

The Crossing at a Crossroads

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Recognize and explain the value of a purpose-driven arts organization.
- Discuss the benefits and risks of commissioned works of art.
- Suggest audience metrics for a mission-centric arts enterprise.
- Recommend a digital marketing strategy for reaching niche audiences.

Topics For Discussion

Purpose-driven and Commissioned Art

The Crossing is a Philadelphia-based professional vocal ensemble, which performs and records contemporary choral music. Donald Nally founded and continues to direct the group. Central to The Crossing's art are commissioned projects from a broad spectrum of living composers. Over 90 commissions have been made as of the publication of this case study. While many arts organizations commission new works, The Crossing has also earned a reputation for its boldness in presenting music that speaks to social or political issues of our time. The description "mission-driven" or "purpose-drive" captures the notion.

- According to Nally, The Crossing serves as a kind of "journalist in musical form." Poll students' reaction to this assertion. In what ways is The Crossing a kind of musical journalist or chronicler? In what ways is it more like an opinion writer or commentator?
- The case study presents four choral projects undertaken by The Crossing, which exemplify not only issues-based art but also success in presenting it. Walk through each of the commissioned projects with students to understand key differences and general reactions.
 - ♦ David Lang's *statement to the court* was premiered in 2010. The text derived from a sentencing speech given by socialist Eugene Debs, found guilty of sedition for contesting the United States's role in World War I. Invite students to discover more about the text and musical setting of this piece. What makes it appropriate for The Crossing to commission? What do students think of the composer's remarks about the piece?

- ♦ Similarly, ask the students to explore Gabriel Jackson's *Rigwreck* with text by Pierre Joris, which refers to the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Why might The Crossing return to this piece as often as it did?
- ♦ *Crossings' Cycle* is a composite work by Stratis Minakakis. Ask students to describe the composer's sources of inspiration for this multifaceted choral work. What relevance does the topic of refugees continue to have in today's world?
- ♦ The Crossing made an impressive commission in 2016 with the *Seven Responses*. Taking a cue from the seven cantatas making up Dietrich Buxtehude's already grand *Membra Jesu Nostri*, the *Seven Responses* present musical rejoinders from seven different composers of international repute. Invite students to survey the extent of the program background on The Crossing's website and concert program (**Appendix 1**). In addition to listening, students should gather the depth of the composers' responses to the bodily "members." How do the seven responses fit with the mission of The Crossing? Readers may connect Caroline Shaw's "To the Hands" with the refugee themes witnessed in *Crossings' Cycle*.
- The composers who are commissioned by The Crossing produce works in line with the purpose-driven mission of the choir. There would seem to be some risk in mainly presenting choral art that bluntly addresses social and political issues of the present day. What are these risks? What are the rewards of presenting this music? In light of the case study narrative, has The Crossing mainly reaped the rewards or faced unnecessary risk from programs featuring divisive issues?
- The Crossing's broad interest in raising social and community concerns through its art echoes a shifting trend in corporate responsibility. According to a "Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation" issued by 181 CEOs in August 2019, companies are no longer only serving the needs of shareholders, but will instead be responsible to a broad set of stakeholders that includes employees, customers, and communities, in addition to shareholders. Bradley recognized this positive movement and is considering ways to partner with corporations under this new guideline. Solicit student feedback on how an arts organization—whether like The Crossing or different from it—can move beyond corporate sponsorship and form deeper alliances with local businesses.

Success and Metrics

In the eyes of its conductor Donald Nally, The Crossing's success is found in the excellent compositions and provocative performances of commissioned art that speaks to the modern world. Audiences have grown steadily as accolades continue to pour in for the choir's recordings. The organization nonetheless faces challenges when viewed from the administrative side. Executive Director Jonathan Bradley has scarce resources including a staff of just two workers to attend to the management and growth of the professional choir. The case explains that Bradley is looking to "convert" the artistic success of the choir's purpose-driven art into a financially sustainable model.

- Bradley is wondering how to express in a concrete way the positive momentum of The Crossing. Income statements and concert attendance figures may not reveal the true success of the purpose-driven enterprise, but are common currency among granting agencies and corporations, as well as donors. Other metrics may be more appropriate or meaningful. The case states that while The Crossing tracks attendance figures at live concerts, Bradley also pulls data for online listening activity, coverage in the press (traditional and online), and performances of commissions by other choirs. Invite students

to view these measures revealed in **Appendix 2**. What other metrics could an organization of this kind present to grantors and donors to demonstrate the success and viability of the organization?

Understanding and Growing Audiences

- Cultivating audiences for the long term is one of Bradley's major concerns for The Crossing, though the case wryly notes that "Donald is not in this to build an audience." The organization has not undertaken a formal audience study, whether in live concerts or from those who encounter the music online. Bradley considers this a logical task, but Nally is generally opposed, believing it may sully a listener's experience (say, following a live performance). This is part of a "healthy tension" Bradley has described in his relationship with the conductor of The Crossing. How can this disagreement be resolved? What are ways to gather audience data without sullying listeners' experience with music of The Crossing?
- Jonathan Bradley is confident in The Crossing's musical product, whether live or recorded. He has noticed that concert audiences do not fit the mold of traditional concertgoers. Bradley is contemplating how a digital marketing program would look to grow the worldwide listening audience for The Crossing. How should marketing for live performances in Philadelphia differ from global communication about recordings and other activities of The Crossing?
 - ♦ Students may be asked to draw up a marketing plan in advance of a class discussion on the case study. Given that the case does not reveal budgets, broad strategies and tactics may be a reasonable goal of such an exercise. Keep in mind Bradley's assertion that concludes the case: "I bet there are 100,000 people out there who don't know they love The Crossing's work."
 - ♦ David Lang's *statement to the court* and Gabriel Jackson's *Rigwreck* have not been released to date but are scheduled for recordings in the near future. Bradley is considering how to drive album sales and excitement for the product. The organization has only the capacity to cast a small net. What marketing segments should be targeted from the potential listening public? Should the priority be on retaining customers or gathering new ones? How could the political leanings of these works affect a marketing plan?