

SOUND INVESTMENT

by Michelle Weger, development manager
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Back at the turn of the century (the 21st century, that is), the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra had just adopted a five-year strategic plan that recommended we establish a regular program of commissioning new music. Across the board, our music director, musicians, board and staff members felt that the orchestra should both preserve the great tradition of classical repertoire and foster the creation of new music. Not surprisingly, our idealism soon butted heads with the omnipresent monster that thwarts so many good intentions: Funding, or lack of it.

In late 1999, the stock market bubble was about to burst – and we knew that it would be risky, in any case, to leverage commissions purely on foundation or government arts agency applications. As crucial as we felt it was (and is) for the orchestra to participate in the musical culture of our own time, our operating budget didn't allow for a general allocation to commission new work, so the search began for dedicated funds that wouldn't "cannibalize" existing donations.

First, we considered following in the footsteps of the Minnesota Commissioning Club, a St. Paul-based group that has commissioned more than a dozen works since 1990. But that group's \$2,000 per couple annual commitment wasn't in line with our vision of making it possible for a broad range of people to participate in commissioning music – too often thought of as a pursuit only for the ultra-wealthy. Moreover, the Minnesota club relies heavily on having members who are knowledgeable about music and composers, and who are already deeply involved in the musical world of the Twin Cities. Rather, we saw an opportunity to open a window on music making, to give people interested in the very process of creativity an insider's view of a composer at work.

A little later, we learned of a program being launched by the New Jersey Symphony which asked donors for a contribution of just \$200. The gift went toward the composer's fee, and members of this commissioning club were invited to a series of events where they could meet the composer, hear some of his or her previous work, and talk about the commissioned work as it took shape. This model seemed to have everything we had been searching for, including a catchy name – Sound Investment. Fortunately, our colleagues in New Jersey were gracious enough to share their experiences with us, as well as the club's name, and we set about adapting their concept to our own specifications.

LACO's first Sound Investment commission spanned the 2001/2002 season, as 27 couples/members followed the development of a concerto for orchestra by then-resident composer Kenneth Frazelle. Then, as now, a little over half of the commissioners were subscribers, many were occasional single ticket buyers or donors, and a few were initially drawn to LACO by Sound Investment itself.

The program schedule we established in that first pioneering year is still in place today. The first of three intimate events brings together the composer and investors for the first time, and the composer typically talks about his or her background, influences and vision for the commissioned piece, using the piano to illustrate the primary musical ideas. A second meeting grants members a "sneak preview" of the piece, where two to three orchestra players read through sections of the just-completed score. Finally, a few days before the premiere performance, investors crowd into the rehearsal hall (sometimes sitting just a foot from the percussion section) to hear the piece in its entirety, while observing the collaboration among the conductor, composer and players. The project then culminates with the work's world premiere, performed as part of our core subscription series concerts.

All of the three working sessions start out as presentations but eventually become fascinating dialogues, with investors wanting to know everything from the composer's age at first composition to why a particular type of drum was chosen over another. In turn, the composer gains valuable feedback from the listeners and participating musicians – a rare gift for an artist accustomed to working in a vacuum. LACO's composer-in-residence and 2004 commissionee Pierre Jalbert explained to the *Los Angeles Times* last year, "What I'm really trying to do is communicate with an audience, and as a composer, you usually don't really get that until a piece is played in concert...As a composer, you are always hearing these things in the abstract, hearing them in your head. Even when I was just playing it at the piano – it's different playing it at the piano for a crowd, it changes everything." Similarly, "Going public" with his work during its construction, said Ken Frazelle, "helped me conceive of it differently. Knowing that we'd be talking about it three times helped me conceptualize it faster."

Four years and four premieres later, Sound Investment has become one of LACO's signature programs. There are several key elements, I think, that have allowed Sound Investment to take hold and flourish at LACO. First, it's very much in keeping with the orchestra's approach to "making great music personal." We have made many conscious choices over the last several years – affecting everything from our marketing campaigns to the way we actually present concerts – to make patrons feel at home and to encourage deeper involvement in the organization. Second, Sound Investment is an undeniably great value. For \$250, investors receive admission to three members-only events and one of the premiere concerts. "It's really a very modest contribution," one of SI's charter members said in the same *Times* article last year, "but I'm very proud to be part of something like this." Another investor – one who had learned of the group at our website and faxed in her enrollment form – agreed, saying, "Here, I can afford to be a patron."

In addition, we do everything possible to give investors a sense of ownership by stressing that each individual's contribution is an investment in a work of art. Even though they can't take it home and hang it on the wall, by becoming financial backers and active observers of the composer's creative process, they are truly the "owners" of the music they have commissioned: The score is inscribed with their names, they are listed in the program as commissioners, and music director Jeffrey Kahane thanks the group from the podium and invites members to stand and be recognized just before the piece is performed.

Something that makes Sound Investment appealing to arts administrators is its adaptability. After all, the New Jersey program was originally inspired by a similar concept in use by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in the UK, and LACO's experience has inspired at least one other California orchestra to start its own commissioning club. But this kind of collective effort doesn't have to be limited to music ensembles. In fact, the University of Iowa's Hancher Auditorium was able to commission and present a dance piece from the Paul Taylor Dance Company last year by selling 105 \$205 "shares" to individual donors.

In its first three years of existence, LACO's Sound Investment achieved modest fundraising goals and yearly gains in membership, but the past year has been something of a breakthrough. Following the premiere of Pierre Jalbert's Chamber Symphony last spring, membership jumped from 36 members/couples to 60 this season – helped in part, no doubt, by that *LA Times* profile, which ran on the day of the premiere. Since then, the group has also been featured in ASOL's *Symphony* magazine and, more recently, the *New York Times*. This season, Classical KUSC, Southern California's all-classical public radio outlet, is recording each installment of Sound Investment for a special it will produce later this year.

Ultimately, Sound Investment has not only provided funds to support commissioning, but proved to be an effective vehicle for both broadening and deepening the orchestra's base of supporters.