

Bang on a Can: Investing in a Music Ecosystem

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Recognize and explain the value of an open-minded musical organization.
- Outline a strategy for crowdsourcing musical commissions.
- Develop an educational and performance program for a multi-day music festival.
- Propose a marketing strategy to bring disparate audiences together using modern technology.

Topics For Discussion

Creating an Open-Minded Organization

Bang on a Can was formed in 1987 in response to a perceived lack of performing venues and forces in new music. Founders David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Michael Gordon deliberately sought to create a space for all types of music and musicians to come together. As a result, the group has earned a reputation for leading the way in contemporary music-making practices, be it through the annual Marathon, educational initiatives, or new structures for funding new music.

- Ask students to consider parallels between the hermetic scenes Bang on a Can combatted in the 1980s and '90s with the challenges musical ensembles face today. Are there resonances or similarities? Differences? What new challenges does the 21st century pose for artistic groups?
- Lang, Wolfe, and Gordon all extolled the core community of audience members they have built over the past few decades. Ask students what the benefits of personal interactions with audience members are—and what some possible shortcomings or mishaps might be.
- Have students analyze the artwork and design featured in the poster that advertises the first Marathon (**Appendix 1**). How does the poster's design emphasize the group's philosophical and aesthetic goals? Break students into groups to have them discuss in general the ways visual marketing and media can—and should—reflect or augment an organization's mission statement and philosophy.

Crowdsourced Commissions



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- Ask the students to review the initial call for the People's Commissioning Fund (**Appendix 2**) and the ten-year report (**Appendix 3**). What values does the group explicitly highlight in the initial call? Based on the ten-year report, how successful had Bang on a Can been to that point at promoting these values?
- Drawing on the ten-year report, how would you characterize the types of composers commissioned through the People's Commissioning Fund? Is it a diverse set? Homogenous? How might it differ from, say, a call for compositions from the National Endowment for the Arts?
- Poll students to see what strategies they might implement to enact a community-based funding model. How might the internet and digital marketing tools assist this?
- Ask students to compare the initial call for funding with digital platforms that have since arisen for crowdfunding. What are some advantages and disadvantages for each kind of solicitation?

Educational Aspirations

In recent years, Bang on a Can has expanded its philosophy of openness to include several educational opportunities. The organization wants to create prospects for those interested in contemporary music to collaborate, come together, and learn from one another. The founders also hope this will help alleviate shortcomings in modern conservatory education.

- Ask students to look at the website for Bang on a Can's "LOUD Weekend" and the program at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. What are the goals of this educational program? How are they presented and marketed? How does the program schedule work to achieve them?
- One of the things Bang on a Can is most proud of is its legacy as an educational and foundational group in the American new music scene. Many alumni have gone on to create ensembles, festivals, and recording studios of their own. One might, however, suggest that this has increased the competition for funding and patrons. Does the contemporary music scene appear overcrowded? What are some strategies Bang on a Can could use to maintain its status as a premier new music organization? Where might there be possible fruitful means for collaboration with offshoot organizations?
- Many music organizations are looking for ways to become more equitable and inclusive in the 21st century. Ask students to do some research on Found Sound Nation, a social justice music organization affiliated with Bang on a Can. In what ways does Found Sound Nation build on ideas of openness? What examples can it provide for other ensembles?
- The 2020 Bang on a Can Marathon was moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Invite students to explore the Marathon's program as well as reviews of the event (for example, those in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*). Ask students to brainstorm potential challenges posed by moving a large-scale concert online in a short time.

Building an Audience

By virtue of its omnivorous musical and artistic interests, Bang on a Can has had to work hard to market itself to a wide variety of audiences. For the first Marathon, the organization purchased patron contact information from local artistic venues and then sent promotional materials to them. For the three-day Long Play Festival, however, organizers would have a wide array of digital tools at their disposal.

- Divide students into groups and ask them to imagine that they are planning the first Bang on a Can Marathon. What are some additional strategies they could use for marketing?
- Now ask students to do the same exercise, but consider how they might plan and advertise for “Long Play,” the anticipated festival of more than fifty concerts over three days, toward which the case study builds. What would they do differently? What aspects would be maintained? How do digital tools and social media change their approaches? Ask students to form groups and design a marketing campaign that takes these developments into account.
- Ask students to discuss in groups what benefits and potential pitfalls an increasingly digital marketing ecosystem might have for a small organization like Bang on a Can, which prides itself on interpersonal connection.