



Orchestras and the Canada Council in the Next Five Years: Reimagining Innovation

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The current landscape for Canadian orchestras

Well ahead of COVID-19, Canadian orchestras have faced – and in many ways, triumphed over – significant challenges.

As the Canada Council's own research has identified, orchestras have had to make up for a proportional decrease in public funding (specifically, a 12% relative drop in proportion to other revenues between 2010 and 2017¹) by focusing on earned and privately contributed income. Now, as the pandemic has critically affected earned and contributed income, orchestras find themselves particularly vulnerable.

Still, they continue to keep artists working: almost all of Canada's professional orchestras have maintained their financial commitments to artists even through the pandemic's most uncertain and trying periods.

Pandemic-era orchestral programming has included, and will include:

- creative approaches to digital creation, presenting, and sharing
- physically distanced performances
- performances with reduced ensemble sizes
- outdoor performances
- short performances in venues permitting flexible seating, and
- partnerships with educators and community organizations that leverage professional musicians' skills in new ways

These programs are making use of musicians' talents and creativity, redefining orchestras' relationships with community, and exploiting digital opportunities, enabling more Canadians than ever to access the work of their orchestras. These strategies will, we hope, ensure a seamless return to full and – potentially – expanded programming when the time is right. By “keeping the band together”, leaning into innovation, retaining key staff, and staying in close musical contact with our communities during this time of crisis, we are confident that orchestras will be well positioned for re-opening as soon as it's feasible to welcome large audiences back into close proximity in enclosed spaces.

While these kinds of programs cannot generate the kind of revenues that a typical concert season does, Orchestras Canada believes that with the right support from non-earned revenue sources, orchestras can continue to pay artists while becoming more innovative, taking bigger artistic risks, and trying completely new approaches in key growth areas such as diversity and inclusion and digital innovation.

This is where Council can help.

¹<https://canadacouncil.ca/research/research-library/2019/05/arts-facts-using-cadac-data-47-symphony-orchestras>

A stronger, more sustainable future for Canadian orchestras

Orchestras and anti-racism/anti-discrimination

Orchestras Canada stands with the Canada Council and the broader arts community in a shared commitment to anti-racism and anti-discrimination as the very bedrock of art and creativity. We also recognize the vital importance of insisting on the three different dimensions of diversity and inclusion as defined by the Council – representation in programming, at the administrative and volunteer leadership level, and in the audiences participating – to ensure that these values are embodied in sustained action.

Though Canadian orchestras have put forth many creative and collaborative initiatives that have celebrated diversity and challenged orchestras’ colonial origins, we have identified some foundational elements that have impeded orchestras’ progress in sustainably and authentically weaving anti-racism and anti-discrimination into their very fibre.

We are collectively committed to change. However, the structure of orchestras’ finances makes necessary change and evolution difficult: orchestras are undercapitalized. The Canada Council’s 2019 *Portrait of 47 Symphony Orchestras* reveals that orchestras labour under a combination of sub-optimal debt-to-asset ratios, levels of working capital, and investment in capital infrastructure². In combination, these raise barriers when it comes to long-term planning, innovation, and true inclusion. This fact, compounded by the web of socioeconomic factors that nurture the development of professional musicians towards orchestral positions, and draw audiences to their seats in the hall, means that Canadian orchestras are continually playing catch-up when it comes to diversity.

Orchestras’ rhetoric, approaches, and actions are rapidly evolving in light of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the disruption caused by the pandemic, and new energy around major ongoing social movements. We highlight just a few examples: the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra’s *Musical Herstory* course highlighting women composers, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra’s *Music as Resistance: Beyond protest songs* TafelTalk, and the Toronto Symphony’s *Socially Connecting with Seniors through Music* program each reveal the potential in our sector. Orchestras are seizing the opportunity created by the pandemic to redefine their relationship with anti-discrimination through artistically-driven, innovative, accessible, and experimental programming. But for these approaches to be feasible beyond the constraints of the pandemic, orchestras need access to new types of funding that are expressly designed to encourage and reward disruption and to allow room for experimentation and – sometimes – failure. We believe that the Canada Council can help.

² *Overview of 47 Symphony Orchestras in Canada*, Canada Council for the Arts, December 2019

Orchestras and artists' income

Sustained investments in arts organizations (including orchestras) will help ensure reliable and steady income for artists while assisting the entire sector through the pandemic and beyond.

Orchestras pay artists. Core funding to arts organizations like orchestras is an efficient way to ensure that significant numbers of artists are paid, and have the necessary structures in place to get their art to communities. While orchestras also provide the infrastructure to support ambitious projects that reach far beyond the scope of what an individual artist can achieve, the largest part of their spending goes to compensating artists.

The Canada Council's own research backs this up: in 2016-17, Canadian orchestras invested nearly 70% of their annual budgets, and more than 80% of their artistic spending, in salaries and professional fees for artists, arts workers, and people in related businesses³. Artists, cultural workers and technical staff were paid nearly \$100M by just one third of Canada's symphony orchestras that year.

Public investment in orchestras creates compound interest when it comes to artists' income. Every public dollar contributed at the organizational level is stretched much further through the earned and private income it facilitates. Not only does a large proportion of that aggregate income go straight into the pockets of working artists, it is then multiplied through the many additional gainful employment opportunities that orchestras create outside the organization itself.

The existence of orchestras is foundational to musicians' income across the country. Orchestras enable musicians to lead lives of dignity and multi-faceted contribution in communities across the country. The high-level musical standards and training enabled by orchestras affect the entire artistic ecosystem, contributing to higher levels of teaching, performance, and musical access across every musical genre.

Orchestras and funding equity

Again, orchestras stand in solidarity with the arts community in a call for funding equity. The Council's role must centre on funding good work better, with transparency, consultation, and confidence in artists and arts organizations. The Canada Council's equity frameworks and language must transcend optics and categories, and effectively reflect needs, capacity, and transformative opportunities across sectors.

³ *Overview of 47 Symphony Orchestras in Canada*, Canada Council for the Arts, December 2019

How can Council help?

By encouraging process as much as product

Recommendation 1: Create an Innovation Supplement across all grant programs that specifically incentivizes process

Diversity and digital innovation share something in common: they both require an emphasis on process. If Council wants to see sustained outcomes in these areas, funding must reward experimentation, and insulate against failure. Orchestras Canada suggests creating an Innovation Supplement that would be delivered across all existing programs, a model similar to the existing Access Support supplementary grant.

This supplementary funding would help pay for time and better process, two essential ingredients in organic artistic exploration. This puts relationship-building back at the centre of creativity, and de-couples experimentation and development from the necessity to race to market with new work. A funding supplement that prioritizes artistic exploration will contribute to decolonizing arts organizations, as well as the Canada Council itself.

We also encourage an ongoing consultative and collaborative approach, increased responsiveness to the approaches organizations are organically gravitating towards, and continued investment in research and development as a direct innovation strategy.

By approaching digital differently

Recommendation 2: Reimagine Council's approach to digital by unlocking funding for digital projects and digital operations

With March 2021 marking the end of the current Digital Strategy Fund (DSF) and the anniversary of the pandemic, the Canada Council has the opportunity to apply learnings from the DSF (including the evident challenges in disbursing sufficient grants funds as the program was originally designed) to evolve its approach. We note that the DSF has caused frustration among many in the orchestral world: the program's theoretical focus meant that learning by doing, rapid prototyping, and "failing fast" were essentially ineligible activities.

As demonstrated during the pandemic, approaches and trends in the digital space evolve at breakneck speed. With this in mind, the next iteration of Council's investment in Digital should be flexible enough to move with the sector, and not impede us.

Accordingly, we recommend that the next iteration of digital funding be oriented more towards digital projects, implementation, and operations. According to a survey of members conducted by Orchestras Canada in October 2020, 74% of orchestras plan to continue some or all of the digital engagement they are doing during COVID, and 12% of them plan to do even more⁴.

We urge the Canada Council to start looking at the digital space not only as a philosophical construct, but also as an integral piece of arts organizations' practical strategies and public offerings.

⁴ *Orchestras Canada Digital Survey*, Orchestras Canada, October 2020

By refining and evolving diversity and innovation criteria and evaluation

Recommendation 3: Evolve application criteria to help groups articulate their progress towards diversity, inclusion, and innovation

Current Engage and Sustain applicants are expected to speak to their “commitment to reflecting the diversity of their geographic community or region” in applications and reports. While this evaluation criteria is a step in the right direction, it merely assesses the organization’s own status quo. If the Council wants to instigate and support change, we recommend a new approach.

We suggest developing a section that requires each organization to define its own status quo, set goals that are informed by the realities in their own geographic area, and provide plans for the actions they want to undertake. Evaluating their work on the strength of the plan, rather than the strength of the status quo, will encourage organizations to incorporate big, long-term changes into their strategy.

Conclusion

Orchestras Canada applauds the Canada Council for taking a consultative approach in its strategic planning process. We look forward to the opportunity to participate in any and all conversations as part of the development of Council's new 5-year strategic plan, as well as any future consultations.

About Orchestras Canada

Orchestras Canada is the national association for Canadian orchestras, founded (as the Association of Canadian Orchestras) in 1972. We represent the perspectives of 130 Canadian orchestras across every province, a group with which we've been in constant dialogue since the pandemic was first declared in mid-March. Canadian orchestras are grateful for the measures implemented by the Canada Council to help Canadian artists and arts organizations to stabilize their operations and innovate through a critical period.