

Hélène Archambault (Montreal)

Music Outreach in the Turmoil of Neoliberalism: Practices and Promotion in Quebec's Symphony Orchestras

In this paper, I will expose how orchestras in Quebec promote their outreach activities through an analysis of their use of media. I argue that there is an underlying tension between the values of music outreach and those of neoliberalism. Music mediation (also called outreach or community engagement) is seen here as a democratic process that promotes individual empowerment and aims to include and bridge social divides (Lafortune 2019). On the other hand, neoliberalism values – competition, adaptability, flexibility, elitism, and a deep distrust of democracy and mass power (Amable 2023) – are viewed as overarching hegemonic mechanisms (Dardot and Laval 2010; Brown 2016). While some studies examine the links between the dominance of neoliberal values and the concept, perception, and practice of music mediation or outreach (Ritchey 2019; Casemajor et al. 2017), few address how these values impact the promotion of these activities. How do neoliberal values influence the public image of music outreach?

To answer this question, I analyzed the practices of 11 orchestras. I reviewed outreach activities communicated on the websites of these orchestras between March 2022 and April 2024. I also trace the evolution of the relationship between democracy and classical music in print and digital media from 2017 to 2024. In Quebec, symphony orchestras are ambassadors of “classical” music and have a mission to disseminate culture in their regions. For instance, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (OSM) has been performing on the esplanade at the Mount Royal chalet – a free public outdoor venue – since 1938 and has been offering youth concerts since 1935.

While the concept of orchestras being socially involved and accessible in the province of Quebec is not new, the 1980s brought three concurrent phenomena that reshaped the issue of social engagement: the dominance of neoliberal values, the emergence of cultural and music outreach, and the aging and declining audiences for classical music. In this interdisciplinary study, I draw on research from various disciplines such as sociology, musicology, history, economics, legal studies, and philanthropy studies. I conclude that institutional pragmatism, contradictory cultural policies, and the prevalence of elitism in classical music are intertwined and contradict the values of music outreach, confusing any attempt at its promotion. This reduces music outreach to merely a tool for audience renewal and the democratization of classical music, thereby limiting its potential to truly empower individuals.

Hélène Archambault is a master's student in musicology at University of Montreal. She holds a bachelor's degree in history and a specialized graduate diploma in music mediation. Her master's thesis focusses on women's musical education during France Third Republic (1870–1940). She was awarded the Music Excellence Scholarship from the Faculty of Music of the University of Montreal in 2024. As a student member of the “Équipe de recherche en musique française” (ÉMF) of the “Observatoire interdisciplinaire de création et de recherche en musique” (OICRM), she contributes to the “Dictionnaire des musicographes” on the OICRM website. She dedicates her professional time to the Executive Director position at the Orchestre de la francophonie, an orchestral academy founded in 2001. In addition, she devotes her free time to a cause close to her heart: volunteer as a member of the Board of Directors of the “Studio de Musique Ancienne de Montréal” (SMAM).