



“WHY DIGITAL”

Evolution of the Arts in a Digital World Symposium - Session No. 1 Notes
January 6, 2021

The Arts are always evolving and reflecting societal changes. How does living in an increasingly digital world influence the Arts industry?

This Symposium was created out of the Winspear Centre's desire to bring together experts to help shape the artistic direction and to provide input for the Completion Project. We wanted this symposium to be shared with other organizations, individual artists, and any others who are interested in learning about digital technology in the Arts.

How did the Completion project come about?

Background

- The Winspear Building opened in 1997, thanks in large part to the \$6M donation of Dr. Francis Winspear, which was the single largest donation in the country at the time. The building was a dream of the musicians in the orchestra, Tommy Banks, and other community members that was 20 years in the making.
- When the building was built, it was on a \$40M budget that had an endowment to sustain the building. To stay within budget, there was a property that remained undeveloped, which became the parking lot. There has always been an obligation to develop the lot and the plan was to create a musical education centre there.

Why Develop Now?

- With the evolution of the organization, a need for a second space was identified.
- Embarking on the Completion Project also reflects the ambition of the organization. We had to ask, 'what is music?', 'what is music's relationship with artists, participants, audiences, and the community?', and 'how can we create a space that supports that?'
- Our world is changing, and audiences are interacting with us in different ways. Digital must be a fundamental part of everything we talk about in a built environment.
- We have all been abruptly thrown into the digital sphere and have needed to learn new skills; for the Edmonton Symphony, these included learning to record the orchestra and to get performances online.

What are the differences between digital and live experiences?

- **Digital creates three distinct layers and ways to experience music:**
 - **A need for 'Smart buildings'**; music buildings that are reactive and more efficient. That means having a building that costs less to run and is more flexible as needs change and evolve. There is now a need to consider smaller spaces versus larger spaces, how to manage traffic flow with doors and corridors, and the transition to different types of



- workspaces. For our environments, we need to consider facilitating traffic, ventilation, security, etc. and how these things can be managed digitally.
- **Evolution of the art form** - There are digital advancements to art forms that are already happening as evidence by the VR mass opera in New York's Prospect Park. Art forms evolve according to their environments and instruments, and we need to build our environments to reflect that.
 - **Audience expectation** - the way audiences are conditioned to interact with content is always changing. The fact that everyone wants us to do something one way, does not mean that we should (i.e., produce digital content). Life should be live and in-person and digital mediums should not compromise that. The live experience is still the best.

Has COVID changed/influence the building in the Completion Project? What questions arose in the Completion Project with regards to COVID?

- **What aspects do we have to consider when designing a new building?**
 - Ex. Air handling systems - we need the ability to change the percentage of fresh air coming into a building.
 - Ex. Digital modelling of traffic through a building - need to have multiple options for pathways, optimization of entry and efficient seating system.
 - For new venues, there is a need to create spaces that enable artists and organizations to have multiple platforms to deliver to audiences (live, broadcast, recording) and the ability to move between those capacities.
- **What is the balance of digital and live experience?**
 - The cost of a digital experience is only cheaper if there is a wider distribution. We need to consider the capital required to put a digital experience in place, the quality of work, what audiences are expecting, and whether a digital performance would be of the same calibre as a live performance.
 - Musical outreach programs work digitally because they are in a more casual setting when compared to concerts.
- **What is going to happen to downtowns after the pandemic?**
 - We wish people will come to the building. People may not come in the same quantity as in the past, which is why digital is increasingly important in this aspect.
- **Anticipation of less administrative space.**
 - With more people working from home, consider what type of administrative support network is needed and whether you need the same level of full-time employees.
- **A change in how we think about the art form.**
 - Why does it need to exist and how do people want to connect to it?

Is the use of digital technology a generational thing?

- It used to be that recordings were documents of live experiences. Increasingly, audiences are shaped by recorded content and are interacting with recordings before attending live events.
- We know that live performances are more enriching and more valuable for communities. It is up to us to make it valuable for younger people to participate in live events.



- Online learning can be valuable for people who cannot physically be there.
- We should encourage people to use the best version of what we can offer.
- The breath of live interactions will change.
- Digital creates access, but also allows for more participation compared to the traditional concert experience. However, this does not mean one is better than the other. There is an enhancement of live experience with digital.
- For a while, we could have a small audience in the building. When people attended live concerts and then saw it online afterwards there was a difference in how they interacted with the pieces. Having a digital component was like having a three-dimensional experience of music.

Q&A SESSION

Can the design of the Winspear Expansion be altered to accommodate for these changes?

The short answer is yes. We can look at how easy it is to clean surfaces; we can look at eliminating door handles, etc. We are not at a stage where we cannot change things. We are making sure that all the mechanisms are good and that we will have a building with flexible capacity and usage.

How are you bridging the expectations of younger and older audiences? In particular, the comfort level and familiarity with digital technology, providing educational bits to bring new “fans” on board while not “boring” patrons who already are very familiar and comfortable with the art form?

We offer a variety of educational programs through the *Tommy Banks Centre for Musical Creativity* that target everyone from the very young to the very old. For example, our Music Box Babies program, which targets children 0-48 months, was typically held at the Winspear with an instructor. The program works best in a live format because the instructors can bond with the child and the adults. We had to grapple with the choice to go digital with this program. We tiptoed in with some Zoom classes for the 0-12 months age group as it was this parent group that was the least comfortable going out. Those Zoom classes are shorter and we needed to figure out how to have the same interaction as a live class. Instructors learned new skills and were able to react to a child’s curiosity and energy level in a digital setting.

For older audiences, we have been offering online Music Appreciation classes. These are 75-minute classes, twice a week, on various topics about music taught by Musicologist & Interpreter, D.T. Baker and Assistant Conductor, Cosette Justo Valdés. When we started, there was an adjustment period where people were getting used to the idea of working and learning online. By the third course, the engagement was huge. People were able to up their abilities and learn to use technology. There was a 95-year-old participant who was able to use Zoom and enjoy the course. We wanted to keep offering programming that would not be taken down by the next set of restrictions.

Typically, in the summer, we offer the Rusty Musician Camp which is a five-day program that has participants playing alongside orchestra members. We were not able to offer this in-person last summer, but our alternative was to bring 60 people together to play together virtually. Orchestra musicians recorded and laid down the tracks to send to participants, then participants sent in their recordings, and everything was edited together. It was a worthwhile experience, but not the same as in-person. It will be interesting to see what we bring in from this experience and incorporating it into the live experience.



After the pandemic, do you predict a resurgence of live performances and demand for more live performances?

All experts are predicting a tsunami of demand for live performances, but that demand will wane. How large the demand is depends on whether people feel safe coming to indoor venues.

Currently, there is frustration with a lack of human contact, which has translated into more people interacting with digital artistic and cultural activities. There is a need for diversity of content. Those organizations that offer sophisticated content online are hard to compete with. It is also difficult to compete if you are an intermediate organization that does not produce content as well as an international organization, and if you are too large to be considered a local organization. Your brand and whether people feel they belong to your community is important. The quality of in-person content will need to increase. With more things moving online, one way to make money is to offer a premium price for things you are doing more intensely.

Thoughts about the economic model for digital delivery?

There is concern about the global community and the way we deal with freelancers and the missions that individual organizations have created for themselves and the collective agreements they have entered into. What type of content you produce and who is included in your communities are all elements that need to be rethought as the environment changes.

For all performing arts, endowments are key to help arts organizations survive. There is very little to no commercial success from digital offerings and they act more as an enhancement. Commercial success could come from musical outreach programs that have human interactions or digital offerings that provide a unique experience.

One concern is whether future generations will be able to tell what a human has created versus something created by artificial intelligence. At least in this generation, we know that a work created by a human has something extraordinary about it. The human element of a work can be found within its complexity – the work's flavours and nuances. Art is that what makes us human.

Even when we do digital versions of a concert performance, it may look like a live performance, but it is not the same. When creating digital content, we must think about it as a different experience for the consumer. It is not as simple as putting a camera in the hall, it is about creating a whole other experience. Before COVID, the Winspear did not record performances and this was done so deliberately so we would understand why we had to go digital and how we could take advantage of this opportunity.

Typically, the Arts are an industry of competition; many organizations competing for the same dollars. Now, with a digital sphere, it is worse than it was before. If I want to listen to a particular piece, I can find it performed by any orchestra online. For me to tune into your orchestra, I need a reason to. Your organization must have something I cannot get anywhere else.



ONE PRACTICAL DIGITAL TIP

Annemarie: Be grounded in the ‘why’. Anytime you do something, ask yourself that question three times. Be clear about the ‘why’ and the outcomes will be the right ones.

Tateo: Check that you are not muted when on a call. You can also find some tips for returning to venues, here: <http://arup-2.hs-sites.com/arts-culture-entertainment-and-arts-education>

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