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DMA Internship experience reflection – MUS 7880, Summer 2012

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As the first intern that Kerrytown Concert House has appointed, I had a unique experience. KCH is a privately run, 110-seat concert venue in the Kerrytown artistic district of Ann Arbor, Michigan. In addition, the House is home to several private studio teachers and the Great Lakes Performing Arts Associates. Just a few blocks from the University of Michigan, KCH plays host to a huge variety of world-renowned artists and local musicians – from Pulitzer Prize nominated artist Wadada Leo Smith, to UM musical theatre students, to classical and jazz artists.

KCH Founder Deanna Relyea has run the activities of the house for nearly thirty years, and in the past few years has been transitioning away from active day-to-day duties. There were several substantial changes in the in-office leadership during my internship, which spanned most of the past year part-time. When I began, there were two regular office employees – the Director Allison Halerz, who worked on accounts, graphic design, and managing much of the business; and a publicity manager, Audrey, who managed the Houses online presence and reservations. However, their job descriptions are difficult to describe concretely – it became clear early on that working for KCH involves a great deal of multi-tasking and sharing of responsibilities.

After a summer absence, I returned to find that Audrey had left, and as Allison was preparing for a maternity leave, a new employee, Priscilla, had been hired. She took over more of Allison’s duties during the leave. In addition to Allison, house manager Haley was a continuing presence during my internship. She helped out in the office occasionally, but her main responsibility was running concerts in the evenings and weekends. I often assisted Haley, serving in her stead for numerous concerts. Haley is the daughter of one of the KCH board members, and until I started working for the House, had no more than a few days off throughout her employment – other than Deanna or the other office employees, she had no replacement. (This became problematic early this spring when Haley broke her leg and was unable to work for several weeks)

When Deanna was in the office, she would delegate responsibilities, outline new projects, and catch up on correspondence addressed specifically to her. As an intern, my first day with Deanna consisted of putting together grant proposals for New Music USA and preparing artist bios. She was pleased with my writing, so I was often asked to pull information from older files and internet sites to create artist “blurbs” for the website and for other grant applications.

In the office, I performed some typical intern activities – stuffing and stamping mass mailings, cleaning the House, rearranging chairs, and answering and filing phone/email reservations. However, I was impressed by the amount of responsibility they placed upon me – I was charged with editing and finishing a fundraising letter for their 2012 “Paint the House” project, which raised much more than the requested $10,000 in the course of a week! I was often asked to proofread and update the website and mailings (a task I do enjoy), and was given special projects including: ASCAP concert filing, researching concert databases to which we could apply, and creating a JazzNearYou profile for the House.

Though I learned much from my office experience at KCH, I spent the majority of my hours assisting with concerts. This was typically a one- or two-person endeavor, which was overwhelming at first. Working a concert entails: preparing the House and “green room” for artist arrival; ensuring that the performers had the stage setup as they needed (and an occasional dash for their food needs); preparing a seating chart for reserved tickets; taking cash/check at the door; dealing with patron issues including seating discrepancies, handicap access, sold-out concerts, latecomers, et cetera; introducing the performers; remembering to run the recorder if requested; running lights; counting cash from the door (often substantial sums, as KCH does not currently take credit cards); and handling performer fees. In addition, some performers would request that we help them sell their CDs or other merchandise, which meant keeping an additional cash-box. In addition to this laundry list of tasks, the house manager must do her best to ensure good patron behavior – usually not a problem, though there were a few issues with audience noise level from time to time, especially at larger events where we ran a cash bar.

I loved the business of running concerts – I enjoy multitasking, and I especially loved hosting musicians. It was interesting to see how different “levels” of artist behaved. The most prestigious artists we hosted were very courteous, and generally self-sufficient (though, I did have to run, not walk, to get smoothies for the Marsalis Sextet before the store closed…). The artists that were a little irritating tended to be local musicians whose concerts were not as well attended – any “diva” behavior I encountered came from them, never the famous folks.

This was an immeasurably valuable experience for me as a performer and for my possible career plans. Learning the process of booking an artist was especially valuable – I got to discuss with Deanna, Allison, and Priscilla what they look for in inviting an artist (vs. “letting” someone rent the venue). In the case of a small venue like Kerrytown, they seek musicians that they know either have a local fan base already, or closely align with the general “brand” of KCH concerts. They are a well-known avant-garde jazz venue, and have a fairly regular group of classical artists from the Ann Arbor area (including Dr. Satterlee). Performers outside the jazz and classical chamber music genres are less-often engaged at Kerrytown. In addition, they have a space limitation (the stage is small, but almost magically can fit a 9 piece jazz ensemble when necessary).

Through this experience, I began to realize how much I would like to be in a similar position to Deanna. As the Founder and Artistic Director of KCH, she has shaped an entire listening community over the last 30 years. She has meaningful connections and friendships with countless artists, and her influence is far-reaching in the Ann Arbor community. This sort of service to musicians an audience appeals to me, and having this experience has opened my eyes to the possibility of promoting new music such a capacity.

It was indeed eye opening to work in the office. Along with the fluidity of every employee’s job description, there was often a prevailing sense of disorganization. Deanna is the glue that holds the organization together – she has all the vital information, and when she is not there to provide it, the office does not always function efficiently. I *was* in attendance during a transitional period, however, and the learning curve is steep. Also, as Deanna is often booking friends or old close colleagues, certain financial policies are bent – such as performer fees. It was impossible for me to figure out exactly what their policies were (the big black operations book did not match what was actually happening much of the time – and was out of date!)

I am grateful to have had this chance to build my relationship with Kerrytown Concert House. I always felt valued as a musician and contributing member of their team, and I have gained skills I can certainly use in my future musical endeavors.