

Baroque (Embedded Ensemble) Initiative

I believe there are significant segments of music able to be performed by symphonic-minded musicians that is either largely ignored or presented as half-baked. We are missing opportunities to grow as performers and develop more intense performance relationships with our patrons.

Take Baroque music for instance. I believe Baroque music is woefully undervalued for its profound emotional impact and relevance for audiences. Baroque music relies heavily on sung text; and even without text, its intentions are clear and its transparent musical language immediately engages the listener. It can be an improvisational showcase for a musician and a terrific display of virtuosity and intimacy.

While I was the Assistant Conductor of the Zurich Opera, I was introduced to more styles of music and performance than I possibly could have fathomed. The amazing thing was that the Opera Orchestra was the backbone of all the music that was being played – new/experimental music, opera, symphonic and Baroque.

Not only were the musicians able, they were fluent in the style of the ensemble they chose to be a part of. There, it was a bit ad hoc, admittedly. Musicians were quite casually approached or begged to participate in various projects, but clearly particular genres and styles unleashed tremendous creative energy and skill in its membership.

When I became Chief Conductor in Brisbane, Australia, there was a group of musicians who loved cabaret performances, and they created a group that the orchestra supported but struggled to fully integrate into the mission of the institution.

In Phoenix, I introduced a vision that would create a minimum of three “embedded ensembles” that would (ideally) be self-selected and specifically trained. I focused on Baroque music, new music and education. The Baroque Initiative was first. Fortunately, it was funded by a patron family in the community, and we started with the training. Baroque bows and gut strings were purchased, and I brought in Baroque specialist and violinist, [Robert Mealy](#), to lead several workshops on baroque style and remain as guest concertmaster for our series of Handel’s *Messiah* performances. In my dream scenario, each season would feature a new workshop leader, such as a continuo specialist, a woodwind and/or brass specialist, etc. The result would be an ensemble that is at least conversant in Baroque performance practice and could be called upon to present various programs throughout the season during the symphony’s schedule.

It’s easy to see how this way of thinking works for new music, too. It is also easy to see how an education ensemble could be trained on best practices through various grade levels and teaching environments as well as other skills such as public speaking.

We have been working on the Baroque Initiative for five years and have a core as well as an effective rotation strategy. Robert Mealy led the early effort for three seasons and now PSO Concertmaster, [Steven Moeckel](#), has taken the reigns.

The end result is a professional development opportunity for symphony musicians, a brand for the orchestra and a terrific way to open the door to 200-plus years of music that symphony orchestras rarely scratch the surface of.