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Boston arts scene gets little institutional funding



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

BSO Music Director Andris Nelsons during rehearsals with the fellows of the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra.

By Malcolm Gay | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 21, 2016

Boston may have one of the most vibrant nonprofit arts scenes in the country, but the city lags woefully behind other cities when it comes to institutional funding for the arts, according to a report being released Thursday.

Commissioned by the Boston Foundation, the in-depth report describes an arts landscape of stark contrasts.

Boston places near the top of 11 major cities across the United States in the number of nonprofit cultural organizations in the city and the revenue they earn. But the city's wealth of arts organizations receive comparatively meager foundation and corporate support, are overburdened with facilities costs, and place dead last in per-capita government funding for the arts.

“The good news is that this confirms that we’re punching way above our weight in terms of the health, vitality, and size of the cultural sector in this city,” said Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation. “The bad news is, compared to other cities, certain kinds of financial support that other cities have put in place are not in place here, and that’s a particularly difficult thing for the small- and medium-size organizations.”

The report, titled “How Boston and Other American Cities Support and Sustain the Arts,” comes at a pivotal moment for the arts in Boston, as anchor institutions wrestle with questions regarding performance facilities and City Hall is in the midst of Boston Creates, a sprawling cultural planning process led by the city’s chief of arts and culture, Julie Burros.



Walsh announces \$1 million in arts funding

The funding will provide grants to artists, expand the artist-in-residence program, and establish an artist resource desk at City Hall.

“To drop this report into the middle of that I hope will be very helpful in creating a context of how to view the strengths and weaknesses for the Boston arts scene and catalyze some action,” said Grogan on Wednesday.

Researched and written by TDC, a consulting and research firm, the report compares Boston’s nonprofit arts sector to that of 10 other metropolitan centers, including New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Seattle. Drawing on tax returns and other data from 2012, focus groups, and individual interviews, the report found that by several measures, Boston is near the top of the country’s cultural food chain.

For instance, the authors found that while Greater Boston has the country’s 10th-largest population, its nonprofit arts sector boasts more than 1,500 organizations — second only to San Francisco when measured per capita.

Arts and cultural organizations, per capita

San Francisco

39

Boston

34

New York

31

Portland, Ore.

30

Minneapolis

28

Seattle

28

Cleveland

25

Philadelphia

24

Baltimore

23

Chicago

21

Houston

15

SOURCES: Boston Foundation, TDC

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Boston cultural organizations also earned nearly \$350 million from ticket sales and other “participation-based sources” in 2012, placing Boston third among peer cities in earned per-capita revenue.

The report’s authors note that this figure suggests that audiences in Boston are “highly engaged [and] willing to pay for cultural experiences.” They add, however, that the reliance on earned income forces some of the city’s small and mid-sized organizations to make “risk averse programmatic choices.”

“Risk-taking and programmatic innovation comes from a sector that is well capitalized and has wiggle room to take on such risks,” said Allyson Esposito, director of arts and culture for the Boston Foundation. Esposito added that without institutional funders to provide general operating funds, many arts organizations rely on ticket sales and so must “program things that will sell.”

And while Boston’s cultural sector may be one of the country’s most dense and vibrant, the report found that Boston is remarkably top-heavy in support for the arts. The city’s three largest cultural organizations — the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Symphony Orchestra, and WGBH — dominate the arts economy, accounting for more than 40 percent of all dollars spent in the cultural sector.

The study’s authors note that the affluence of these three institutions masks the scarcity of resources faced by smaller and mid-sized organizations.

“The presence of these three institutions puts Boston on par with New York and San Francisco in terms of per capita dollars expended on the arts,” the authors write. “Without these large organizations, Boston’s financial picture would more closely resemble smaller markets in this study.”

Grogan said that while these anchor institutions may skew the city’s arts funding, they also pull their cultural weight.

“It’s true that they are absorbing a big share of the funding, but they also contribute mightily to the perception of Boston and its attractiveness,” he said. “That does a lot for this city and its quality of life.”

The study found that Boston arts organizations face a unique set of challenges when it comes to attracting funding. While the city is near the top in terms of median individual giving, corporate funding for the arts in Boston is among the lowest levels per capita. Boston also has relatively few foundations that fund the arts, and they often favor larger institutions.

In addition, the study found that venue costs are particularly challenging in Boston. The authors noted that while some institutions in San Francisco or New York have costs defrayed by operating out of city-owned or city-maintained buildings, Boston organizations often pay “full freight” on facilities.

Government support, per capita

Minneapolis

\$17

New York

\$15

San Francisco

\$10

Cleveland

\$9

Baltimore

\$8

Chicago

\$7

Philadelphia

\$6

Boston

\$4

SOURCES: Boston Foundation, TDC

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“The City of Boston does not provide support for arts facilities,” the authors write, noting that facilities costs often go “far beyond simple occupancy expenses” to include things such as maintenance investments. “Both New York and San Francisco dedicate tens of millions of dollars every year toward targeted facilities support.”

Meanwhile, the study found that Boston arts organizations received the least government funding per capita among all the cities in the report. In fact, the report's authors noted, Boston is unique among these cities in that it receives more federal support than funding from state and local governments.

“The city of Boston hasn't had a lot of grant dollars to give,” said one of the report's authors, Juliana Koo, vice president at TDC. “The funding structure we have is not geared toward a community making a systemic change.”

On Tuesday night, Mayor Martin J. Walsh announced \$1 million in additional arts funding for the city.

Julie Burros, the city's chief of arts and culture, hailed the report on Wednesday. “We were anticipating that this data would help us to deeply understand the financial situation of parts of the sector, and indeed it does,” Burros said. “It confirms many things that have been stated by participants in our process.”

Burros added that the Walsh administration has been studying public funding streams in other cities and had been “encouraged” by what it had found. “The report has a whole chapter on that,” she said. “It's valuable to see there are solutions out there.”

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