

Navigating Capitalism and Patronage: Institutions and Non-Profits in the Field of Contemporary Classical Music Production

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Freelancing as a classical composer in Los Angeles means navigating manifold layers of complexity: professional opportunities arise from a variety of music scenes and cultural businesses,¹ entangled with considerations of musical tradition, ethnic diversity, economic precarity, and gendered dynamics. However, institutions² and especially non-profit organizations³ dominate the allocation and distribution of opportunities and capital. Therefore, understanding the landscape of contemporary classical music in Los Angeles necessitates more theoretical engagement with music production at an organizational level.

While my own research draws on fieldwork and numerous interviewee responses, it's worth considering historical research that—although distant geographically and temporally—centralizes patronage systems and the impact on classical musicians in the past. Two significant studies addressing the connection between classical music and patronage—specifically German court musical establishments (such as those of Berlin or Württemberg; see Gramit 2004) and Vienna (DeNora 1995) around the

¹ Instead of the oft-used term of “cultural industry,” Timothy Taylor argues for the use of “cultural business” to avoid the theoretical baggage of the former. “Businesses can be organized in a variety of ways and do not connote the assembly-line, standardized production of *industry*” (Taylor 2023, 21). This is to take into account the artisanal nature of concrete labor enacted by composers working in film and television.

² For the purposes of this paper, I understand “institution” as a general term which refers to a bounded entity (e.g. an orchestra, a college, a research center), which prioritizes profit to varying degrees depending on the subject in question (and may, by extension, indicate non-profit status). This is in contrast to 1) a music scene in metropolitan areas, which are often thought to be more akin to permeable, fluctuating, unbounded “spaces”; and 2) a cultural business, which may refer to a bounded entity but one which explicitly prioritizes profit and commercial ventures.

³ Communications scholar Matthew Sanders defines a non-profit as “an organization dedicated to the common good that cannot distribute profit to stakeholders” (2015, 206).

beginning of the 19th century—provide additional historical context. DeNora brings to light the “high culture” music patronage system in Vienna from the 1750s to the 1820s, noting its evolution and eventual deterioration. As conspicuous musical consumption was a sign of status amongst the old aristocracy,⁴ musicians found employment through noble patrons within this system. DeNora argues that the decline of *hauskapellen* (private house chapels) occurred alongside a new organizational base of patronage, wherein aristocratic patronage became more diffuse. Here, public concerts in the form of salons, after-dinner performances, or parties broadened the patronage activity to include minor aristocrats, new aristocrats, and members of the upper middle class. The decline of *hauskapellen* destabilized musical occupations, forcing musicians to increasingly turn to freelance strategies. This occurred alongside the rise of more public-centered, amateur accessible music, which DeNora suggests may have been one factor for the development of “serious” music⁵ and its reliance on old aristocratic patronage. Similar to Los Angeles (as will become apparent later), one observes the overlapping themes of patronage and freelance strategies, as well as the aesthetic changes and delineations accompanied by each.

As with DeNora, Gramit interrogates the development of “serious” German music culture circa 1800, as well as the role of entrepreneurship that was necessary for its economic viability. He connects this with the broader socioeconomic and cultural conditions which enabled “selling the serious” (Gramit 2004, 81): a growing German bourgeoisie, the utility of printed music, the increased necessity of trained musicians, and an audience for cultural commodities. More generally, Gramit characterizes the broader implications of these shifts as couched within a transition from the older system of aristocratic patronage to a more market-driven system for cultural commodities. Here, musical prospects shifted from court musical life to occupations increasingly driven by print culture and the burgeoning “administrative cultivated middle class” (Gramit 2004, 83).

The shift from a patronage system to market-based strategies echoes the current situation for composers in Los Angeles. As my interviewees report the decrease in traditional careers (i.e. professorships in academia), many are pressured or encouraged to adopt entrepreneurial strategies necessary for a professionally successful 21st-century musician. Such entrepreneurial efforts by classical composers, however, are not randomly directed. Instead, sources of patronage have shifted from the university system towards other institutions. As I will detail below, the significant impact of patronage from large institutions takes a variety of forms. Nonprofits, especially, take an active and important role. In particular, I examine the nonprofit organization The Industry as a case study of this contemporary form of artistic patronage.

Paralleling the ways in which aristocratic patronage served as a nexus of musical professionalization, economic viability, social and cultural prestige, and musical labor, institutions in Los Angeles function in a similar fashion. In place of *hauskapellen* and German music culture, however, today’s Los Angeles is heavily influenced by its history of substantive minority communities, diverse cultural institutions, and musical desacralization, culminating in a musical eclecticism and syncretism (Marcus 2004).⁶ This broad history—along with the city’s development as a multicultural neoliberal

⁴ Briefly, “serious” music refers to a canonic ideology that emphasized “great” works by “great” composers (see DeNora 1995).

⁵ DeNora corresponds the old aristocracy with the “first aristocracy by rank” (i.e. princes/princesses, counts/countesses, and Baron van Swieten); the new aristocracy corresponds to “second aristocracy by rank” (i.e. barons/baronesses, freiherr/freyerrin, and individuals/families with the “von” designation) (1995, 19).

⁶ Briefly, Marcus notes the historical presence of Latin American, Black American, and East Asian minority communities and their role in music making. “Diverse cultural institutions” refers to the variety of organizations informed not only by the minority communities mentioned, but also those stemming from Hollywood and concert

urban space⁷—has come to uniquely characterize Los Angeles, where composers experience to varying degrees the simultaneous realities of labor markets, mission-market tensions, social networks, the professional managerial class, and multiculturalism.

Thus, I draw on research concerning present-day institutions (musical or otherwise), which highlights trends of corporate sponsorship (Jones 2007) and patronage (Moore 2016); non-profits under capitalism (Sanders 2015) and the development of market-oriented brand identities (Pippen 2022); and the role and importance of board members (Harrison and Murray 2012; Ihm and Shumate 2019). Based on case studies and informed by frameworks developed by Bourdieu (1993), Riley (2020), and Wacquant (2023), I argue that music non-profits serve as mediators between capital (economic capital and forms of capital) and the multicultural landscape specific to the Los Angeles contemporary classical music field.

SURVIVING MUSICALLY THROUGH INSTITUTIONS AND PATRONAGE

It may be helpful to understand the importance of institutions (and, by extension, patronage opportunities) by first considering interviewee observations. As many have indicated, there are several reasons for a composer to secure official affiliation with a larger institution.⁸ Increased access to resources via an institution often enables more efficient working conditions, to the point that *not* being a part of some institution might severely impede one's professional opportunities. For instance, some composers reported being directly commissioned by schools⁹ for educational purposes, or even cultural institutions¹⁰ seeking out "composers of a particular background."¹¹ Other than a source of commission work, access to performance and practice spaces—as well as a labor pool of performers—often comes hand in hand with institutional affiliation. One can, theoretically, secure these as an individual, but the upfront costs are likely to be excessive for the average composer. Access to resources, in turn, can impact the type of music one composes. Composing for a small chamber group, for instance, becomes more viable than composing for an orchestra. The connection between resources and ensemble size makes the importance of institutional affiliation and patronage apparent.

In order to understand how such institutions function and sustain themselves, we must examine the new classical music scene within a broader context of patronage under capitalism. Weingrod notes that "patronage" has historically been a nonstandardized term, and consequently offers an anthropological framework where patronage refers to "how persons of unequal authority, yet linked through ties of interest and friendship, manipulate their relationships in order to attain their ends" (1968, 379). For the scope of this paper, I understand patronage as experienced by composers as largely similar, with unequal

culture (i.e. western classical music). Marcus argues that the intermixing of these varying musical influences resulted in a musical desacralization, where "high" and "low" forms of musical traditions (and everything "in between") were intermixed and hybridized.

⁷ Riley describes multicultural neoliberalism as "a profoundly unequal but rigorously equitable form of capitalism" (2020, 43).

⁸ Larger institutions mentioned by interviewees might include higher education, orchestras, opera companies, or well-established new music ensembles/collectives.

⁹ Interviewees predominately mentioned universities, although some have found work in relation to secondary education (for example, high school bands or orchestras).

¹⁰ Some examples offered by interviewees include a Japanese American community cultural center, an LGBTQ+ center, a Buddhist temple, or a philosophical society.

¹¹ Niall Taro Ferguson interview by the author, Los Angeles, August 28, 2023.

access to capital as the predominant source of “unequal authority.”¹² In addition, Wacquant’s work on conceptualizing metropolitan areas is instructive here, providing a broader framework for understanding the urban “as the domain of accumulation, differentiation, and contestation of manifold forms of capital” (2023, 15). He also notes that issues regarding marginality, ethnicity, gender, or citizenship inform the symbolic and social spaces of a city (an important signal towards the importance of multiculturalism, which I will return to later). Based on Wacquant’s Bourdieuan theorization of the urban, it is easy to see how the rapid concentration of capital under neoliberalism further empowers patron-based relations. As Moore has argued, “new music, and classical music culture more broadly, tends to follow the aesthetic and moral desires of the economically and politically dominant class—the patron class, essentially” (2016, 230).¹³ This large concentration of capital, along with the noticeable demand for new classical music, has been noted by many interviewees. For example, freelance composer Saunder Choi states the following:

That top down approach really is important. And you can see that [top down dynamic] flourish and become apparent in stuff like the very recent [California Festival: A Celebration of New Music], for example, that just happened [fall 2023]. It really is a testament of how much space and how much demand and appreciation there is for new music here in Southern California. And that also means more work for composers here and a diverse array of work, apart from the classical music, the classical groups.¹⁴

This quote resonates with most of my interlocutors’ experiences and observations, reinforcing the prevalence and importance of a trickle-down patronage system empowered and expedited through large institutions.

So how might such a patronage system work, and what are some specific ways in which money flows? Capital can be concentrated and distributed in a variety of ways. For instance, it is common for institutions to ask for private donations as a form of patronage,¹⁵ which may take the form of one-time or recurring payments.¹⁶ Sometimes, a donation might be connected in support of a special event or fund allocated for a specific purpose is employed towards securing financial support. For example, The Industry, an experimental opera company, began The Decade Fund Initiative, asking for donations

¹² Based on interviewee responses, a patron-client relation doesn’t necessarily indicate a specific method of payment. For example, a composer might receive wages from a university, and consider the university their “patron.” Interviewees seem more concerned with the idea of inequality and reliance on a funding source, which may include wages but could also include fees, payments, or otherwise unregulated (or underregulated) transactions.

¹³ Moore doesn’t seem to give an explicit definition for the “patron class.” For the purposes of this paper, I understand the patron class as a social formation of groups/individuals that, as Moore says, are “economically and politically dominant” (2016, 230) in a capitalist society, and also participates in patron-client relations characterized by “unequal authority” (Weingrod 1968, 379).

¹⁴ Saunder Choi interview by the author, Zoom, January 19, 2024.

¹⁵ As Weingrod notes, anthropologists have observed a mediation function served by patrons in societies characterized by political-economic segmentation (1968, 382). In the case of musical patronage in Los Angeles, an institution may be understood as a patron itself, which may also serve as a mediator between musicians looking for work and other patrons (who may otherwise never directly interact with such musicians).

¹⁶ For example, WildUp, a non-profit new music collective, allows for donations on their website and while no minimum donation is required, the webpage autofills the input box with a value of \$100. Interestingly, an option for auto-donations on a monthly basis is also provided as well, somewhat akin to signing up for a subscription (WildUp 2024).

starting at \$5,000 to “commission and develop major artistic projects” (The Industry 2024a). In this instance, donors would receive special recognition and would be invited to special events including artists and members pertaining to the directorship of the nonprofit.¹⁷

Securing grants or fellowships as patronage can also be another viable possibility for patronage. In an email newsletter, The Industry noted the readership of securing a General Operating Support Grant from the Perenchio Foundation, a private foundation established by the recently deceased billionaire businessman and philanthropist Andrew Jerrold Perenchio. The newsletter indicated the importance of the grant as securing “critical multi-year funding”(The Industry 2024c). While grant patronage seems quite common amongst many interviewees, only larger, more “prestigious” grants seem to be deemed worthy of a newsletter. Usually, most grant support is often relegated to mentions in a music program or announcement before a musical performance.

Another mode of patronage, one that seems less prominent in my research (yet still present), is corporate patronage. One example is the Unprecedented Music Association, a newer non-profit music collective with membership comprising mostly UCLA alumni. Advertising through social media notified viewers of the collective’s Dorico sponsorship for an upcoming concert event.¹⁸ Potential audience members could purchase a Dorico-affiliated ticket, which would also provide them with a 20% discount for any Dorico 6 software purchases (@UnprecedentedMusic 2025). The nature of this sponsorship, as Jones argues, “should be viewed within the societal context of the expanded power and influence of today’s wealth holders” (2007, 172). In the context of present-day Los Angeles, “wealth holders” overwhelmingly refers to large corporations and the vast economic resources potentially available for establishing patronage relations. In other words, Dorico sponsorship becomes a signal for the expanded power and influence of corporations, where, in this case, profit through sales of a product becomes tied to the experience of a musical performance. This connection is couched within the neoliberalization processes which occurred throughout the past four decades, paralleling “similar episodes of patronage when systems of community and public welfare disintegrated during the rise of capitalism” (Jones 2007, 159). And although corporate patronage is dwarfed by the presence of musical non-profits, the broader impacts of neoliberalization can be observed in the latter as well.

MUSICAL NON-PROFITS: THE SYNERGY AND STRUGGLE BETWEEN MISSION AND MARKET

Composers in LA regularly interact with non-profit institutions. These institutions play a significant and vital role as mediators between patrons and such composers. Additionally, it’s worth reflecting on how such non-profits navigate the relation between market logic and mission values. Sanders notes that non-profits generally experience “mission-market” tension, referring to instances or conditions where an organization’s social mission orientation may conflict with demands of a market economy. In such cases,

¹⁷ Another example associated with The Industry involved “The Decade Party,” an event celebrating the founder Yuval Sharon featuring ensemble members, dinner, and a cocktail reception. Tickets required for entry were acquired by becoming an event sponsor, beginning at \$1,000, up to \$25,000 (The Industry 2024b). The highest sponsorship level included six tickets to the event, recognition in event programming, a private brunch with Yuval Sharon, and exclusive memorabilia.

¹⁸ It’s worth noting that Dorico is the product name of music publishing software, and such software is owned by the German company Steinberg Media Technologies GmbH, which is in turn a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Yamaha Corporation.

non-profits are pressured by neoliberal notions of economic viability to adopt corporate practices¹⁹ to secure funding and resources. As a result, corporate practices are either preemptively accounted for before establishment of mission goals or are prioritized to the detriment of accomplishing mission goals. In some cases, this has led to varying degrees of sustainability as well as dysfunction, the latter sometimes manifesting in lockouts, labor strikes, or delays (Sanders 2015).

The previously mentioned non-profit organization The Industry demonstrates a seemingly necessary adaptation and integration into the capitalist system in order to achieve growth and sustainability. About a year after its founding, ex-board chair Mary Ann O'Connor reflected on achieving this integration successfully:

Our Board has expanded to ten members, and will be expanding further in the year ahead...Our Board has adopted an appropriate mission statement, by-laws, governing principles, personnel policies, and financial reporting systems. (The Industry 2016a)

It is worth acknowledging that while the dynamics between market and mission vary depending on the specific non-profit in question, this mission-market tension is described by Sanders as “normal and productive” (Sanders 2015, 206), and a sign of an inherent contradictory state of non-profits.

Donor risk associated with supporting such an opera company was noted by O'Connor as well. For example, she recalled the scale and impact of fundraising in the early days:

The Board and staff, including our wonderful Executive Director Elizabeth Cline, made a huge stretch to raise a million dollars for the production. This, I would note, is a million dollars that went right back into our local economy in jobs for L.A.-based librettists, composers, singers, musicians, visual artists and production team members. (The Industry 2016a)

Other than the obvious allusion to capitalist investment, the second half of this quote also points to a politics of redistribution.

Beyond this, the importance of a board's navigation of a mission-market dynamic seems tied together with social capital²⁰ as well. For instance, soon after the founding of The Industry, O'Connor noted the significant stepping stone of building “many new relationships, with individuals and communities, in parts of L.A. that are not often included in the world of opera or classical music” (The Industry 2016a). More recently, founder Yuval Sharon reflected on his decade of experience leading the non-profit (The Industry 2025). Sharon mentions the importance of the board chair, Ruth Eliel (a banker who transitioned to arts management and led the LA Chamber Orchestra as executive director for more than a decade), as well as previous board chairs (occupations including legal counsel and assistant

¹⁹ This could include, among other things, an emphasis on marketing, cost cutting, and/or the accumulation of capital.

²⁰ I am referring to Bourdieu's definition of social capital, defined as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” ([1983] 1986, 248-249). While a thorough explication of understanding institutional patronage in terms of a field is beyond the scope of this paper, understanding social capital within Bourdieuan terms provides a clue to the hierarchical nature of navigating professionalization as a composer in Los Angeles (as described by interviewees).

attorney, as well as a technology entrepreneur). The value that a board chair brings—beyond the somewhat ambiguous contributions of “work,” “service,” or “leadership”—necessitates a more thorough analysis and discussion.

First, it’s worth noting the predominance of “white collar” jobs in board leadership and composition, as this indicates the potential knowledge base and social connections which may benefit the nonprofit institution as a whole. Ihm and Shumate note that board members are the key decision makers when nonprofits confront difficulties, and that collaboration is a strategy for legitimacy and overall survival (2019). Beyond official collaboration with corporations, governmental organizations, or other nonprofits, within-sector collaboration (in this case, collaboration between music-oriented organizations) relies on informal relationships and sometimes integrative collaboration. Collaboration leads to information sharing and the generation of social capital, in this case, network resources. Ihm and Shumate argue that board social capital—“board members’ connections to other organizations” (Ihm and Shumate 2019, 476)—emerges from these various connections, and ultimately determines the extent of access to resources. More connections also boost legitimacy in the field, making a nonprofit more desirable and attracting more collaboration with potential partners, and overall enhances the position of the nonprofit within the field.

Board chairs may also have considerable impact on the organization as a whole. Harrison and Murray note that chairs can impact the morale of staff and general stability of a nonprofit during crises (2012). Effective chairs are thought to build relationships with others, working “*with* others to advance nonprofit performance—not *under* or *over* others” (Harrison and Murray 2012, 432). Importantly, they use social connections available to them. The chair is perceived as a team leader and relational leader who embodies specific personality qualities,²¹ and parallels an effective managerial position when facilitating and brokering other leadership roles.

The Industry seems to have followed this general theorization on boards by diversifying its membership. Since 2016, board membership included individuals with backgrounds in psychiatry, technology and software, consultancy, and executive directorship, to name a few (The Industry 2016b). One can glean the importance of social capital in O’Connor’s reflection on The Industry’s beginnings as an organization:

Our Board had five members including Yuval and David Mack (then General Manager)...We had very small stipends for the core team and relied mostly on people volunteering their time and talent. Our Board retreat was at my house in Ojai, and it was there that we identified our goals, our general audience and micro-audiences, our prospective donors, and our plans for Board and organizational development. (The Industry 2016a)

It is worth noting here that the preponderance of white-collar occupations suggests a strong association with John Ehrenreich and Barbara Ehrenreich’s (1979) theorization of the professional managerial class.²²

²¹ Harrison and Murray detail these desirable qualities under several categories: motivation and style (ex. altruistic), capacity to lead (ex. devoted), personal attributes (ex. trustworthy), ability to relate (ex. flexible), ability to advance the organization externally (ex. uses connections) (2012, 426-427).

²² The Ehrenreichs (1979) define the professional-managerial class as “consisting of salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations” (13). Ehrenreich (1989) emphasizes persons “whose economic and social status is based on education” (12), and who earn incomes high enough to participate significantly in consumption and otherwise be considered as “upper-middle” class.

To add to this, participants were not incentivized by large salaries or wages. In fact, it seems many were volunteers. This points to a trend of volunteerism under cognitive capitalism,²³ a phenomenon previously observed in corporate governance (Shachar and Hustinx 2019). In other words, influence of neoliberal practices common in corporations seems increasingly widespread in nonprofit maintenance and governance.

WORKING IN MULTICULTURAL LOS ANGELES

This understanding of how nonprofits must, to some extent, apply market logic to survive in a capitalist economy works in concert with the patronage systems of concentrated wealth and accumulation, aggravated by neoliberalism. Yet this logic becomes tied together with the multiculturalism that has developed over more than a century of Los Angeles history, ranging from ethnic diversity to the musical styles spanning both concert music scenes and commercial film. The mission-market “tension” is amplified and arguably intertwined in what Riley describes as a multicultural neoliberal economy (2020). In fact, multiculturalism as an artistic framework provides the inspiration and “raw material” for the musical variety and flexibility often necessary for successful composer professionalization. The various commitments to cultural or ethnic diversity, in concert with a prominent, culturally liberal stance towards gender and LGBTQ+ communities, seem common in the musical and artistic scenes of contemporary classical music in Los Angeles. For example, ensemble collectives aren’t shy about embracing such identities, either explicitly as part of a mission statement or by showcasing members who do so through individual biographies. The music collective Bridge to Everywhere,²⁴ for instance, describes itself as a transcultural music ensemble and nonprofit which features musically multi-lingual artists. Artist biographies mention a variety of influences in connection with social identity, including Mexican heritage and Indian ancestry. This phenomenon has been noted in other areas in the US, where “groups develop market-oriented brand identities that tacitly celebrate diversity...through their repertoire,” which “has reinforced a broader critique of the white supremacy of classical music’s repertoire” (Pippen 2022, 81). Similar to Pippen’s observations, it is common to see new music nonprofits embrace “a synthesis of social justice, artistic rigor and profitability” (2022, 82) in their public facing presentation. As a result, in the multicultural and neoliberal landscape of Los Angeles, economic redistribution (and its associated politics) commonly manifests in terms of social identity, be it racial, ethnic, gendered, or otherwise.

CONCLUSION

Institutions, and non-profits especially, integrate the multicultural flavor of Los Angeles with the mission-market balancing act, contributing to a broader musical scene in which multiculturalism and neoliberalism become co-constitutive to each other. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the reliance on patronage coincides with the value that social networks can provide, and also accompanies notable engagement with individuals tied to

²³ Shachar and Hustinx’s notion of “cognitive capitalism” refers to “the broader aim of neoliberal governmentality to produce and mold ethical subjects, an aim that aligns with corporate classwide rationality to enhance subjects’ engagement in the contemporary cognitive mode of capitalist accumulation” (2019, 798).

²⁴ At the time of writing, 21 artists are officially listed on the ensemble webpage. The website describes the artists as musicians “who are classically trained but also have extensive training in other musical practices across the globe (from West Africa, India, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America, to electronic music, folk, popular music, and beyond)” (Bridge to Everywhere 2026).

the professional managerial class. With the increasing concentration of wealth accelerated by neoliberal capitalist logics, musicians in contemporary classical music production increasingly rely on such patron-based relations, in concert with a myriad of strategies for accumulating the social, cultural, and symbolic capital expected for advancement in the field.

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