Are We Ignoring Our Most Loyal Supporters?

By Joan Jeffri

The chamber music field worries about the graying of its audience. But the author—a former arts administrator and current advocate for the aging—says we should rejoice in the growing ranks of active seniors and cultivate them further.

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, about developing new audiences in China. Some years ago, a national museum, wishing to attract the elderly population, especially what Americans would call the blue-collar population, decided to open one day a week charging no admission; and it sent the word out about this new initiative to “third agers.” The day came, and the museum was to open at its usual 10:00 a.m. time. By very early morning, lines of seniors began to form, snaking all the way down the very long block and around the corner.

10:00 a.m. The gates to the museum open. The would-be new audience members begin to set up tables in the courtyard in front of the museum. Finally, they enter the museum, holding in their hands the fruit and vegetables they came with, and proceed to the restrooms where they wash the items. They then return to the courtyard and sell their wares, entering the museum only to wash more vegetables.

Be careful what you wish for.

In the United States, for many years we have heard cries about subscription audiences growing old in their seats, and the concert hall itself is sometimes portrayed as geriatric—with both audience and the musicians who play to them sporting increasingly gray (or dyed) hair. So audience development has concentrated on youth, those who are increasingly technology-connected, who have many choices of activities to fill their limited leisure time, and who have been reported (by Vanderbilt University sociologist Steven Tepper and former NEA chairman Bill Ivey, among others) to want to participate in art, not be passive observers. Indeed, the youth challenge has spurred many institutions to look across the spectrum of their audiences.

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra’s Maestra Marin Alsop started Rusty Musicians in 2010, as a way “to attract new audiences through participatory opportunities for engagement as well as to enhance the BSO’s position as an educational and social community resource.” The “Rusties” are adult amateur musicians—instrumentalists and vocalists—who, for one night, perform alongside regular members of the BSO or alongside members of the Heritage Signature Chorale.

While the Rusties seem to get a tremendous thrill out of this experience, it has been said that the reaction of the professional musicians varies. Follow-up—to see if the public profile of the orchestra or its attendance was affected—would tell us more.

Although age is one of the characteristics people use to define diversity, most often the conversation turns to the lack of racial and ethnic variation among our cultural institutions’ administrators, performers and audiences. Obviously, addressing this aspect of diversity is crucial—but meanwhile, the very large old-age contingent is often forgotten; and when it is mentioned,
the stereotype invoked is that of blue-haired ladies/gray nodders growing old along with their subscriptions.

It is by now widely understood that we are entering a period when people are living longer, healthier, more creative lives. In response to this phenomenon, the very definition of old age has been changing. The pioneering University of Chicago researcher Bernice L. Neugarten was the first to differentiate between the “young old” and the “old old.” She divided late adulthood into three categories: Old Age (65–74), Old Old Age (75–84), and Elderly (over 85). Clearly, it is time for all of us to rethink these categories.

In terms of numbers, 10,000 Baby Boomers have been turning 65 every day since January 2011, says the Pew Research Center, and the age cohort will continue to grow at this rate until 2030. The same Pew survey reported that people see themselves as middle-aged through and beyond their 60s: “The typical Boomer believes that old age does not begin until age 72.”

In a recent project to document the work of older professional visual artists, Art Cart: SAVING THE LEGACY, the Research Center for Arts and Culture found that, in New York City and the District of Columbia, 25 artists between the ages of 63 and 100 were digitally connected through websites, email and more—one 100-year-old having “picked up” the skill of digital art-making at the age of 89.

In terms of participation, according to the 2008 National Endowment for the Arts Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, nearly 20 percent of classical music attenders was 65 or older, a high proportion compared with audiences for most other performing arts.

As my colleague Ted Berger, project director of Urban Artist Initiative/NYC, is fond of saying, he’s among the “temporarily able.” As we grow older and live longer, Berger’s term might be useful to describe a growing new group of potentially active participants who might further swell audiences for the arts. In terms of size alone, this is a group that can’t be ignored.

But in the struggle to get younger generations into those 19th-century institutions like concert halls, or reach out to them through clubs, cafés, and nontraditional spaces, little regard is given to that portion of the audience that has been with us for the last several decades.

Museums have done better than music presenters in building new participation within the older sector. While both music and art boast many medical and therapeutic interventions, I am not focusing on those but rather, on efforts like the Museum of Modern Art’s Meet Me at MoMA project, which finds a new audience among people with dementia and their caretakers—its book on the subject is so popular it has been translated and used in Japan. The Rubin Museum of Art has a free-admission Senior Day, a Senior Film series for well seniors, as well as programs for those with dementia and their caregivers. Many other institutions around the country have begun dealing with age-related topics, developing programming on a host of subjects that enhance health “literacy,” and mounting exhibitions that draw older visitors into museum halls and auditoriums. All are well documented in Museums on Call: How Museums Are Addressing Health Issues, a June 2013 report from the American Alliance of Museums.
participation in the arts actually maintains health in older adults. Gene D. Cohen, M.D., conducted a 2006 study on Creativity and Aging that tracked the health of older adults (average age, 80) who participated over nine months in professionally conducted, participatory arts programs in Brooklyn; San Francisco; and the District of Columbia. Eligibility for the intervention (art) and control groups required participants to be 65 or older, living independently at the study’s start, involved in intensive community-based programs—arts programs conducted by professional artists for the intervention group, non-arts activities and programs for the control group.

At Washington, DC’s Levine School of Music, for example, seniors participated weekly in the Senior Singers’ Chorale. The study found that the intervention-group participants took fewer medications, had fewer doctor visits, and had fewer falls than a control group of elders who did not participate.

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This study suggests that such reasoning is wrong on two counts. First, the power of age and cohort are limited for explaining past and current patterns of participation.

More importantly, this approach underestimates how broader changes in personal life are influencing civic and arts participation. The middle of the 20th century represented the high point of processes that standardized the life-course of individuals. After 1970, this uniformity gave way to a new diversity of personal decision-making.

The transition to adulthood became more protracted and characterized by diversity and autonomy. Models for growing old also varied; workers no longer retired in their early and mid-sixties, and the “empty nest” life-cycle stage went from an exceptional to a typical household form for older adults. This same pursuit of flexibility and informality has influenced the art world as well.

So we are left with the profile of an older adult who attends concerts, who benefits from arts participation (consonant with younger engaged audiences’ desires), who purchases subscriptions and/or finds less expensive ways to attend concerts, who has been “educated” into the attendance habit, who listens through the media, and who is here for us.

I suggest we pay more attention to the tastes of these older men and women, that we make their attending, listening and participating easier, that we ask them about their experience, that we involve them in our success, not only because we keep hearing stories of the little old lady who gave $50 a year, then died and bequeathed $9 million to her favorite nonprofit organization, not because these people may fail to predict future audiences, but because these audience members have been with us for the long haul and it looks like, according to the demographic projections, they may be with us for three or more decades. They are not the metaphorical vegetable washers outside the Chinese museum. They are our current and also our future audience.

Joan Jeffri is founding director of the Research Center for Arts and Culture, now part of the National Center of Creative Aging. Former director of Columbia University’s graduate program in arts administration, she is now Scholar-in-Residence in American University’s arts management program. Jeffri’s publications include The Emerging Arts: Management, Survival and Growth; Arts-Money: Raising It, Saving It and Earning It; and Respect for Art: Visual Arts Administration and Management in China and the United States.