Angela Answers

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Making Connections, Within and Beyond Music

Dear Angela: Lately, I've been struggling to feel like my ensemble's work matters in the grand scheme of things. We don't want to turn our concerts into lectures or protests, but we do want to contribute positively to a better world. How can we make our programming more relevant?

BY Angela Myles Beeching



THERE'S A WIDE RANGE OF SOCIAL and environmental issues that are especially relevant now. From climate change and social justice, to immigration, racism, and war. There's also the overarching epidemic of loneliness and the mental health crisis. In these challenging times, we're all dealing with both individual and collective trauma.

So, think which issues are most resonant for you and your ensemble, and which one you'd most like to address in your programming. Once you've chosen a topic, brainstorm for works that cast light on it, directly or indirectly.

Where's home now?

Let's say you choose immigration, and your goal is to humanize the issue and to build connections between your neighbors. You might build a program showcasing works by immigrant composers, interspersing these with brief readings from their letters about coming to America. To introduce the works, you could demonstrate how the composers weave elements from both their new and old home cultures into their music.

To help audience members connect with each other during intermission, you could invite them to apply pushpins to a large display map of the world to indicate where they or their family are from originally. You and your ensemble can introduce this by doing it first.

Concerts bring people together, and that better world you want begins with the conversations you start.

Healing

Another example: imagine your chosen topic is mental health. To actively involve your audience, consider how two musicians I've coached recently developed their programs. Each artist independently created their own version of a meditation concert. In between pieces performed, their audiences learned and practiced either active listening and mindfulness skills, or centering exercises focused on breath awareness.

The repertoire these musicians perform includes works by Mozart, Schubert, and Debussy—but there are countless other possibilities. Beyond the music, the gift the audiences receive is the life-skill to lower their own stress levels. And they learn this by unlocking music's healing capacity to calm and focus and connect us to ourselves and to each other.

Excellent programming

. . . is all about finding relevant entry points to the music so that your audience can make meaningful connections between the works they hear and their own life experience.

Now, more than ever, people are hungry for participatory events where they feel safe, seen, and heard. In convening an audience gathering, you have an opportunity to create a welcoming environment, opening a dialogue that sparks connection and conversation.

When you offer audiences prompts that help them connect and reflect on their own life experience, you're giving people the chance to come home to themselves, to be present to their feelings, and to dare to be human with each other. The best concert events inspire a sense of belonging and community.

The more you can make your performances springboards for thoughtful reflection and open conversations, the more good you'll bring to the world.

Angela Myles Beeching is a career consultant and the author of Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music. *Angela works with individuals, ensembles, and organizations to facilitate positive change.*