

Memo To Management: Maestra Music

Sophia DeWitt

Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Indiana University, Indianapolis

PHST-P 588: Principles and Practices of Fundraising

Dr. Lee Bynum

December 9, 2025

Subject: Strengthening Maestra Music's Fundraising Strategy Through Equity-Forward and Mission-Driven Approaches.

Summary:

- Maestra's donor base is strong but narrow, relying heavily on founder-centered networks and individual women/non-binary donors.
- Maestra's current growth limitations stem from narrative specificity, unclear metrics, and an underdeveloped national philanthropic case.

Recommendations:

- Develop a national, intersectional fundraising narrative grounded in equity and advocacy.
- Expand and diversify the board to strengthen fundraising capacity.
- Redesign flagship fundraising events to be more strategic and revenue-positive.

Dr. Lee Bynum,

Maestra Music is a wonderful organization that seeks to diversify the orchestra pit, moving from a predominantly older, white male lineup to one that includes women and non-binary individuals. With only six years old, the organization has already advocated for thousands of individuals in the New York City theater community, with nearly 2,800 members. However, many members and donors are a part of the same core audience and are either connected directly to the founder or through her partner (Bynum, 2025 interview). While Maestra has diverse funding streams from family and local foundations, state subsidiaries and corporate sponsors, its primary source is individual donors. However, the organization continues to grow, with a current budget just

over \$1 million and the hiring of its first executive director. This transition period is a great time to reflect on the fundraising strategy and identify areas of improvement that will enable the organization to continue growing over the next decade. A significant change is underway in the philanthropic sector, reflecting the current political climate of DEI backlash, declines in small-donor giving, and the overall erosion of institutional trust. Meastra's community-centric narrative is a strength, but when combined with current fundraising strategies, it limits its reach. Overall, Maestra Music has built an excellent foundation for advocating for musicians and creating long-term relationships with donors who care about this cause and want to see the industry change for the better. However, a few challenges currently hinder the organization's continued growth. Starting with the community is a great way to focus on community needs and build a core donor base that reflects your audience. Unfortunately for Maestra, most donors are also members with connections to the owner, Georgia Stitt, or her partner, Jason Brown (Bynum, 2025). This focus on meeting member/donor needs has limited Maestra's reach to the New York theatre scene. Although many donors are based elsewhere, all are currently located in New York. All of these individuals are women or identify as non-binary. Still, the conversations do not address the various intersections that donors and members experience in their lives, such as race, class, and age. These conversations are necessary for developing a more pronounced sense of belonging, not just for current donors but also for new potential donors and members who may be wary of donating as they feel they do not belong.

Additionally, the board is relatively small, about half the size of other organizations of a similar, if not smaller, size. The board has traditionally been a working board rather than a fundraising board, and that is acceptable for smaller organizations just starting. However, with low board dues and limited traditional diversity, there has been limited access to alternative funding

avenues and to building new relationships, such as with corporations and high-net-worth donors. Now, you did mention in your interview that there were a few major donors and corporations that recognize Maestra's work, but these networks always have room to grow, especially when you have the right people on your board. The events Maestra hosts reflect its mission and aim to highlight musicians by providing spaces for them to perform and network. However, significant planning is involved in the events, especially the Mother's Day event, which you stated was heavily advertised. While \$10,000 and \$20,000 were raised at a single event, it is not much when working with a \$1 million budget. The most significant events, Amplify, only generate around 30% of their costs, and The Salon is not structured as an 'asking' fundraiser but rather as an entertainment event. There is extensive planning for these events, but little to show for in terms of fundraising. Maestra has the opportunity to grow; however, current challenges and funding strategies risk creating stagnation and resource strain, which will prevent it from meeting the theatre community's growing needs.

Maestra's fundraising strategy is not solely community- or donor-focused. It blends ideals from both sides, creating a pigeonhole effect that reflects the hiring process they advocate against. They rely on donor-centered strategies, building long-term relationships based on passion, while adopting a community-centered messaging approach that highlights and advocates for musicians (Bout & Hodge, 2022). Since most donors are also members of Maestra, we see a unique blending of donor and community-centered strategies. From an outside perspective, it would seem that Maestra is solely catering to donor needs and wants, which Le (2021) argues is prioritizing these needs over equity. This is not the case, as using the donor-centered strategy has allowed Maestra to build a reputable donor pool over the last six years, comprising audience members passionate about advocacy. Combined with its community-centered messaging,

Maestra has built deep trust within the community by holding advocacy conversations with donors and working with them to change the theatre hiring process (Le, 2024). However, this strategy has also led to some stagnation in growing the individual donor pool, which currently generates the most funds, as the messaging centers solely on one dimension of donors and members: gender. Lived experiences are essential motivators for donors, but because people encounter many other social dimensions in their lives, even if they have experienced similar hiring issues and systemic othering within the theatre community, they may not feel comfortable or believe they are not a good fit for Maestra (Wiepking, 2022). To continue building a narrative that reflects the community as a whole, Maestra needs to broaden its definition of a donor, as people give for a range of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, rooted in altruistic values and personal benefits (Wiepking, 2022). They can expand their donor base without sacrificing their equity-driven missions or inclusionary values.

Maestra's narrative resonates with people from diverse backgrounds, as you noted in your interview, and has caught the attention of high-profile musicians such as Alicia Keys and Sara Bareilles. Maestra's mission is compelling beyond the immediate Broadway community it currently serves. The narrative centers on a single shared experience, which Adichie (2009) warns can unintentionally limit broader engagement and obscure the intersectional experiences within the community. However, I would argue that the core of this narrative about the exclusionary bias within the theatre community can be expanded upon to reflect other structural inequalities, such as racialized labor markets, class barriers in music education, and disability exclusion. It is not that the single narrative is bad; it simply creates a narrow scope of appeal. People often have multiple intersecting identities and when these are absent from fundraising narratives, potential donors may struggle to see their own stories reflected even if they strongly

support the organization's mission. Building on the current narrative can help Maestra foster meaningful and emotional conversations about advocating for all marginalized members of the theatre community which strengthens the organization's relationships with current donors and helps to build new ones (Palassio, 2024).

As noted earlier, the theatre community comprises musicians with diverse intersectionalities and lived experiences, so expanding Maestra's narrative will require significant changes to the organization's fundraising strategies. Different communities engage with philanthropy in unique ways with some prioritizing informal communal giving, such as non-monetary gifts and direct forms of mutual aid and reciprocity (Osili & Bhetaria, 2022). At the same time, others are more focused on building advocacy and equity within the community for future generations (Dale, 2022). Currently, Maestra's fundraising campaigns rely heavily on traditional models that do not deliver significant returns. These resonate with current donors, as they offer a chance to highlight community members through performances, but may not fully connect with potential donors from racial, cultural, or other queer communities that value more community-building or justice-driven experiences (Osili & Bhetaria, 2022; Dale, 2022). Shifting fundraising events to align with donors' diverse backgrounds and understanding how different groups engage with fundraising can strengthen these events and the overall narrative by making them more appealing to broader audiences (Donahue & Stewart, 2022).

Additionally, the board needs to expand to accommodate the organization's growth and reflect the broader community. While the board is already diverse in terms of identity and lived experiences, its current structure limits its ability to contribute to fundraising. The current members' eagerness and willingness to contribute more than the required amount and to shift to a fundraising board are essential. Introducing board minimums provides a baseline of support that

helps to stabilize annual revenue and set a precedent for other donors. However, these minimums may limit the pool of potential board members who cannot meet them and may be seen as a shift in which the board holds the power rather than the community (Brown, 2022; Vu, 2023). When Maestra begins seeking additional board members, these individuals should be recruited for their fundraising connections and strategies as well as their ties to the theatre community. This ensures that board expansion strengthens the organization's fundraising capacity and fosters community-driven leadership to guide it through its next phase.

Overall, Maestra's roots in community values and advocacy have enabled it to grow, but structural constraints and narrative specificity have led to minor stagnation. I would recommend these things during this transitional period:

- Restructure the narrative to encompass the broader theatre community by highlighting individuals of different backgrounds who also face bias in the industry.
- Diversify donor pools to reflect the changing community while growing their networks.
- Implement board requirements on donations and actively require individuals with fundraising skills or connections.

Maestra has positioned itself as a leader in gender equity advocacy in the theatre community.

Through restructuring, Maestra Music can continue reshaping the industry to be more inclusive of marginalized members while staying true to its core mission and values.

Sincerely,

Sophia DeWitt

## References

- Adichie, C. N. (2009). The Danger of a Single Story [YouTube Video]. In TED Talk.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>
- Brown, M. G. (2022). Engaging the Board for Fundraising. In G. Shaker, E. R. Tempel, S. K. Nathan, & B. Stanczykiewicz (Eds.), *Achieving excellence in fundraising*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Bout, M., & Hodge, J. M. (2022). Co-Creating Major Gifts. In G. G. Shaker, E. R. Tempel, S. K. Nathan, & B. Stanczykiewicz (Eds.), *Achieving Excellence in Fundraising*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Dale, E. (2022). LGBTQ Philanthropy. In G. G. Shaker, E. R. Tempel, S. K. Nathan, & B. Stanczykiewicz (Eds.), *Achieving Excellence in Fundraising*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Donahue, R. & Stewart, C. (2022). Planning Events with Purpose. In G. G. Shaker, E. R. Tempel, S. K. Nathan, & B. Stanczykiewicz (Eds.), *Achieving Excellence in Fundraising*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Osili, U. & Bhetaria, S. (2022). Philanthropy Among Communities of Color. In G. G. Shaker, E. R. Tempel, S. K. Nathan, & B. Stanczykiewicz (Eds.), *Achieving Excellence in Fundraising*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Palassio, C. (2024, September 9). Funding narrative change - The Philanthropist Journal. The Philanthropist Journal. <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2024/09/funding-narrative-change/>
- Vu, L. (2021, March 22). White supremacy and the problem with centering donors' interests and emotions. Nonprofit AF.  
<https://www.nonprofitaf.com/white-supremacy-and-the-problem-with-centering-donors-interests-and-emotions/>

Vu, L. (2024, October). Are you perpetuating inequity while engaging in Community-Centric Fundraising? Nonprofit AF.

<https://www.nonprofitaf.com/are-you-perpetuating-inequity-while-engaging-in-community-centric-fundraising/>

Vu, L. (2023, May 22). Why do so Many Nice People Become Assholes When They Join a Board? Nonprofit AF.

<https://www.nonprofitaf.com/2023/05/why-do-so-many-nice-people-become-assholes-when-they-join-a-board/>

Wiepking, P. (2022). Understanding Individual Donors. In G. G. Shaker, E. R. Tempel, S. K. Nathan, & B. Stanczykiewicz (Eds.), *Achieving Excellence in Fundraising*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.