

Making Spaces for Art

A Case Study : Arraymusic

“ Artists need centrally located, affordable space.” Rick Sacks, Artistic Director

Arraymusic never intended to be anything other than a chamber group ensemble. Sometimes however evolution takes over. Arraymusic has been on a journey that both Rick Sacks, Artistic Director, and Sandra Bell, General Manager, could not have predicted but that necessity did. A quick visit to their website--one that gets hits from all over the world-- demonstrates their split screen identity. A quick listen to their music reflects the diversity in their instrumentation.

Arraymusic is both a chamber group ensemble (the Array Ensemble) and an affordable space that artists can rent at a reasonable rate, at any time of day, to create, record and produce music. Arraymusic is a one-stop shop where artists can experiment and hone their craft. As such, they are about fostering creative collaborative relationships. And they don't follow a formula. There is no formula for what Arraymusic has created.

Like all good bands, the Array Ensemble started in a cinder block garage on Albany Street resplendent with a tiny washroom in the early 1980's. The Ensemble had already been performing together since 1972 but they needed a cost-effective rehearsal space. Word spread and other groups started asking to use the space. Quickly it became a home for new music improv groups and other creative musicians. Sacks realized that providing affordable space was another way for Arraymusic to realize it's mandate of promoting Canadian New Music. Like most success stories, garage days are limited and best remembered with a bittersweet nostalgia. They eventually outgrew their space and moved to the Artscape Liberty Village development at 60 Atlantic Avenue in April of 1992. This represented a big stepping stone moment for the group as their rent more than doubled in the move but they knew the need was there. When Artscape decided ultimately to close the Liberty Village development, Arraymusic started looking for their new, permanent home.

“What we needed was silence, and a space to make good music,” says Sacks, “and that is hard to come by in Toronto.” From Craigslist to realtors, Arraymusic embarked on a search to find a home that fit their needs. They looked at partnerships with other like-minded arts organizations. They considered another Artscape development but nothing seemed like just the right fit. Just as the situation was starting to look bleak, Sacks stumbled on the Kijiji ad that changed everything. What they found was a turn of the century building that was actually two buildings fused into one. What could be more



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perfect for Arraymusic? After all, they too have fused and become something they never intended at the outset.

On one-way Walnut street, smack-dab in the middle of the cultural corridor, in a turn of the century building that was once a factory, is the new home of Arraymusic. Sandra Bell, “knew it was home when [she] walked in.” How they got there is one part serendipity and the kindness of strangers, and an equal part dedication to evolution.

The project was more than a little daunting. The building would require major renovations in order to become a suitable home. They found out the Ontario Trillium Foundation had a capital grant deadline in just three weeks. Could they even pull it off? They worried if they didn’t make the grant deadline and receive the funds, they wouldn’t be able to complete all the necessary renovations. Bell and Sacks turned to ArtsBuild for help and advice. Executive Director Adele Dobkowski encouraged them to go for it. They met with their Board and took the leap of faith. They managed to get their Trillium application in on time.

Using advice from ArtsBuild and a document Artscape published called, “Square Feet: The Artist’s Guide to Renting and Buying Creative Space”, they set about negotiating with their new landlord. It was a learning curve that could only be described as vertical but the negotiations with the landlord went smoothly. Arraymusic has been blessed with the sort of landlord many of us can only dream of. He clearly saw the vision of what Arraymusic is looking to create. They were able to agree to escalating rent over the initial five year rental period which will allow Arraymusic to grow their business in the new location. The landlord also threw in some free rent at the start of their occupancy, has taken on some of the retrofitting work and has made a sizeable donation to the organization. They were off to a good start. Then came the good news that they were to receive the grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation in the amount of \$150,000. Arraymusic moved into their new home in November 2012.

In four short months, so much has changed. Walls went up to partition off offices. Five offices have already been rented to like-minded partners. There is a new floor. The building has been sound proofed. And they have been meeting with contractors about the elevator.



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There is lots more to come with a priority list that is both daunting and commendable as it incorporates environmentally friendly choices. A primary capital improvement is an elevator that runs on gravity and not electricity. From cost efficient lighting, to collapsible risers, tables and chairs for cabaret events, a deck for outdoor social receptions, a brand new entrance complete with ramp and eye-catching signage, to key code locks to ensure twenty four hour access for all, no detail is being overlooked. The board of directors is thrilled and everyone is anticipating greatly increased community use.

Sacks and Bell have an eye to the future and the enormous potential of both the building and what they are building. They invite community participation to their events to make the most of these mutually beneficial relationships. For instance, a frequent user of Arraymusic has offered up his social media savvy. Arraymusic has gone from having twenty-five Twitter followers, to more than five hundred in four months. Another example would be the pan, tilt, zoom stationary video cameras they are hoping to purchase to record concerts. One person can operate the system, and handle real time edits. They hope to eventually create a premium subscription series available by video simultaneously increasing their audience and diversifying their funds.

Yet another thing that sets Arraymusic apart from just any rental space is the way they promote their events. A proud feature of their website includes enticing event listings, something they do for all their rental clients. Sacks and Bell acknowledge that is a lot more work on their plates to offer this service for free but they believe the pay off of increased attendance for everyone and the cross-pollination of audiences is well worth the effort.

An ambitious outreach plan is also taking shape, which takes advantage of everything the neighbourhood has to offer. It is a neighbourhood with kids and schools and diverse demographics. They are contemplating offering children's programming in addition to their already full calendar. Arraymusic wants to enmesh itself in this community and become a friendly façade within it as well.

For an organization that never intended to be anything than a music ensemble, they are unquestionably doing a brilliant job, seamlessly incorporating both sides of their split personality. As memories of their garage days fade, a unified new vision for Arraymusic comes into focus and takes the stage. Bravo!