



LET 'EM IN

SNAGGING YOUNG AUDIENCES FOR CLASSICAL MUSIC
ISN'T AS HARD AS IT SEEMS.

BY STEFENE RUSSELL



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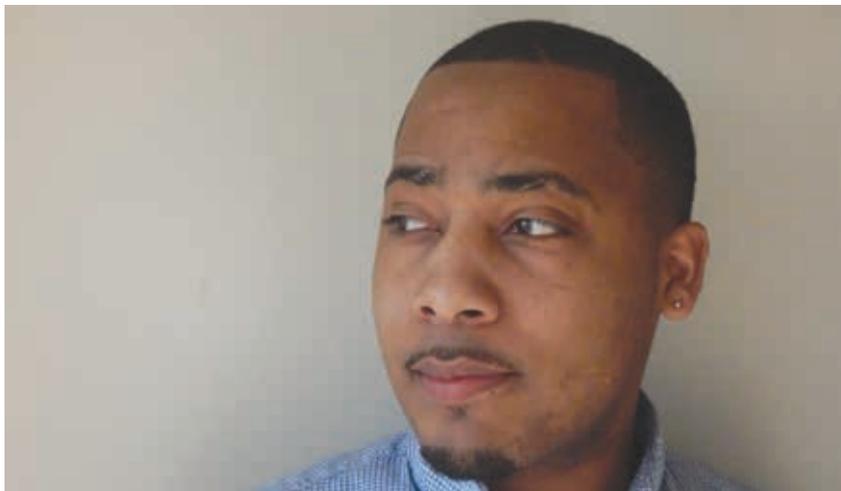
One subscriber says, "It's so nice to see youth in the hall."

Opera singers, ballerinas, poets, and symphony musicians all lose sleep over a similar, awful scenario: that one day, their particular art form will disappear because there is just no one left listening or watching—all entertainment will be found on a screen, or mega-popular. It's a dilemma that arts organizations have openly struggled with for decades.

Which makes the St. Louis Symphony Campus Coordinator program that much more remarkable. Started in 2009, it's an astonishingly simple



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DeRon Wilson

idea: students sell \$10 tickets to students. They make \$100 for every 20 tickets they sell, and get up to eight free tickets of their own. And they get bullet points on their resumes that list the Symphony as an employer (which has a great deal more cachet than “barista”). Once young people are exposed to the experience of classical music in a venue such as Powell Hall, they tend to keep coming back: in its short life, the program’s already seen a 200-percent rise in revenue growth.

It all started with just one campus coordinator, DeRon Wilson, who’s now the St. Louis Symphony’s IN UNISON and Campus Marketing Fellow, as well as Interim Education Coordinator. Wilson oversees a good chunk of the Campus Coordinator program, including recruiting and serving as point person for a pool of 20-plus campus coordinators on 10 campuses.

When asked if it took a heavy sales pitch to sell classical music to college students, Wilson says no, not in his experience. “I was just trying to expose as many people in the local area, because it is a world-class symphony,” he says. “And it is. I mean, it’s what I grew up on. So I was just extremely excited about it, and I guess I just tried to make as many people as excited about it as I was. And it worked.

“Most of the campus coordinators have some kind of musical background,” he says, “and they come with that excitement and they get other people excited, and you sort of build the business from that.”

Wilson began playing violin at age seven, attended the Central Visual and Performing Arts High School, and heard about the Campus Coordinator program as a senior, just as he was getting serious about his music and heading off to Cape Girardeau to start classes at Southeast Missouri State University. He’s now a senior at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, where he studies closely with the Arianna String Quartet. “I also tend to get music instruc-



tion from various symphony musicians since I'm here," he says. "I'm developing a string quartet at the moment, and just playing as much as I possibly can. I love it so much. The plan is to stay in St. Louis and keep on developing, and then we'll see where we go."

Wilson works closely with Director of Community Programs Maureen Byrne and Group Sales Director Vicki Kirschhoff, who says that the Campus Coordinator program has "just blossomed," and that its impact has definitely been noticed by the regulars at Powell Hall.

"That's the thing I think is neatest about this program," Kirschhoff says. "Hearing from the subscribers, who are getting older, and are happy to see this next, young generation have an interest in this music that they love. We probably had 150 students here last Friday night, and a guy wrote to me and said, 'It is so nice to see youth in the hall.' That is why this is such a vital program."

Byrne has been so impressed with the results, she thinks other orchestras could benefit by adopting similar practices. She says that the program grew quickly from the start: in 2010, they added five more coordinators. "And then we thought, 'Wow, this thing really has legs!'" she laughs. "So we actually put some structure to it, started recruiting, and put a person in place who could, on a part-time basis, recruit for us and manage the program—manage training them, paying them, that kind of thing." That person, of course, was Wilson, and she credits its success and quick

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growth to his focus and drive. “This is DeRon’s second or third year running it. And, oh my gosh, he’s done fantastically well,” she says. “I think part of why he’s done so well is because he was a campus coordinator himself.”

Wilson chalks it up to a couple of things, aside from enthusiasm for classical music being contagious. Though some students drive to Powell Hall

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and pay in cash, many campus coordinators have made things easy for their customers by setting ingenious and super-easy systems that employ techie touches such as Google Docs, PayPal, and Square. They get training early on, and are given marketing materials, but every coordinator has their own way of doing things, Wilson says. Some like to work person-to-person; others rely on social media. “It’s very entrepreneurial that way,” he says. And once they grow a pool of friends who start buying tickets, they tend to be repeat customers.

“There’s just something really interesting that happens to people when they actually hear the symphony in a live hall. It’s so much different than listening to it on a CD or a recording. You just have that moment of excitement, where there’s something unpredictable.”

Though not everyone has been playing classical music for most of their lives, Wilson says he’s also an example of how orchestral music can be accessible to all people.

“My start wasn’t the typical start,” he says. “I wasn’t exposed to classical music as a child. It started in my school system, and it was something that I was really excited about. But I feel like I can relate to a lot of people, because I didn’t grow up in a musical household at all. That’s one of the things I can talk to people about in that arena, who feel like the arts are stuffy. I tell them they can come down here in tennis shoes and blue jeans. Musicians don’t intend for classical music to be this extreme high-art society. We just have to look at classical music for what it is—a raw form of human expression. And if we can think of it in that way, it becomes more approachable.”

*Stefene Russell is Culture Editor at
St. Louis magazine.*