



NOVEMBER 1, 2017

ARTISTS AS ACTIVISTS

Too often, advocacy for the arts falls within the portfolio of arts administrators: Leaders of organizations visit with policymakers; development staff make the case about excellent programs when seeking public support; and arts educators find themselves working with school districts and boards, talking about the importance of an arts-enriched education.

Artists (singers, musicians, costume and set designers, etc.) rarely get an opportunity to join this conversation.

But here's why you should!

FIVE REASONS WHY ARTISTS SHOULD ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN ARTS ADVOCACY

1. Show Me the Money

Like so many other fields, several of the issues that impact the field of opera have to do with sustainability and fundraising. A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the federal agency that supports arts organizations and their programs, usually won't sustain an entire organization. However, that single grant, due to its rigorous application and panel review process, serves as a stamp of approval for the recipient organization and leverages eight dollars for every dollar received from the NEA.

And where does that leveraged money come from? Often it comes from private donors through charitable gifts. There have been efforts from both Republicans and Democrats to limit the deductibility of charitable contributions in an effort to increase revenue. By many accounts, this would result in smaller donations.

We're all here because we love the arts. But we also want to get paid. Support for the NEA and preservation of the full scope and value of the charitable deduction supports the sustainability of nonprofits, allowing them to spend less time figuring out how to pay artists and staff, and more time on creating quality productions.

2. Your Glowing Personality

Seriously. Audiences are coming to see your work. You may even be on the production's promotional materials. You have a platform both on and off the stage to share information that's important to you. You probably already have a public Facebook or Twitter account, and what better way is there to share information with your fans, fellow artists and community about how they can support your art form?

Your stories about your first opera, your favorite music teacher or another artist who inspired you to do what you do are incredible examples of why the arts should be valued and supported in communities — whether it's in your hometown elementary school or funded through a federal appropriations process.

3. One Big Suggestion Box

Your artistry is your livelihood, so as an employee, your voice makes a difference. Various issues impacting artists and creators arose in the past couple years, including net neutrality, the Affordable Care Act and FEMA support for artists impacted by natural disasters.

Did you know that one in ten employees works in the nonprofit sector? This includes 4.1 million jobs in the nonprofit arts. We may not have the resources to fund political campaigns, but the impact of our collective voices can have a major impact on policy.

Lawmakers may forget that artists are a part of the workforce. It's important to remind lawmakers that you are a wage-earning, household-supporting, taxpaying VOTER in their district or state. Let lawmakers know what issues impact you. (And don't forget to remind them of how many thousands of Twitter followers you have when you thank the lawmaker for his/her ongoing support.)



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4. Not JUST About Opera

Of course, not all of the issues important to us are connected directly to the arts. Social justice movements around equity, such as #blacklivesmatter or #marriageequality, may not be arts issues. But the arts often bring these issues to a new audience, offering new ways to understand systemic challenges.

And these issues are not *unrelated* to the arts either. The performing arts reside and occur in communities and systems that are impacted by inequality. Some performing arts organizations and disciplines have been part of systemic inequality. The performing arts can bring awareness to issues. But who has a voice in the creation? How can those who have traditionally been excluded become part of the dialogue?

5. Pay It Forward

It's hard to imagine what life would be like without an introduction to opera and the performing arts. How can you ensure that others receive the same exposure? Is there an opportunity to partner with local arts and community organizations to assist with arts programming? Is there a public meeting of parent associations or the school board where you can talk about the importance of receiving arts education? How about writing an op-ed and encouraging state and local lawmakers to support arts in the schools? Lending your voice to the movement to support an arts-rich community is a great way to show your appreciation for those who supported your own passion.

To learn more about the federal issues that impact opera, visit operaamerica.org/Advocacy.

To gather research and talking points on arts education, visit ArtsEdSearch.org.

Be sure to check out policy and legislative updates in each issue of OPERA America's *OperaLink* newsletter.