

Gamelan Dharma Swara

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Identify benefits and downsides of having a sponsor or patron arrangement.
- Recognize artistic enterprises indebted to traditional music.
- Assess the risk of organizational choices as it relates to artistic mission.
- Navigate arts organizations that retain professional and amateur talent.

Topics For Discussion

Sponsorship

Gamelan Dharma Swara is a New York-based gamelan ensemble, one of the leading ensembles of its kind in the United States. Continuing an Indonesian practice that still thrives in Bali and Java, gamelan ensembles are known for their use of gongs, various tuned metal instruments, percussion, and scintillating dancing. In its early years, DS attracted a sponsor for its performances—the Indonesian Consulate of New York, located in the stylish Upper East Side. The consulate not only provided a home for the unincorporated ensemble but also housed an instrument, offered free space for rehearsals, and permitted public concerts on site. As part of its residency, DS was called to perform at diplomatic events and was trusted to preserve the traditional art of Balinese music and dance in particular. They proudly wore conventional costumes for their performances.

- In what ways was DS well positioned to accept the patronage of the Indonesian Consulate? Consider from the perspective of the group's artistic leadership at the time.
- In 2010, DS received an enviable invitation to perform at the gong kebyar competition of the Bali Arts Festival, making it the first ensemble outside of Bali to appear at the annual festival. What happened at this event that made it such an important moment in DS's history?
- What were the benefits and risks of DS maintaining the sponsorship with the consulate? Why did DS leave the partnership, given the risks of severing ties?

Reconciling Tradition and Innovation

Much of the case study revolves around the question of tradition and innovation as it relates to the Balinese art of the gamelan. Already in the same year as Dharma Swara's celebrated performance at the Bali Arts Festival, the group released its first album, which placed traditional repertoire alongside contemporary works for the gamelan commissioned by the ensemble from American composers. The ability to keep a dual focus—one on convention, the other on modernization—has been one of the strengths of DS.

- The balance of traditional and contemporary styles of gamelan playing was on display at the cultural festival Basilica SoundScape outside of New York City. Developed by the popular music website Pitchfork, Basilica SoundScape featured mainstream pop artists, which included DS. The group juxtaposed its traditional playing and dancing with new works to evoke a modern sound from the instrument. Positive press followed. In what ways was this an illuminating moment for the group? How was it delicate for the organization at the same time?
- Organizational soul-searching has been a regular activity among the leaders and members of DS. Why was it important to cling to the traditional Balinese music and dance? What freedom did the group have to forge an identity around new music for the gamelan?
 - Ask students to reflect on the mission of the ensemble: “to inspire wonder through the Balinese performing arts.” Should DS revisit its mission?
- Part of DS's identity is projected in its appearance in live performance. The ensemble's “look” has been characterized by traditional heritage garb. Men don jackets (*Jas*) and headpieces (*udeng*), while women wear fitted lace dresses (*kebaya*). Both wear a cloth wrap (*sarong*) and a fabric belt (*slendang*). This was typical of gamelan ensembles within and outside of Indonesia.
 - Many members of DS felt comfortable in the concert attire; others were not so sure. The feelings were not split among particular groups of members. Explore the idea of cultural appropriation and “ethno-drag” as it relates to the costuming for DS events. What issues of representation and identity were at stake for individuals and the organization?
 - Ask students to reflect also on the question of gender as it relates to clothing for concerts.
 - Formal changes to DS's concert attire have yet to be made, but DS has tested out a couple of ideas that could provide a path forward. The group has tried to wear all black, or black plus a selected color highlight. A two-person gender ensemble also tried a mostly white outfit. Some have thought about T-shirts for members, but others have argued that DS must use its home of New York City, the fashion capital of the world, to its advantage. Player comfort in the concert attire must also be considered. Ask students to chart the impact of these factors in their review of the case details. How might the decision process take place on this topic, in light of the organizational culture revealed in the case study?

- Invite students to propose ideas for the quandary about attire, which is a synecdoche for the wider issue of DS's identity and a decision awaiting at the case's climax. One way to distill the matter and prompt discussion could be to project the words of Joel Mellin in the classroom: "We are in search of something that is appropriate for our identity, but is not culturally inappropriate, something that everyone can do, and does not upset people—something that brings the group together, not something that divides it." See if students can separate their personal preferences from what is best for the organization. What role should venue play in the calculus? A brief recommendation, individually or in groups, could be assigned in connection with the case.

Professional and Amateur Performers

Incorporated as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit arts organization, Gamelan Dharma Swara aims to "inspire wonder through the Balinese performing arts." This is done both through performance and educational activities. DS is at once a professional organization that collects fees from performance and also one that welcomes members who are trying to learn the Indonesian art. Artistic leaders have been academic specialists, and Balinese guest artists have helped develop repertoire and coordination of the ensemble. The talent level of the musicians and dancers is high, but most are uncompensated for their work. The demands of DS do not require full time commitment, but dedication to regular preparation and performances is required nonetheless.

- DS master teachers and guest artists receive a stipend for their work, but members generally do not. Neither the artistic director nor executive director earns compensation. The majority of participants are also asked to pay annual membership fees (\$100-\$150) to defray the many expenses the organization incurs. Some fees are waived for the most experienced and talented veterans. While annual dues are typical for gamelan groups in the United States, there is some debate about whether this is appropriate for an ensemble that plays at a high level and commands substantial performing fees. Survey the students about the system and whether improvements could be made. Is a tiered or varied arrangement advisable? How might the organization handle members who are already professional musicians by trade?
- DS sometimes receives requests for performance that do not require the full complement of musicians and dancers. For these gigs, the executive director dispatches select musicians of the ensemble to form groups known as *gendèr wayang* (or *batei*). The small groups receive compensation for these occasional events, while DS takes a percentage of the negotiated fee. Some players have expressed reservations about this arrangement, since players normally do not receive compensation when the full ensemble performs. How can these concerns be addressed? Is there a more equitable arrangement for these gigs? What are the implications of having different configurations of DS (small and large) when it performs?
- Further efforts are in the works to professionalize DS. As new repertoire continues to be explored, the question of commissions has arisen. This issue also reflects the organization's hybrid professional-volunteer model. For instance, Joel Mellin, a seasoned DS player and composer, has written works for the ensemble (some of its most impressive and favorably reviewed), but professional composers from the outside might command substantial sums. The talent level of DS suggests creativity might come from within the group, but there may be some "legitimacy" to be gained from soliciting new works from distinguished names. What are ways to think through this topic as the group expands its repertorial horizons? What other issues of professionalization are raised in the case?

- As an organization reliant on its talented membership, DS is invested in providing an environment where its musicians and dancers can thrive. In 2017, the group published a research study, which examined the structure and practices of ensembles based in the United States that, like itself, specialized in artistic forms narrowly represented in the American performing arts landscape. Topline results are provided in **Appendix 1**. What best practices came from the research that relate to cultivation of members? What recommendations seem most realistic to implement based on the details of the case?