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SoNA Oral History with a Focus on Corporate Philanthropy

By

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Introduction

The arts scene of Northwest Arkansas has become increasingly woven into the culture of the ever-progressing region, and one of the longest-lasting players in this field is the Symphony of Northwest Arkansas. As a forerunner for so many other fine arts organizations in the area, there is much to learn from the Symphony of Northwest Arkansas. SoNA requested that the University of Arkansas record these experiences of past and present alike in the form of an oral history. As SoNA looks to the future, they recognize the many players who helped the organization to both survive and thrive at various points in its history through hard work, fundraising, and a shared love of the arts. One of the primary drivers of SoNA's, and other organizations like it, success in the region is the undeniable benefit of a philanthropically minded corporate base, most notably the Walton family (R. Nicholson, personal communication, February 16, 2022). Throughout this oral history project, I look to understand the overall history of SoNA so that we can contribute to the organization's vision for the project while contextualizing the impact of corporate funding on the symphony orchestra.

Literature Review

Over the years the role of corporations has shifted from profit-focused entities to holistic drivers for good. As the pressure for corporations to do better for their communities has risen with time, the level of competition for those corporate dollars has also increased. Through extensive interviewing in Turkey, key players in the corporate funding area spoke to this growing competition for corporate funding, specifically to the arts. Today there is a growing movement towards funding dedicated to educational and environmental causes (Bulut). While these are certainly areas that greatly benefit from corporate philanthropy, they are direct competitors to prospect funding for arts organizations, such as symphonies.

An important piece in this puzzle of funding is the actual processes of allocation. Kate Daellenbach set out to investigate these various paths of funding and identified three primary paths. The first path is led by senior-level managers, secondly a path of funding championed by lower-level managers, and lastly a path that began with a third party but then connected with one of the first two paths (Dallenbach). In the case of the arts, many of these relationships are built on the first path, one stemming from top management. This prominent path is seen in Northwest Arkansas from Walmart and The Walton Family. Another prominent example of this corporate family arts philanthropy is that of the Rockefellers and their contributions to musical education during the latter half of the 1900s. Through their relationship with John P. Harrison, they were persuaded to use funding from the Rockefeller Family Foundation to fund musical education ventures. Harrison was instrumental in the development of Latin American music in the 1960s through his close work with the Rockefeller Family Foundation and his heart for the art of music (Herrera). The great impact their efforts had during this era present a respectable picture of how beneficial corporate funding can be to musical organizations whenever relationships and goals are strong and understood.

The positive possible impacts from corporate funding are certainly strong drivers in communities across the world, but the intention of the firms involved in funding the arts are oftentimes not as they seem. A study was conducted analyzing sixty U.K. firms who were actively philanthropic and common thread of motive was clear: validation/reputation of the firm (Moir). While the positive impacts of corporate giving to the arts should not be undermined, it does need to be fully examined. One way in which intentions of corporate giving can be

-analyzed is through the timeline of their giving. It has been found that firms with an irresponsible past are not as likely to reap benefits of philanthropic efforts (Zolotoy). Corporate social responsibility, like any other goal, is most successful for the corporation and community alike whenever it is a pivotal part of the firm culture from the start, which in my opinion does benefit younger firms. The Walton family is an excellent example of corporate philanthropic efforts with a clear and respectable goal: to make Northwest Arkansas a vibrant and inclusive area (Walton Family Foundation). The success of their efforts is visible in SoNA along with many other arts organizations in the area such as Crystal Bridges.

Background

SoNA has taken many turns along the way, which is a key reason for this project to really provide insight on its journey. The Symphony of Northwest Arkansas, initially named North Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, was founded in 1954, nearly a decade before Walmart was founded in the area. In its early years SoNA performed around the region, with summertime shows in various parks in Siloam Springs, Bentonville, and Springdale. The orchestra's primary performance venue was the University of Arkansas Men's Gym, as NASO, now SoNA, was a collaboration with the University of Arkansas Music Department. Hellen Walton, the daughter of Walmart founder Sam Walton and a prominent local philanthropist, felt this venue was not completely suitable for the arts. In 1990, she led a team effort to found the Walton Arts Center (WAC). This venue, completed in 1992, served as a home for the symphony orchestra as well as a venue for other fine art performances (Benjamin, Nicholson 2021).

The creation of the WAC heralded a new era for NASO. Carlton Woods served as NASO's executive director from 1981 until 1997, overseeing the orchestra as it transitioned into its new performance space in the Walton Arts Center (Benjamin, Nicholson 2021). These two entities worked very closely together. According to Mary Benjamin, former board chair and long-time supporter of SoNA, at one point the symphony orchestra "came under the umbrella of WAC." (Benjamin, Nicholson 2021, p. 2). Following Woods, Jeannine Wagar was the director of the orchestra, and her tenure ended with the collapse, due to financial difficulty, of NASO prior to their final show of the season in 2008.

This collapse is what led to the rebrand from NASO to SoNA, which was spearheaded by Karen Kappela of Siloam Springs. The newly revitalized SoNA was heavily supported by Kappela and Peter Lane who, alongside an advisory board, brought in Paul Haas in 2010 to be the director and conductor of SoNA. The organization is now heavily supported by the community from the Maestro Circle of local families, The Walton Family Foundation, and many other players in the region (Benjamin, Nicholson 2021).

SoNA and many other fine arts establishments in Northwest Arkansas have taken substantial strides forward in recent years. The study from Roger Cohen, with Americans for the Arts, shows that in 2015 alone the various nonprofit arts organizations in the area generated \$131.2 in economic impact in just Benton and Washington counties, an increase of \$85.7 million since 2010. This data was compiled by the Walton Arts Center staff from twenty-three local arts organizations for the study. The study also found that there were almost

1.8 million attendees to arts and culture events in the region during 2015 (Northwest Arkansas Council 2017). NWA's significant arts industry NWA has been made possible largely by the enormous number of large corporate players in the region and their willingness to further develop the area economically and culturally. On the Walton Family Foundation's website, you can find the vision statement, "Looking ahead to 2025, the Walton Family Foundation envisions

Northwest Arkansas as one of the most vibrant and inclusive communities in the nation,” (Walton Family Foundation 2022, p.1). This ever-growing region, both culturally and economically, has provided SoNA with a tremendous opportunity to both survive and thrive as a fine arts organization for decades to come.

My Project

The goal of our project is to conduct interviews with key players in the development of SoNA through the years to establish a narrative in the form of an oral history that reflects the past, present, and future of the organization from the eyes of those who have most impacted it. Though compiling an oral history of an organization that has been active for sixty-eight years is daunting, our team has been extremely fortunate that SoNA and the Pryor Center have partnered with us on this project. The Pryor Center is an entity under the wing of the University of Arkansas with the goal of creating both oral and visual histories. Their expertise in audio, video, and the interviewing process has been of great benefit to our team. SoNA administrators have also been greatly beneficial by providing a timeline that breaks down the key events in the history of SoNA, a list of key players and their contact information, and a brief essay-form history of the organization. We considered all the information provided and analyzed the key plotlines throughout SoNA’s history.

We then identified the people responsible for or surrounding those storylines. Once our main sources were identified, we began to work with the Pryor Center to create on-camera interviews with as many of these individuals as we could. Naturally, we started by contacting those who have had the most significant impact on SoNA as they could provide us with the greatest amount of useful information. Through the information provided by SoNA, picking out pivotal people in the organization's history was not overly challenging. I was specifically interested in the financial side of their history, especially those who have steered SoNA away from financial collapse over the years. Others on our teams had various focuses when identifying key interviews as their points of interest for the project varied by discipline.

Once we identified those who we wanted to interview, we began working on the basic interview format we would be utilizing. As a team we created a list of basic interview questions and ran through a mock interview with a member of the Pryor Center team, Bill Schwab, so that we could all get a feel for the process. Bill was an excellent first interview as he is very familiar with the on-camera interview process, but even more so he has been involved with SoNA and the greater fine arts community of the region for quite some time. After the initial interview we divided up the key contacts and reached out to them to schedule interview time slots for in-studio interviews. Prior to each interview I research the person I am to be interviewing, to further understand their prior experiences and how that translates to their position with SoNA. Once the interviewee has been researched, I create an introduction script for the start of the interview and customize some of the basic interview questions while also tailoring many new questions written specifically to best capture their knowledge and experience with SoNA. Once the introduction and questions are complete, they are uploaded so the whole team can stay up to date on the interviews we are conducting, and our smaller group will meet at the Pryor Center on the day of the interview to conduct the official recording. The whole team of students, team leads, and contacts from the Pryor Center meet weekly to provide updates as to how the interviews are going and to plan for future interviews. This time is very beneficial as we are all learning from each other throughout this process and trying to create the most comprehensive and engaging oral history as we can for SoNA.

One of the early interviews that I had the pleasure of participating in was with the current Executive Director of SoNA, Riley Nicholson. As the head of the organization over the last few years, I was very interested in hearing his thoughts on how SoNA weathered the pandemic financially. The pandemic presented significant financial issues for most organizations, but the impact on the arts, specifically performance arts, was especially real. Nicholson explained how government aid along with SoNA's loyal donor base were extremely beneficial during this rough patch for the orchestra. The interview that I personally conducted that best fit my focus on the business side of SoNA was with Ben Harris, the General Manager of SoNA. He provided excellent insight into how he manages the business of SoNA while still pursuing excellence in their musical endeavors. One takeaway from his interview that I found particularly interesting was the scale of SoNA's personal donor base. I presumed the orchestra relied heavily on corporate funding, but the reality is that there is a healthy balance between personal and corporate funding.

Evaluation

While this project is still a work in progress, there has been enough headway by me and our team to evaluate our work thus far. Concerning the interview process, there was much to learn from our first interview with Bill Schwab. While the questions asked were not inherently bad in any way, they did not provide an overwhelmingly extensive response from Mr. Schwab. The initial questions we asked also did not take nearly as much time to answer as I initially thought they would. I realized that follow up questions and comments naturally arose from the on-camera dialogue. Taking all of this into consideration, I feel as though it greatly helped me, and others on the team, more adequately prepare for future interviews. I was able to prepare a greater number of more specific questions that allowed for follow ups for my interviews, and I believe that through that I was able to learn more from those I had the privilege of speaking to. The lessons learned from Bill Schwab's interview were most evident for myself during my interview with the acting General Manager of SoNA, Ben Harris. I started by researching Mr. Harris' background and relation to SoNA. This initial research led me to discover interesting information such as Mr. Harris had the privilege of opening for B.B. King in addition to many other extremely notable musicians. I was able to introduce him on camera with a comprehensive introduction that showed a higher level of preparation and respect on my part. Following the introduction, I was able to start the interview by name dropping the many esteemed artists he had opened for and asking him to elaborate on those experiences, how they shaped his life musically, and if those experiences translated to his work today at SoNA. This introduction and opening question served as a great starting point for comfortable and personable on-camera dialogue. Another interview that I was a part of that provided valuable takeaways was our interview with Riley Nicholson, acting Executive Director of SoNA. He was the first interview my mini team took on without aid from the rest of the team or further assistance from our advisors. During this interview I was able to see how important follow up questions truly were. People naturally enjoy talking about themselves and their experiences; however, whenever you are able to follow up on their answers it greatly encourages them to elaborate to a greater extent. A decent portion of the footage we took that day resulted from follow-up questions that arose naturally.

Perhaps the most frustrating part of coordinating anything that involves people from different circles and schedules is just finding time to plan and conduct an interview. I realized through this process that people were very happy to be a resource to our project, but the timeliness of their assistance was not always optimal. Let me be clear that I fully understand that

the people that are involved in this oral history project are very active people with busy lives to attend to; however, it was certainly a roadblock for our team trying to get into contact with potential interviewees. That being said, something I would have done differently would have been to develop a basic email about that project and send it to all individuals identified as key players in the development of SoNA at the beginning of the project. Initiating the dialogue about our project with that many people all at once could have been overwhelming, but I believe that it could have been beneficial in the long run. As I said before, this is an ongoing project and interviewing process. There are many more interviews scheduled for the semester but going off those interviews that have been conducted thus far I feel confident in the work that has been done. Our team has interviewed a variety of individuals with questions from many different points of view that will continue to paint a narrative of what SoNA was, what SoNA is, and what SoNA could be going forward.

Next Steps

There is a great opportunity for this project to be continued in the future! I am confident that we could conduct many more interviews and still gain a new perspective on SoNA with each conversation we have. The primary next step, in my opinion, is to do just that. The team should continue to interview the key players to fill in any existing gaps in the history of the organization.

Of the interviews our team has conducted thus far, we have comprehensively covered the current state of SoNA and its recent history. An area in which I would like to have more in-depth content from interviews would be the NASO era. NASO was rebranded as SoNA near the end of the early 2000s, and I believe that the transitional process was vital in further establishing SoNA as a major arts player. Gathering more interviews with people involved in that transition directly as well as those involved in NASO from its inception until the rebranding process would be greatly beneficial to the project. These interviews do have a bit more urgency to them as many of those who dedicated time and money in the early days are now further along in years.

Once all these interviews are completed, the opportunities to utilize this content are numerous. Given the previous work of the Pryor Center, their webpage of videoed interviews, known as the Arkansas Story Vault, would be an obvious next step for this project. This would allow for many different perspectives from our interviews to be displayed and accessible in their truest form. I do believe that this project does need to be taken further than this semester. With the goal of creating an oral history of SoNA, what we have accomplished thus far has been very critical in the way of setting the building blocks for that to become a reality, but to achieve the goal of a complete oral history, in my opinion, our interviews need to be utilized and trimmed down to create a concise story of SoNA that is digestible to a broad audience.

Concerning the possibilities of next steps for a business-based look at this project, there is still much to be analyzed with SoNA and the greater arts community of Northwest Arkansas and their interaction, and benefit, from such a strong corporate presence in the area. This project specifically set out to examine the history of SoNA, but I believe that a comprehensive look into the corporate influence on other arts organizations such as Crystal Bridges, The Momentary, and many other key players would be of great interest to many. The impact of corporations in the area, such as Walmart, can be measured in a multitude of numerous ways. For starters, there is the very traceable financial support that has flowed directly from corporations into arts organizations. Those figures, while remarkably interesting, just scratch the surface of the benefits. For example, SoNA benefited from the construction of the Walton Arts Center as the

space serves as their home stage, but this recurring benefit to SoNA would not appear on the books regularly as corporate funding, despite it being a byproduct of the Walton's ongoing generosity in the region. Another impact the corporate presence has on this area that would be more difficult to exactly measure is the general inflow of people and capital the mere existence of these firms brings into the area. If not for these corporations, Northwest Arkansas as we know it today would not exist. The flourishing area has provided an ideal environment for organizations such as SoNA to prosper as they have.

An interview process modeled after the one employed by our oral history project with participants from other arts organizations and corporations alike could generate very useful information for those interested in the area and all that it has to offer. This project would obviously be much broader; however, if the principle focus of the interviews, the corporate climate in Northwest Arkansas' benefit to the arts, were followed closely a very compelling narrative would come from the project. The work our team has done so far would fit into this spin-off project well as SoNA is a very well-established arts organization in the region, and additionally many of the people we intend to interview by the conclusion of the semester have contributed to the growth of this sector over the years.

Personal Evaluation

Through this process I feel like I learned a lot of valuable lessons and skills for the future. The first of these lessons would be about communication. As I mentioned earlier, getting in contact with interviewees is at times difficult. From this process I realized how important sending follow-up emails was. I previously thought it was rude to send a follow-up email, but as we began contacting more and more people, I realized how beneficial it could be. Also, in the vein of communication, I learned a lot about interviewing through this project, not surprisingly. I think a practice that will really apply to job interviews in the future for me is to really do your research on the person you are interviewing with. I noticed whenever I had a detailed and accurate idea of the person's background and accomplishments that it helped establish a mutual respect between us. Lastly, a social skill I learned from this process is the power of a nice icebreaker. While you cannot strictly rely on pleasant small talk or stories, I found that having a nice icebreaker that related specifically to the person you were interviewing went a long way in building rapport.

I learned more about business than I expected through this project. Going into the interviews I was convinced that SoNA was afloat due mostly to corporate generosity towards the organization. What I came to realize is that the corporate sector did in fact have an impact on SoNA, but the scale at which local donors support the organization was very eye-opening. During my interview with SoNA General Manager Ben Harris, whenever I inquired about the distribution of funding between corporate and local support, he revealed that it is very evenly split. Something that stood out to me even more was how SoNA has survived over the years through a recession, a rebrand, and a pandemic. What I realized about this organization is the people who believe in it, the donors, and participants, have really been the life force instead of corporate generosity. Not that corporate generosity did not play a role in financially supporting the mission of SoNA, it was just not to the extent that I assumed going into this project.

Conclusion

Through this process of interviewing participants, we have created a foundation for a complete oral history of SoNA that represents the many aspects of the organization and pays

tribute to those who invested their time and money into the mission of SoNA, to provide Northwest Arkansas with a vibrant symphony for the public to enjoy. The corporate presence in the area has benefited the symphony financially along with the ever-growing arts scene in NWA. There is further work to be done regarding interviewing remaining contacts, and even beyond SoNA I would love to see further exploration into the corporate influence on the arts in the area. I am excited to see how SoNA develops in the future, and I feel strongly that the people of Northwest Arkansas will continue to support the organization.

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