festival's audience. Barelos and DeBoer live in Omaha, whereas Campbell and Byerly now live in California. All four maintain strong connections to the Omaha community, fueling their passion for OUtR and its mission. On the festival's intense local focus, Campbell says, "For us, it was really important to share that Omaha has its own music scene—not just famous artists from outside. You need to really care about the community."

OUtR's programming has ranged from contemporary masterworks, such as Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* and Luciano Berio's *Folk Songs*, to world premieres, interdisciplinary performances, and installations. The festival gives preference to premieres and to works created within the last 25 years, emphasizing non-commercial and independently-created pieces. The organizers intentionally select aesthetic risk-takers—those performers who reside on the artistic fringes. The 2016 festival offered ten events held at five wide-ranging venues from an art museum to a converted warehouse. The venues also spanned four distinct neighborhoods in Omaha, spreading the festival's

reach into multiple residential, business, and artistic communities. Though this geographical breadth requires careful planning for visiting performers without their own transportation, artists have a chance to see more of Omaha than a centralized location for the festival would allow.

Going forward, one of the board's goals is to increase the variety of programming, which currently leans more heavily toward contemporary music performance in the Western classical tradition. Historically, more than half of the applicants to the festival have been musicians, even though the festival welcomes all kinds of performance proposals. All four organizers are musicians, which could explain these results. Their contacts and circles are largely drawn from the musical sphere. For future festivals, the board aims to increase the representation of dance, theatrical, mixed media, and interdisciplinary performances on its annual slate of offerings.

Programming a Homegrown Festival

OUTR's emphasis on local performers ensures that the festival is uniquely relevant to the community in which it takes place. Local talent showcases the festival's roots in Omaha and heightens its relevance for the community, according to DeBoer. It also helps to empower local experimental performers, providing them with a platform to reach both a potential audience in their home community and other performers with whom to network. While the festival would like to keep the focus principally on homegrown acts, roughly half of the programming comprises outside artists. Calls for performers have been distributed each year in different ways to attract local and national acts. The executive team announces opportunities through social media, word of mouth, and various institutions ranging from universities with strong composition and new music performance programs to the Society of Composers, Inc. At present, about three-quarters of all applications

come from out-of-state performers. This means that the festival has had to be selective with visiting artists; on the other hand, there is a lower barrier to entry for local groups.

Led by artistic director Campbell, a panel made up of the festival's organizers reviews the applications and chooses the outside acts for OUTR. This group has consulted outside artists when applicable to assess specific proposals in non-music disciplines. The panel was tasked with reviewing more than 250 applications for the 2016 festival. In the review process, the organizers do not simply opt for the applicant with the highest profile. Rather, they concentrate on whether an applicant is likely to be a good fit for this local festival. It is a much more difficult decision than selecting a prominent artist who could bring in a large audience at a marquee event. To keep the out-of-state proposals at bay, OUTR did not advertise nationally for its 2017 festival. Though this decision did result in fewer applicants for the panel to review (about 150), DeBoer notes that the applications they did receive from non-local artists were overall more established acts—groups with longer and more comprehensive performance histories—than in previous years.

In an effort to emphasize the community-focused nature of the niche festival, the application specifically asks outside performers what interests them about performing in a small market such as Omaha. While the committee is not looking for a specific answer to pass a threshold on this question, the way an applicant responds to this question helps the festival organizers and the volunteer panel to pare down the pool of submissions to the acts that are most likely to fit in with the OUTR values and atmosphere. The panel specifically looks for community-oriented, open-minded performers in hopes of forming lasting relationships between local artists (and patrons) and experimental performers from around the country. The festival has an inclusive and social atmosphere,

allowing the performers ample opportunities to interact with audiences and with each other. OUtR intends to foster a sense of community between local and outside performers that will serve both well in their futures.

One piece of advice that OUtR board members receive regularly from colleagues and local supporters is that the festival should bring in one famous headliner each year. At first glance, the idea seems at odds with the mission of the festival to celebrate local artists who may not have the stature of prominent experimental performers. Such a proposal also could result in tension between the headliner and other performers at a festival known for a socially integrated environment. In short, the festival risks having a marquee artist overshadow the festival's remaining performers that OUtR aims to showcase and empower. The small number of people in Omaha who would recognize a famous experimental performer are likely to be attending the festival already, so DeBoer doubts that this would cause any noticeable uptick in festival attendance. She insists, "Most of our target audience does not care if you're famous in New York. What they care about is a really unique experience." Unique experiences, for both the audience and performers, are precisely that which the board endeavors to create at each offering of OUtR.

Curation and the Artist Experience

Once the artists are selected for the festival, many decisions remain regarding the curation or presentation of the festival's events. Technological demands and other practical concerns sometimes dictate the scheduling of an act and its venue. But logistics are not the primary focus of OUtR's curation. The board believes that the most compelling events are those that combine a variety of contrasting sets presented with a sense of progression. One benefit of such programming is that it often reveals unexpected

common ground between superficially unrelated performances. At one festival, for example, an event opened with FOCI Arts performing Steven Takasugi's delicate and intense work *Strange Autumn* and closed with an improvised noise band. The aesthetics of both have a lot in common, despite the fact that each typically draws separate audiences. This mixed programming of artists, who each exercise complete creative control, creates an audience experience in which "every set is like opening a new door to a secret room," as DeBoer states.

Many of the festival's venues already regularly program or highlight contemporary and experimental performers and artists. But matching performers with appropriate venues is still a crucial and time-consuming task. "Hard-edge" groups with louder or more provocative performances are typically scheduled at late-night venues, where fewer children attend; dance companies and other groups that feature movement may need a large and sturdy performance space. Despite the best efforts of the organizers, the match is not always a perfect

one. "Sometimes you put the quiet flute set in the loud bar," DeBoer remarked. "Twenty-five minutes of just realizing that this was wrong...you can't always predict that." The selection committee must also face the reality that work samples submitted in an application are sometimes quite different than the work that would be presented at the festival. This scenario is almost unavoidable at a festival that prioritizes a spirit of experimentation and promotes new works. Furthermore, out-of-town performers are unlikely to be familiar with the venues and therefore may not realize a mismatch in time to correct it. For example,

"Most of our target audience does not care if you're famous in New York. What they care about is a really unique experience."

*—Amanda DeBoer,
Festival Director of
OUtR*

a modern dance and percussion duo applied for the festival with work samples of loud and physically expansive performances, but they created a new piece that was quiet and delicate, which the festival unknowingly slated in a massive venue.

The organizing team tries to ensure that OUtR's artists have a good experience at the festival as well. Ensuring positive takeaways begins with fair compensation. DeBoer is aiming to increase the fees paid to all artists at the festival, but she also notes that the festival has other intangible benefits for visiting performers: "The thing that I have to offer is a beautiful experience in a new town with a new group of people in a cool venue. [Offering a good experience] is the thing that I really spend time agonizing over." Many performers will attend each other's events during the four-day festival, providing an opportunity for post-concert discussions of the presented works. Further connecting these visitors to the Omaha community, local organizers and performers often open their homes to out-of-town artists during the festival.

Saxophonist Jacob Kopcienski, a visiting soloist at OUtR 2016, commented on the surprising and impressive atmosphere of the festival. He liked

how festival management secured venues already invested in experimental creativity and in local programming. Kopcienski also valued the opportunity to meet cutting-edge artists not only from Omaha, but also from New Orleans, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere. He further noted that the organizers and performers were all down to earth: "There was a lot of effort to engage with venues

that were already doing this kind of work themselves. There was a strong sense of ecology at the local arts scene." In addition to his solo performance event, Kopcienski also played saxophone alongside other Omaha-based musicians in a raucous rendition of Frederic Rzewski's experiment in error and inaccuracy, *Les Moutons de Panurge* (*Panurge's Sheep*). It was a collaborative musical experience emblematic of the collegial and interactive vibe that defines OUtR.

Community Outreach

In its second season, OUtR launched Soundry—a series of educational workshops that runs concurrent with the festival's performance events. The program admittedly focuses heavily on music, but offers an outlet for community members who may or may not have musical training to explore sound art and different creative practices for organizing sound. Soundry is held at the warehouse arts space Kaneko, one of the festival's partner venues, and is spearheaded by outreach coordinator Stacy Barelos, with assistance from OUtR artists and board members. Participants are almost exclusively local community members. OUtR has also held group talks during past festivals, at which performers discuss the processes of preparation and collaboration for the work they will present at the festival. Such talks provide community members with the opportunity to interact personally with artists and to understand in particular the genesis of a work and the creative process more broadly.

The basic idea of Soundry has spawned related educational programs for students and young adults. "Soundry Explore" is led by visiting OUtR performers each day of the festival and gives high school students the chance to build their own instruments, learn about listening and improvisation, explore extended techniques and unconventional performance possibilities, and try their hand at composing new music. "Soundry Explore" students create a performance work that is featured on the festival with OUtR artists performing. Another spinoff

"The thing that I have to offer is a beautiful experience in a new town with a new group of people in a cool venue."

**—Amanda DeBoer,
Festival Director of
OUtR**

called “Soundry Create” is a week-long summer institute during the festival that targets college students. It features sessions on composition, improvisation, sound-art, and professional development. Registration is capped at 20 tuition-paying participants for each program to allow a high degree of individual feedback and coaching for each student. Scholarships are offered every year on an individual basis.

The festival’s educational programs and outreach initiatives have generated great interest in experimental works among a growing number of Omahans, some of whom wish to donate their time and resources back to the festival. OUtR depends on the support of between 10 and 15 unpaid volunteers to put on the festival. Volunteers are involved in many aspects of the events. They set up and prepare venues, manage sound and lighting at events, supervise the event stages, sell tickets and merchandise, and even provide transportation for out-of-town performers. The involvement of local volunteers helps to further connect the community to the artists, delivering on the central goal of OUtR.

Finances and Advertising

Since 2014, the budget of OUtR has increased steadily, as its reputation and the quality of events have likewise grown. The festival has received financial support from the Nebraska Arts Council and New Music USA. Such grant funding accounts for roughly 40% of the festival budget, with individual donations and business sponsors accounting for another third. The remaining revenue comes from festival ticket and merchandise sales (**Appendix 1**). Local sponsorship is an area of funding on the rise, though this has largely materialized through in-kind donations of goods and services. Money earned from Soundry tuition goes directly to the instructors as compensation for their time and also bolsters the budget for the festival’s performance events.

With grant funding and fundraising holding steady, increasing ticket sales through higher attendance is a priority for the board. OUtR employs a multi-pronged advertising campaign within the community, with many low-cost options for announcing festival events. The organizers distribute traditional press releases to local media outlets, contact arts and culture blogs and local magazines

OUtR spends less than 10% of its total budget on advertising.

for stories, purchase social media advertising, deliver posters throughout the city, and arrange appearances on local TV with performances and artist interviews. Festival venues and sponsoring organizations reach out to their own networks via newsletters and additional promotional materials. In total, less than 10% of the festival’s total budget is spent on advertising. Unsurprisingly, OUtR’s largest expense is artists’ fees—the majority of which go to out-of-town performers. While on the surface, this may appear to contradict the festival’s vision of itself as a community arts organization, the higher fees are necessary to cover travel expenses incurred by visiting performers. Remaining expenses include venue and equipment rentals, operational costs, and merchandise. Ideally, the board would like to pay the festival’s volunteer workers, if finances allow in the future.

Right-sizing the Festival for the Omaha Community

Attendance has remained relatively consistent for the nascent arts festival. OUtR organizers have attracted a small local following of Omaha-based acts in building the festival’s audience. For its ten annual events, the festival brings in around 1,000 patrons in total. The audience that OUtR draws is demographically mixed, ranging from teens and 20-somethings to young families and retired Omahans. The remarkable breadth represents a larger cross-section of the community than one

might suspect at a festival devoted to experimental performance. The variety and geographical dispersion of the venues in particular allows the festival to tap into different Omaha communities.

Though there is room to grow the audience for OUtR—particularly for the festival’s final (and largest) event on Saturday night—the total number of patrons works well with the current arrangement of the festival’s venues. A sudden influx of patrons in future years could mean rethinking many of the smaller, more intimate performance sites that have become mainstays of the festival. Board members, artists, and patrons have all built relationships with these venues that they wish to maintain. The schedule of the festival is already tightly packed, typically with three daily events Thursday through Saturday plus an opening night performance on Wednesday. Because OUtR is not a “destination” festival, the schedule is designed to allow those working during business hours to attend all or most events on weekdays. Those days are already at maximum capacity for the community. “We don’t really need a thousand-seater...the size of our venues is good,” says DeBoer. Adding more events overall to accommodate increased audience interest would fundamentally alter the structure of the festival, requiring either additional days, events earlier in the day, or overlapping events—all of which could result in decreased attendance at each event. Booking more performers and venues for additional events on another day would also require more financial resources. While the organizers do hope that their audience base continues to grow, this growth is likely to be modest and gradual, with the relevant programming and venue adjustments to follow as necessary.

The board is committed to drawing an audience of enthusiasts for the experience of live, experimental performance. OUtR would rather not “pad” their audience numbers with people who visit for the hype.

To this aim, OUtR has carefully chosen the types of venues and the language that it uses to advertise the festival, ensuring that both accurately reflect the experimental nature of the festival’s artistic work, instead of relying on advertising aimed to entice a general audience. The communication plan de-emphasizes audience reach in the Omaha market in favor of efforts targeting the most likely audience for the niche festival. Additionally, while out-of-town audience members are always welcome at OUtR, the board is resolute in its assertion that this is a local event specifically created with an Omaha audience in mind. To that end, the organizers make no effort to advertise the festival nationally.

*

A lifelong Omaha resident and longtime patron of the arts has approached the OUtR board, announcing her intent to contribute a one-time gift of \$15,000 to OUtR for its next festival. The donor puts no specific stipulations on how the funds are to be used, commenting only that she is impressed and encouraged by the community that has formed around this local festival and wants to be invested in its continued success. The gift is a boon for the festival, effectively doubling the annual budget of OUtR. Members of the board have no shortage of ideas for how to disburse this unexpected gift, but have not yet reached a consensus. One board member has requested a report on how to proceed in light of this donation. How can OUtR deploy these funds in accordance with its mission as an organization centered on experimental performance and the Omaha community?

As mentioned, the size of the audience that OUtR attracts has remained stable each year, despite steady increases in the reputation and budget of the festival:

- Should OUtR plan to expand the local base of Omahans attending the festival through deeper

marketing efforts and an increase in outreach events? Outline some key areas that could constitute a marketing campaign to achieve this aim.

- Could an expansion of Soundry or the addition of year-round outreach events be successful in garnering a sustained interest in experimental performance within the community? Would this ultimately translate into increased community engagement and attendance at the festival? What goals can be set and how can marketing efforts be measured?

Advertising is a small piece of the OUtR budget at present. The festival currently spends over 70% of its budget on artist fees (the majority going to out-of-town performers) and less than 10% on advertising. Given the local mission of OUtR, should these proportions be altered?

- What is the case for directing the gift toward artists? Is there an argument for increasing the presence of national artists in the festival as a way to generate more local interest? Or is the community-centered mission of the festival in conflict with a larger national spotlight?
- Could the recruitment of prominent national performers help awaken potential experimental performers from Omaha? If OUtR uses the donation to bring in a “big name” headliner from out of town, how would this serve its local mission?

Identify the pros and cons of options that OUtR could pursue, ultimately making a recommendation for action to the board based on the festival’s values and mission.

APPENDIX 1**Omaha Under The Radar
Statement of Activities**

Year Ended December 31, 2016

	<u>Unrestricted</u>
Support	
Nebraska Arts Council grant	\$ 4,186
Omaha Gives	\$ 1,545
Special events:	
February Fundraiser	\$ 2,250
Total Support	<u>\$ 7,981</u>
Revenues	
Ticket and T-shirt Cash	\$ 1,781
Ticket and T-shirt PayPal	\$ 1,887
Soundry Camp Tuition	\$ 810
Total Revenue	<u>\$ 4,468</u>
Total Support and Revenue	<u>\$ 12,449</u>
Expenses	
Program Services Expense	
Artist and Contractor Fees	\$ 9,751
Supporting Service Expense	
Office	\$ 150
Equipment	\$ 858
Food	\$ 182
Marketing	\$ 1,071
Rental	\$ 510
Tax	\$ 67
Total Expenses	<u>\$ 12,590</u>
Change in Net Assets	\$ (141)

Note: This does not include in-kind donations of services, including hotels and accommodations, food and alcohol, advertising space, venue and space usage, etc. Neither does this Statement of Activities include the beginning and ending Net Assets.



EASTMAN
SCHOOL OF MUSIC

UNIVERSITY *of* ROCHESTER