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Fifth House Ensemble and Agent Relationships



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Fifth House Ensemble is a Chicago-based chamber music group that has embraced collaboration and education as part of its artistic mission. Its inventive partnerships and penetrating initiatives have set it apart from other contemporary music ensembles. This case study examines the decision within Fifth House Ensemble to engage with a booking agent for some of its programming. Three examples illustrate the group's robust artistic offerings. After parting with the one artist management company, Fifth House Ensemble re-entertains the idea of whether a new agent might enter the picture to assist with bookings for a new project with which the group had some experience—a concert version of a live video game experience.



This case study was prepared by Michael Alan Anderson, Associate Professor of Musicology at the Eastman School of Music. 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.

Collaborative, Imaginative

Chicago-based Fifth House Ensemble (5HE) is a chamber music group that puts collaboration and education at the forefront of its work. Its audiences have ranged far beyond the expected clientele of classical music, ushering in a new era of programming with wide appeal. Its inventive angles in performance have tapped folk musicians, graphic novelists, and video game designers. 5HE's array of educational programs and social initiatives have further brought about novel partnerships and civic engagement programs with diverse communities. The group's venues for performance are often unexpected, reflecting the aura and breadth of the artistic enterprise.

Imaginative partnerships are one way that Fifth House Ensemble has become distinct among elite contemporary chamber music ensembles. The group has co-created artistic projects in urban communities and with social service organizations. Recent 5HE projects include Broken Text, a collaboration with Raven Theatre and DJ Searchlight, inspired by multi-week residencies at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center and St. Leonard's Ministries; Voices from the Dust Bowl, an alliance with composer Steven Snowden and bluegrass band Henhouse Prowlers presenting stories from workers' rights organizations around the United States; and Nedudim, an exploration of music and cultural identity in partnership with the Mediterranean folk band Baladino that engages Chicago-based organizations representing Israel, Iran, Germany, and Spain.

Through targeted arts-integrated educational initiatives, 5HE reaches more than 17,000 students each year. The ensemble develops custom interactive musical experiences for K-12 students in Illinois and is a member of the Illinois Arts Council Agency's Arts-in-Education Roster. For more than five years, 5HE has joined with Loyola University's Center for Urban Research and Learning, which has produced residencies targeting at-risk youth and adults in

Chicago, including the Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center. 5HE has also collaborated with Storycatchers Theatre as part of its residency at the detention center to develop curriculum culminating in new theatrical work based on participants' own experiences. At the university level, its programs have made deep and enduring impact. Emerging artists at various conservatories around the United States have further benefited in different ways from 5HE's entrepreneurship residencies, training programs, and summer festival, Fresh Inc.

Program Mix

Fifth House Ensemble is managed by a six-person staff. Melissa Ngan has served as executive director since the group's inception, and Dan Visconti serves as artistic director, active with the group since 2013. These leaders are supported by a full-time director of operations and production, who travels with the ensemble for on-site support. An educational programming coordinator services the many learning initiatives the group has forged, and a marketing manager furnishes communication materials for all events on the horizon, whether self-produced or run through a presenter. Until 2017, 5HE booked its own gigs. The process of booking was built chiefly on relationships formed by its members. The artistic director and artistic administrator handled bookings and all communication with presenters and partners.

In early 2017, 5HE considered the possibility of seeking an agent to grow the list of opportunities that were beyond those accessed by the administration and players. The board of directors and administration

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of 5HE decided that, should an agent enter the picture, the artistic administrator position would not be eliminated, but rather would be free to work on other 5HE projects of artistic interest and serve as a liaison with the agent. Before pursuing possible agents, the ensemble developed a list of its projects dating back to 2009. This kind of a document could allow an agent to see not only where the group had performed but where opportunities may lie. Further, agents could gather the mix of programming that this agile ensemble had taken on and understand the kinds of venues that presented the work of 5HE.

There were three basic types of partners with which 5HE contracted: universities, performing arts centers, and orchestras. University collaborations generally outnumbered the other categories. The group engaged in several college residencies per year. Many were single day run-outs, while others were multi-

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year engagements and creative partnerships. Residencies were usually arranged in conjunction with live concert appearances. Workshops are an integral part of the group's college visits. 5HE offers more than two dozen workshop topics, ranging in scope

from organizational development and individual artist needs to community collaborations and marketing tips. One of 5HE's longest-standing relationships was with Carthage College. Each year's activities featured multiple concerts, workshops, side-by-side rehearsals, and private events.

While universities usually offer concert venues of their own, 5HE split out the category of performing arts centers, which were independent of college campuses (or operated as separate enterprises even if attached to a university) in cities across the United States. Of this type, the ensemble saw only one

or two performances per year. The most lucrative appearances among performing arts centers were at the Miller Theater series in New York (2009) and at the Texas Performing Arts (2016), which featured masterclasses and workshops at UT-Austin. The final category (orchestras) included one robust example—the Detroit Symphony Orchestra—plus another (Cleveland Orchestra) to be explored in this study. In the case of the DSO, 5HE was invited in both 2012 and 2014 as part of the orchestra's Mix @ the Max series, which offers a club-like atmosphere for contemporary programming. The ensemble presented two versions of the program Black Violet in partnership with graphic novelist Ezra Clayton Daniels, who created multimedia scenes synced with a three-part concert series of chamber music. There was much to digest for potential agents.

What Agents Can Do

As Fifth House Ensemble contemplated next steps with possible agents to promote and book its work, the group stepped back to consider the pros and cons of the decision that was on the horizon. What could be gained from a relationship with an agent? 5HE board and staff were at once hopeful that new opportunities could emerge and wary that an agent could realistically vault the group toward higher success singlehandedly. A perception among some early career artists is that an agent will offer new horizons and steady income for musicians with little or no effort, in exchange for the fees paid to the representative. The members of 5HE were established artists though, most in mid-career. If the group hired an agent, it would not be to find its first “big break,” nor to be introduced to the music business. 5HE artists knew who they were as musicians and were well acquainted with the landscape in which they were operating. 5HE was in position to be picky. The group was only interested in investing with an agent who would have the connections and the energy to expand its reach with a network of performing arts centers. They compiled a prospect list of more than 600 venues in the United States where their stand-alone concert programs

might have success. An attractive agent, in the view of the ensemble, would have close working relationships with major presenters around the country, something that could not be replicated internally. Presenters flock to conferences throughout the year to understand the talent that is on the horizon from agents in the music industry. 5HE wanted a seat at that table and knew it did not have the organizational capacity to achieve that kind of reach with performing arts center representatives. With the help of an agent with national scope, 5HE's full-time artistic administrator would be relieved internally of some of the "cold calling" of performing arts centers around the United States. Investing in someone with those relationships in place could be money well spent for a group looking to expand its base with performing arts centers. If these bookings were handed over to an agent, 5HE also anticipated that organizational capacity needed to be reserved for stewarding the relationship. Even with the artistic administrator's position freed up, the agent relationship required internal attention and nurturing to be successful. A little less than half of the current allocation of their artistic administrator's time would need to be reserved to manage any new agent relationship. Interface with the agent would likely not be daily, but could involve much behind-the-scenes work of providing current schedules, relaying budgets, supplying "tech riders," and updating marketing materials for an array of programs.

For all the potential benefits, there were reservations within 5HE about embarking on a relationship with an agent. When contracting with an agent, an arts organization gives up some of its ability to advocate for itself with presenters. (The maxim "You are your best advocate" continues to ring true.) Some agents are able to talk about their artists fluently and can boil down programming with presenters in an appealing way. Agents can have large rosters though and will know some "acts" better than others. Agents' interconnected relationships with the performance world may counterbalance any lack of ease they might have with their rostered artists. This was a crucial

consideration for 5HE. Executive Director Melissa Ngan spoke ardently on this point: "The strongest thing we had going was long-standing relationships with partners. We work in close communication and offer high customization. Our collaborators can help us to develop work, or we can develop new avenues of emerging artist training or community-focused work for them through performances embedded within residencies. These highly tailored programs are borne out of many conversations and listening. It's rather unusual for agents to get involved in that level of conversation or to do business this way on behalf of artists."

Investing in an artistic management company that had industry relationships in place could be money well spent for a group looking to expand its base with performing arts centers.

Conversations between Fifth House Ensemble and presenters sometimes begin with Artistic Director Dan Visconti, who creates ideas that are fashioned for specific spaces and audiences. The booking process is thus shared across the organization and not entirely kept only in the purview of the artistic administrator. When there is a bite from a presenter for 5HE, listening and flexibility are keys to securing work, as Ngan suggested. The ensemble in fact maintains different press kits, which can be sent to different types of sponsoring organizations. Most agents however prefer to offer a defined and limited number of programs for each artist on their roster.

The relationships in place between 5HE administration and presenters were at stake in any discussion of an agent deal. Hence, the topic of exclusions was important in committing to a representative for the ensemble. Boundaries needed to be set for potential agents, so that 5HE could pursue opportunities independent of

its representative. The group would need to be specific in any agent contract as to what kinds of work were off limits, so that 5HE could preserve and strengthen relationships it held already among presenters.

An Agent Emerges

Fifth House Ensemble's search for an agent was not a formal one rooted in a decision based on the principles just outlined. Rather, an opportunity for an agent relationship emerged the way many relationships do—through existing contacts. One member of 5HE had professional interaction with someone who was leading an artist management company, DTC Concert Artist Management.¹ The company was aligned with many performing arts centers and also had clients similar to 5HE doing inventive, cross-media work. The agency also communicated an interest in building new artistic projects in collaboration with presenters and in further developing the ensemble's residency offerings to universities. 5HE forwarded the documentation it had prepared, and the DTC agent responded positively to the information, noting strong relationships with a number of the venues on the ensemble's list of prospects.

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Conversations progressed in 2016 about a potential contract between DTC and Fifth House Ensemble. Several topics consumed the preliminary discussions. Term length and exclusivity were concerns for 5HE at the start. How long should the group commit to the agent? 5HE leadership wanted to give the relationship a chance to succeed but was also unsure of committing to a long-term agreement. A one- or two-year contract would give the ensemble a built-in "exit ramp" if metrics fell short or

if the agent had otherwise not performed to the high expectation of the group. As expected, exclusivity was also central in the early discussions with DTC. The agent was prepared to seek new business for 5HE but the ensemble brought a long list of exclusions to the table, presenters with whom the ensemble had long-standing relationships that would be exempt from the agreement. Designing exclusions in a potential contract also meant establishing clear responsibilities about the type of work that was to remain internally negotiated by 5HE. Any community-focused engagement projects would be outside the contract, as would grant-supported work. Also exempted were engagements where 5HE would not perform concerts, but rather just teach or speak to target audiences. An "out clause" was further important for 5HE: would there be a way to end the agent-client relationship, even within the contract term that was set? Once commissions and fees were determined for the services DTC would provide, 5HE board and staff decided to sign with the agent in the spring of 2017. The parties agreed to a three-year contract with an out clause. What follows are the results of three programs that 5HE has offered, one of which was well suited for agent intervention and the others which were better managed in-house.

Journey Live

The "fulfillment of a ten-year-long dream" and "an event with a huge community-building component." This is how 5HE artists and composer Austin Wintory describe the program *Journey Live*. The program is rooted in the video game *Journey*, a 2012 indie adventure game originally released for PlayStation 3, which rose quickly to critical acclaim. The premise of the game is a player's trek through an expansive desert toward a mountain. Players are assisted by other players with whom they can only communicate by individual chimed notes, or physical movement. (The other players remain anonymous until the end of the game.) Music plays an unusually prominent role in the game, being the only form of contact between players. Players unlock bright red pieces of cloth and activate

¹The name of the agency has been fictionalized for the purpose of this study.

them through contact with other living beings, allowing them to progress through various levels toward the end. Wintory's score for *Journey*, was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media in 2013, the first time a video game soundtrack was recognized in this category.

Journey Live is an interactive performance of Wintory's score. In 2014, Wintory teamed up with 5HE and arranger Patrick O'Malley to develop an arrangement of the *Journey* score adapted for the ensemble's full

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instrumentation, with added percussion, voice, and harp. Live players also appear on stage with live musicians, while the game's impressive visuals form an oversized backdrop. O'Malley's arrangement ties

musical outcomes to the players' unpredictable actions, a notion untested in concert performance. The *Journey Live* score has numerous "trigger points," which allow the performing musicians to react to real-time moves of the player. Because the game unfolds in real time and musicians answer the choices made on-screen, no two performances are the same. With this program, 5HE has procured a new audience of video game aficionados beyond its contemporary art music listeners. The new fan base is not to be underestimated; avid fans had a strong passion for *Journey* that often includes a deep attachment to the music from the game.

In bringing the *Journey Live* programming concept to life, 5HE launched a crowdfunding campaign, which raised over \$50,000 from nearly 1,200 contributors. This support helped produce initial performances of *Journey Live* in four cities. The kickoff took place in February 2016 at the Music and Gaming Festival (MAGFest) in National Harbor, Maryland, a nonprofit

festival run by video game fans, attracting some 20,000 enthusiasts each year. The crowdfunding proceeds enabled three other performances, two on university campuses and one at a major theater venue in Chicago in the spring of 2016.

Positive press followed the success of the initial run. Gaming and entertainment sites ran features on Fifth House's take on *Journey*, but also mainstream news (like NPR and Vice) picked up the story. 5HE was eager to sustain the momentum of *Journey Live*. Having exceeded its goal ten-fold, the crowdfunding campaign provided additional support to sustain the program. Enough funding was raised to book a major venue, National Sawdust in Brooklyn, New York, an incubator for contemporary music and emerging artists. As a stand-alone program ripe for more performance venues, *Journey Live* was ripe for an agent to handle. 5HE managed some additional bookings until DTC was hired to book this program. The agent then proceeded to book nine performing arts centers across the country that were interested in *Journey Live*. Concert presenters found the program easy to understand and were willing to accept the program as-is, sometimes with a masterclass or engagement activity as needed. While the interactive show is a bit of an outlier in the 5HE portfolio and in little need of customizing for presenters, *Journey Live* has proven to be one of the group's most successful offerings among its touring programs.

DePauw

In 2013, the School of Music at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana was interested in reimagining its curriculum to address the changing needs of its student musicians who were entering a music ecology that was anything but predictable. The school was simultaneously looking to integrate the surrounding community of Greencastle and Putnam County into the performing arts atmosphere on campus. The alliance signaled 5HE's role as an arts consultant and creative partner as much as a performer, a role that many arts organizations are hesitant to consider.

Given the lofty goals of the school, the tactics that 5HE developed were equally substantive. The collaboration would consume two full years and required eight visits to Greencastle from the ensemble. The group sought ways to bring the school of music into dialogue with locals. 5HE proposed a year-long civic practice project, which would identify and leverage artistic and cultural assets on and off campus. Local contacts included poets, folk musicians, activists, videographers, community leaders, and K-12 students. Community-based initiatives brought these groups together with university students and faculty in sites throughout the county. Activities designed by 5HE were the result of listening sessions in the community. “Pop-up” performances and educational events took place throughout 2013-14. Sometimes 5HE performed side-by-side with DePauw students; other times the ensemble or the students were on their own. The culminating experience of

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the first year was a multifaceted concert entitled *Harvest*, “a celebration of the people, places, and stories of Putnam County.” Over 600 people attended this on-campus event in spring 2014, 80% arriving through word of mouth, and 30% for the first time. This concert experience reinvigorated the careers of local artists, connected neighbors to one another, and supported small businesses in the community. After a year of organizing these events, 5HE furnished DePauw’s School of Music with a community resource database of potential partners encountered in the community outreach activities. It was expected that student-led performances and educational programs in Putnam County would continue after 5HE completed its residency.

Internally at DePauw’s School of Music, the ensemble offered curriculum support far above what any visiting or resident ensemble would customarily

propose. While student workshops and in-class appearances might be expected, 5HE ventured to provide individual student advising and project support to school faculty. Members of the ensemble also created video resources for the school’s new website, 21CM.org, an online resource to help musicians in the modern musical landscape. 5HE also worked with students in the DePauw Chamber Orchestra to develop its first crowdfunding campaign beginning in the fall of 2014, which raised over \$12,000 to support a performance at the famous Viennese concert hall, the Brahms-Saal. Consuming two years of customized work for the ensemble, the project is virtually inconceivable in the hands of an agent to procure or steward these activities.

Beethoven and Prometheus in Cleveland

Custom curriculum design was also part of Fifth House Ensemble’s work with The Cleveland Orchestra to connect with students at the Cleveland School of the Arts. This undertaking in 2017 largely predated DTC’s involvement with the group. Again showcasing 5HE’s ability to act as an arts integration consultant and curriculum developer, the collaboration with The Cleveland Orchestra kept the ensemble mainly behind the scenes as its members co-created ideas with orchestra members and classroom teachers. The 2017-18 season for The Cleveland Orchestra represented its centennial year as a major arts provider in the city. Orchestra and Music Director Franz Welser-Möst chose as a guiding theme for the season the notion of Ludwig van Beethoven in connection with the titan of Greek mythology, Prometheus. (Beethoven’s op. 43 from 1801 is the ballet, *The Creatures of Prometheus*.) The director conceived of “The Prometheus Project” as a lens through which to celebrate Beethoven’s music in the orchestra’s hundredth year. 5HE was enlisted to flesh out a program with the students at the Cleveland School of the Arts.

The curriculum design project involved six classrooms at the arts school with students ranging from

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eighth to eleventh grade. Prompted by the theme of Beethoven and Prometheus, 5HE proposed that students explore and reflect on the various stages of the “Hero’s Journey.” In four-week residencies led by teaching artists from The Cleveland Orchestra, with support from 5HE teaching artists, students would be tasked with exploring the Hero’s Journey archetype creatively through different academic areas and artistic mediums. Artistic projects ranged from original photography on themes of identity and stereotypes to theatrical scenes and exercises centered on overcoming obstacles, as well as musical pieces composed by assembling sounds derived from students’ own genetic and character traits.

The school’s core curriculum subjects of English/ Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies were also tapped for the project. Using the template of American scholar Joseph Campbell’s classic “Hero’s Journey” framework, students were challenged in the classroom to produce work that connected the adventure-conquest-transformation journey to their own experience or that of their personal heroes (from public figures to family members). Students were to envision using their own gifts to shape their future world. In September 2017, the learning that took place would take on sonic significance in an educational performance in Severance Hall, the home of The Cleveland Orchestra, at the start of its centennial season. The concert was performed for 2,000 students in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. In that program, select student projects from the Cleveland School of the Arts were curated into a multimedia performance, using large-scale projections surrounding the orchestra.

5HE provided guidance throughout the Prometheus Project from concept to completion. Members of the group stewarded the design and implementation of the endeavor at the school; provided support to musicians, staff, and teachers; and organized the content for the culminating performance. It would be impractical to have a company like DTC become a third party to the sustained conversations among 5HE, the orchestra, and the school. In the absence of traditional performance by the ensemble, partnerships like this were likewise best handled in-house.

Undertale: Agent or Agentless?

After a year of enlisting DTC Concert Artist Management to book *Journey Live* and other programs for Fifth House Ensemble, Melissa Ngan and her colleagues were starting to rethink the partnership. The bookings were strong for the interactive video game concert offering, which helped propel that program to new artistic heights for the ensemble, but the project was also of an ad hoc nature. It was highly replicable and did not require extensive conversation with presenters. Replete with video backgrounders and concert clips, the *Journey Live* press kit practically spoke for itself. Meantime, 5HE continued customized community work in Chicago with projects that addressed the city’s urgent issues and embraced unique opportunities. The group was so busy negotiating specially tailored programs with partners around the country that DTC was reduced to finding presenters only for *Journey Live*. In mid-2019, 5HE decided to terminate its arrangement with its agent, ahead of the three-year term outlined in the original agreement.

The board and staff at Fifth House Ensemble realized that its competitive advantage lay not in “straight-ahead programs,” as it called stand-alone concerts, but in creating customized performance/residency experiences and acting as consultants for strategic partnerships with a range of arts entities and causes. Melissa Ngan remarked, “We came back to a question

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that our last strategic planning consultant asked of some of our former residency partners: think of a group that can build an artistic program from the ground up and provide professional skills and tactical advising to go with it. Where else would you go?

More than one responded, “There is no list.” Having taken back the booking of its programming and services in-house, a new opportunity emerged for Fifth House that would summon many of the questions it had before it hired DTC.

As the opening program of the 2019-20 season, Fifth House Ensemble teamed up with Materia Collective, representing indie game creator and composer Toby Fox, in announcing a concert version of *Undertale Live*, a live musical adventure based on Fox’s video game of the same name. The *Undertale* game invites players into a clandestine world of underground monsters. Rather than doing battle with the monsters, players are encouraged to empathize with those most unlike themselves and deal with them

nonviolently—sparing monsters instead of slaying them. *Undertale* rose quickly in popularity and boasts over a million active players on average each month worldwide. Similar to *Journey Live*, the concert version—*Undertale Live*—would feature 5HE and in-game visual projection with new arrangements of the game’s music fit for the ensemble. The experience would highlight live audience involvement and the element of choice. Concertgoers join the mission by voting on how the storyline will unfold.

Fifth House is preparing a digital release of *Undertale Live* for presenters and has already booked multiple performances in Chicago and on tour using internal connections. The concert stops are tightly “routed” to keep expenses under control. The following season’s booking cycle is approaching, and 5HE would like to offer *Undertale* to presenters and venues. Board members have asked Melissa Ngan about whether a new agent might enter the picture to assist with *Undertale Live* on a project basis, as opposed to the exclusive nature of the relationship with DTC. While 5HE was preparing for an administrative return to self-management to support its arc from “just a performance” toward partnerships, the concert productions of *Journey Live* and now *Undertale Live* felt distinct. Due to the replicable nature and established track record of success of both programs, what role, if any, could an agent play if engaged on these projects?



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