

Chicago Symphony Orchestra

An Ethnographic Study of Patrons Inside Symphony Center
2005-06 Season



Thank You

We have greatly enjoyed our time at Symphony Center. Your patrons are vibrant and diverse, the venue is breathtaking. We hope that you are surprised and delighted at the observations provided within this document. This has been a valuable and exciting experience for all of us.

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The Experience

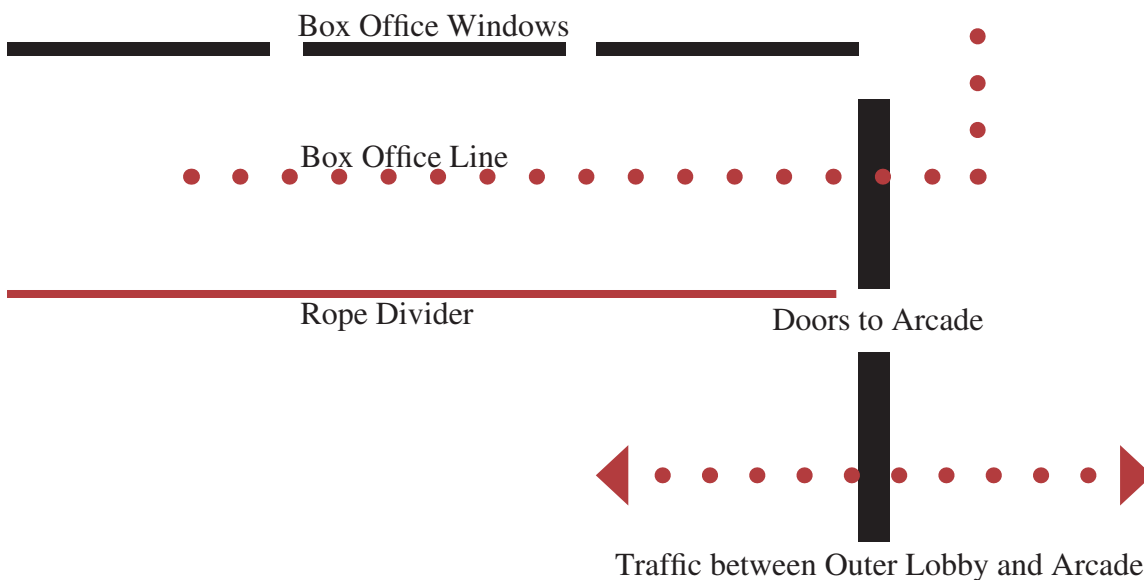
The dynamics of experiencing a venue such as Symphony Center are similar to those that occur within a personal relationship. There is the initial rush of euphoria, a desire for interaction and large investment in the future of the partnership. In observing your patrons, it was easy to perceive the loyalty and affection they have for your organization. In addition, it was equally clear that employees and volunteers at Symphony Center were enamored with their guests. It is in that spirit that we offer you the following ideas, drawn from our direct observation, so that you may continue to foster the life long affair that exists between the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and her many admirers (and hopefully alleviate some of the crowding).

Box Office Blockade

An important and necessary function of any event requiring paid attendance, the box office is by nature the busiest directly before the beginning of the show. Currently, Symphony Center's patrons line up single file at one or more of the three available windows. Due to the narrow construction of the outer lobby, it is not long before the box office lines span its entirety, impeding the flow of traffic to and from the arcade. The patrons in transit are forced to wrestle their way through those that are stationary, which is uncomfortable and dangerous.

During our observation we noticed that although there are two sets of double doors leading from the outer lobby to the arcade, the doors closest to the box office remained closed, further limiting the flow of traffic. It is our recommendation that this set of doors be used to direct the box office line away from the outer lobby and into the arcade. This redirection would not only aid the flow of traffic through the set of doors closest to the street, but would also help patrons to associate the arcade and rotunda with Symphony Center.

Aerial View



Barren Ballroom

One of the most visually engaging and grand rooms within Symphony Center, we were shocked to discover that this space is extremely underutilized. In fact, we learned that many of the new patrons, did not even realize that it existed or that they could explore other floors. We overheard comments such as:

“Maybe we can walk around up here”

- A couple with wine glasses, appearing uncertain, walk upstairs

“Can we take it upstairs?”

- A couple heading via the arcade to the back of Symphony Center

“The Rotunda area is so plain—like a transit station. We wanted to check out the ballroom, and just stumbled on it.”

- A couple from the back Rotunda area on what brought them to the ballroom

This grand room captures the essence of Symphony Center and has a magnificent view of Michigan Avenue (many guests stare out the windows). Patrons, if properly directed and encouraged, would likely spend their pre-concert and intermission moments here, which would help to alleviate the congestion in the inner lobby.

To facilitate this, we recommend the following:

- Create a destination, an inviting area for patrons to spend their time in. Provide places for repose (during intermission the areas with chairs fill up first) and high and low tables for couples and groups to gather. The tables should have tablecloths and be elegantly dressed. Play music associated with the concert’s theme in this room.

- Have employees direct traffic to the ballroom. Concessions employees could say something as simple as, “We invite you to enjoy your drink in our ballroom on the second floor.” Ushers could inform groups that are gathered on the main floor that additional seating is available in the ballroom, or encourage them to view Michigan Avenue from above.

- Rush Ticket holders are another considerable source of inner lobby pre-concert congestion. Currently, they are congregated in the middle of the floor, placing them directly in front of the concessions bar. We feel that traffic flow would be greatly improved simply by congregating this group of patrons in the ballroom. In addition to the extra breathing room, this is an opportunity to introduce the space and the second floor bar.

Caffeinated Clustering

From our observations, we deduced that many of the couples, groups and families that attend concerts at Symphony Center, arrive separately. The early party (this person may or may not be the ticket holder) will select a place to wait in the outer lobby. Generally, wall spaces and the areas between doors fill up first. After there is not a place in the outer lobby that appears to be “out of the way”, patrons begin filling in the center of the room. Once a spot is selected (this holds true for intermission as well) it is unlikely that the individual or group will relocate. These stationary clusters of patrons seriously impede traffic flow into the inner lobby.

Another pre-concert behavior that we observed is the tendency for patrons to arrive with a coffee from an outside source. We noticed cups from Dunkin’ Donuts, Cosi, Corner Bakery and McDonald’s, to list a few. In addition, many arrive with various means of entertainment, such as a book of Sudoku puzzles.

We believe there is an opportunity to jointly address the above behaviors. We suggest the creation of a “meet and greet” area in the Arcade. A row of chairs should be lined up in the arcade. At the head of the row, a coffee bar should be established. In addition to coffee, you may wish to consider providing water and allowing the purchase of a small assortment of snacks.

We feel that this opportunity could also be applied to intermission. We learned that during intermission, many patrons will dash to an outside vendor to purchase coffee because they believe that this solution will be timelier than purchasing coffee within Symphony Center.

Providing a slightly removed location (though still visible to gift shop visitors) for refreshments and repose draws people away from more crowded areas and helps to reclaim sales.

Scant Surface

Your patrons have a lot of baggage; quite literally. They carry coats, purses, shopping bags, coffee cups, books, programs and beverages and snacks purchased at Concessions, to name just a few odd items. Most of the items are particularly awkward in that they have no home, too small to place in the coat check, too precious to be left unattended in their seats. Instead, they are carried around Symphony Center, slowing down the beleaguered patron and taking up valuable real estate. We observed that the more items a patron is carrying, the more likely they are to plant themselves in the middle of the inner lobby.

The area where this really comes to a head is in the Concessions lines. We watched countless women struggle to pay for their food, trying in vain to rifle through their purses without dropping the rest of their possessions. Very few of them were able to do so in a timely manner. To rectify this situation, we suggest the strategic placement of a small table directly in front of the ordering station which reaches just above waist level (remaining well below the level of the bar.) This surface would allow patrons to use both hands to complete their transaction.

Additionally, we noticed that there are currently no options provided to accommodate patrons that purchase more than one concessions item. Even if the patron is purchasing only a soft drink, they are offered both a glass and a can. By providing something as simple as a tray, you might find that patrons are tempted to purchase additional items and you will find your service numbers improving.

Another opportunity to improve traffic flow through the incorporation of additional surface area is the implementation of high bar tables or ledges. Throughout the inner and outer lobbies, the general trend among patrons is to attempt to stand in a space that will remain undisturbed. These types of places are the first to go, beginning with the chairs, open wall space, spaces between the doors and around the pillars in the middle of the lobby. Most patrons appear lost and somewhat distressed. High bar tables and ledges not only provide a secure resting place, but also a nonverbal direction that your patrons need. Tables and ledges tell them where to be, which is, of course, out of the way of traffic. Tables and ledges provide the additional benefit of a surface to rest their many belongs on and a place to enjoy their concessions.

We have previously recommended placing tables in the ballroom. Alternate locations include the first and second floor arcade and rotunda, these additional spaces are also well suited for the installation of a ledge.

Disguised Direction

There is an amazing amount of signage throughout Symphony Center. There are signs that provide direction, education and amusement; signs that are well designed, well crafted and eye catching. Why then do the majority of the signs in Symphony Center go unread? Regrettably, we are unable to explain this phenomenon. We can, however, tell you how your patrons obtain their information. They ask for it. Your ushers, security guards, box office attendants, concessions bartenders and even your crowd management consultants all moonlight as tour guides.

In light of this discovery we recommend the creation of an "Ambassador" position, the function of which lies somewhere in between help desk attendant and town crier. This person could verbally and proactively distribute information such as the direction of the nearest restroom or water fountain or could redirect elevator traffic from the crowded outer lobby to the generally line free elevator located in the inner lobby. Information regarding special events in the rotunda could be distributed in this manner. (During our observation, the sign announcing the tribute to Daniel Barenboim went almost entirely unnoticed. Like most signs in the outer lobby (including the concessions menu) patrons stood in front of it, obscuring it from view.) This person could also function as a sheppard, directing patrons away from the concessions bars (where they tend to remain following their purchase) and the middle of the lobbies, to more remote areas.

To support and reinforce the efforts of the Ambassador, your current employees and volunteers should begin to proactively offer information to patrons while they are forced to be stationary (in line for the elevator, while taking or checking tickets, during the purchase of concessions or as they check their coat. As more information is offered, the chance that a patron will stop and request information during an inopportune time (thus blocking the flow of traffic) is greatly reduced.

One of the few signs which is read with any frequency is the concessions menu. We believe that it would be helpful to provide a reduced version of the sign which can be reviewed at the patron's leisure in their seat prior to the start of the concert. Any decisions that can be made before they enter the line will help to improve the pace of service. We also feel that the appearance of the large menus could be improved by using a temporary adhesive such as Velcro to secure the wine selections instead of the current plastic sleeves. Additionally, placing the menus in frames would give them a more sophisticated appearance.

Bothersome Bottlenecks

Below we have listed some additional “trouble spots” we perceived

The Honors Coffee Bar

It is a fantastic idea to have an unmanned coffee table. Patrons can serve themselves at their own speed, thus reducing line length and helping to alleviate crowding. Overall, your guests seem to be able to get the coffee into the cup in an efficient and timely manner. The trouble arises when it comes time to personalize their beverage. We advise the separation of coffee from cream. The establishment of a separate coffee customization table will help encourage the flow of traffic in the same way an assembly line increases efficiency. This situation could be further improved if the separate preparation table was round, allowing for the placement of multiple cream and sugar stations.

Second Floor Bar

The first thing we noticed about the second floor bar is that although the bar technically has two serving sides, only one is used. Utilizing both sides of the second floor bar will draw patrons out of the narrow area between the bar and ballroom (this is especially important on the nights when the honors coffee bar also shares this space) and into the hallway leading to the box seats.

Doors to Inner Lobby (Pre-Concert)

While they may be the most obvious traffic flow offender, the doors to the inner lobby are the gateway to the day’s festivities and are therefore the most important. We observed that even during a sold out concert, many of the doors remained shut. As the traffic increased, additional doors were opened, but having all the doors open from the beginning would contribute to the even distribution of traffic.

Cumbersome Concessions

Listed below are additional suggestions to aid in streamlining the concessions experience:

Slim Down Your Offerings

Observation told us that the majority of Symphony Center Patrons order coffee, wine and chocolate. We also learned that the most popular snacks were the cookies and brownies. This purchase pattern indicates that your patrons view their experience at Symphony Center as a special event, deserving of a sweet reward. We advise the tailoring of your offerings. If you provide a few elegant options, your line will move faster and your customers will continue to be satisfied.

Mid-Concert Preparation

It pays to know your customer. By identifying the most popular drinks, you can pre-pour several glasses just before intermission, reducing delivery time. Bartenders should also ask patrons who purchase pre-concert refreshments if they would like to pre-order a drink (or snacks) for intermission. Having these orders ready in advance will further speed up delivery time and will make your patrons feel special.

Place Order, Then Move Over

Any time the assembly line concept is applied, efficiency follows. By reconfiguring the way patrons order, pay and receive their refreshments into various stages (instead of all at once) several patrons can be served simultaneously. Separate the bar into distinct "order/pay" and "pick up" counters at concession bars. This traffic pattern can be established by setting up a barrier to channel traffic in the correct direction, which will consequently diffuse loitering in immediate bar area.

Remote Rotunda

We observed the rotunda in three various usage scenarios, with a temporary bar installed, housing an exhibit and with no additional attractions in place. We noted the following:

- The temporary bar was generally ignored during the pre-concert rush. Although we noted moderate traffic, those in transit from the Adams street passage to the arcade were direct in their intention and possibly missed the bar entirely.

- During intermission the temporary bar was patronized by the concert attendees who were let out directly into the rotunda. Very few patrons traveled from the front of Symphony Center. The bar maintained a line during the entire intermission.

- Although a few patrons lingered on the first floor, most chose to return to the second and either sit on benches, lean over the railing or against the wall.

- In the bar's absence, 95% of the rotunda patrons remained on the second floor. This held true even when the exhibit was in place.

- Extremely sparse traffic from the front of Symphony Center to view the exhibit.

- We believe that because of the strikingly different visual language of the arcade and its distance from "Symphony Center" it will be a challenge to draw patrons away from the inner lobby and second floor. You may have success if the rotunda becomes a destination, an extreme "must-see" attraction. Installing an ATM in this area may greatly increase the guest count.

Contact Information / Credit

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Credit

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