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Hitting a high note

Symphony Nova Scotia balances artistic quality with financial stability

On a sunny afternoon in March, an eager crowd filed into the Rebecca Cohn auditorium for Symphony Nova Scotia's season showcase. By the end of the hour-long performance, which ranged from classic orchestral compositions to a solo by indie-rock artist Rich Aucoin, the talented musical ensemble received a standing ovation.

Since its inception in 1983, Symphony Nova Scotia has been performing for thousands of people across the province each year. "Our goal is to be a leader in the arts for Atlantic Canada," says CEO Chris Wilkinson. While many other orchestras have been struggling to fill seats, Symphony Nova Scotia has continued to thrive. In fact, its subscription sales have increased by

20% in the last year.

Much of this growth can be attributed to a new partnership with Audience Strategies for the Arts. Based in Dallas, it's an international consulting company with a clientele that includes the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the Arts Council of England. Its business relationship with Symphony Nova Scotia has focused on streamlining and improving the orchestra's marketing strategy. "We're seeing fast results," says Wilkinson. "We hope to continue growing our subscription sales by 5% each year."

A classically trained violinist, Wilkinson first began playing with the orchestra in 1986, after moving to Nova Scotia from Victoria. His connection

to the symphony is a family affair; his wife, Suzanne Lemieux, is the principal oboe player. In addition to his work as a musician, Wilkinson served as the symphony's personnel and production manager for 20 years. His career highlights also include two years as the general manager of the Thunder Bay Symphony Orchestra, from 2011 to 2013.

Wilkinson has experienced both sides of the business, which allows him to bring a unique perspective to his current role as CEO. "It can definitely be a juggling act," he says. One of the first tasks on his to-do list was to draft a new strategic plan. Ticket sales account for roughly \$1.2 million each year, but a significant portion of the orchestra's revenue also comes from public and private sector funding. "Public funders want to see a strong business plan," says Wilkinson. "A comprehensive strategic plan was crucial to our long-term sustainability."

Symphony Nova Scotia organized

for starters

extensive consultations with local businesses and community members whose feedback was an integral part of the planning process. Ultimately, six areas of priority were identified for the next three years, with artistic quality and financial stability topping the list.

In terms of an orchestral business model, Symphony Nova Scotia is already off to a great start. More than 72% of all annual costs are directed onstage, maximizing the number of performances

that can be offered each year. "It's a very good number when compared to other orchestras," says Wilkinson. "Our overhead is quite lean, and it allows us to put as much as we can into the product."

One area of the business that Wilkinson would like to improve is corporate investment. Historically it has always been quite low, and he's planning to launch a study in the fall to determine the best way to increase the value of these partnerships for both the

symphony and individual corporations.

Wilkinson believes the orchestra itself is an excellent economic contributor for the province. Symphony Nova Scotia has 37 musicians on contract and hires another 50, as needed, each year; their combined annual payroll amounts to about \$1.7 million. "For each performance, we need ushers and technical crew," he says. "The orchestra frequently brings guest artists to the province, and many of these visitors stay in nearby hotels. In the end, most of the money we get from the public goes right back into the local economy." As an added bonus, the symphony brings federal money to

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— **Chris Wilkinson, CEO,**
Symphony Nova Scotia

Halifax, including an annual \$623,000 from the Canada Council. Its foundation has received another \$3 million from Heritage Canada's Cultural Incentives matching grant program.

Many of the orchestra's musicians also teach in the province's universities and music schools, inspiring the next generation of talented performers. "If Symphony Nova Scotia didn't exist, those 37 musicians wouldn't live in Halifax," says Wilkinson.

The upcoming season will be a diverse offering, from Mozart and baroque to collaborations with the Halifax Pop Explosion and the science-fiction convention Hal-Con. "We're always striving to be a vibrant orchestra with high-quality guest performers," says Wilkinson. "We want to be valuable and relevant to the community in Nova Scotia." — **AMANDA LESLIE**

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