



Montclair arts groups speak out for the NEA



Opera Theatre of Montclair's first full production, "Nabucco," in 2015, had supertitles and a full orchestra. COURTESY MIA RIKER-NORRIE

By GWEN OREL

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When Jazz House Kids first presented a Montclair Jazz Festival, "we were on a raised grass and rock platform in Nishuane park," said Melissa Walker, founder and president of the festival's producing organization, Jazz House Kids. "I brought in speakers I had from the '90s. I had an electric piano."

After Jazz House Kids received grant money for "Inside the Jazz Note," more money could be allocated to the festival. It had been a semi-private event when it debuted in 2010, aimed at students and their families, though the public could come in.

Three years later, the Jazz Festival received money from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, and from the National Endowment for the Arts.

That summer, there was a decent-sized stage.

“That was the NEA,” Walker said. The money helps Walker keep the festival to its mission of providing top-quality jazz free of charge.

“It was like we had arrived,” Walker said, recalling how she felt when she heard her organization had received grant money. “For me as a patron of the arts, all my life, the NEA stood for this broader mission of arts and culture, who we are as individuals, the collective voice as the people. It gives me chills. To be under that umbrella that says you are a part of the national conversation, and delivery of arts services in your community, is really humbling, and such a privilege.”

The festival has grown from a small audience of 300 people to one that is more than 5,000 strong, Walker said.

NEA also partially funds the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and Essex County grants.

The NEA, along with the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting are scheduled to be zeroed out if President Donald Trump’s FY 2018 budget passes.

The NEA’s annual budget of \$150 million costs the American taxpayer \$0.46 per year, according to Time.com, and the proposed border wall potentially costs 146 times as much as the NEA’s budget.

For smaller arts groups, the prospect of the NEA’s demise is particularly frightening.

DRACONIAN CHOICES

Mia Riker-Norrie, general director of Opera Theatre of Montclair, founded in 2012, said that the \$2,000 her organization gets through Essex County amounts to 10 percent of the company’s budget. OTM held its first full production in 2015.

“Because we are so tiny, that money represents four singers that don’t get paid, no lights in a show, budget for costumes. We would have to make even more draconian choices than we already do,” Riker-Norrie said.

According to arts.gov, the NEA’s website, 65 percent of NEA grant money goes to small and medium-sized organizations with budget of \$1.75 million or less.

While OTM would seek more private funding to make up the loss, “I think private donors are even more tapped out. How many people can you ask? How many times can you ask?” And, Riker-Norrie said, if she can’t pay her people, “I’ll shut it down.”

At the artists membership organization Studio Montclair, money from Essex County amounts to 11 percent of the budget, but at one point, was 40 percent of the group’s income, said Susanna Baker, Studio Montclair’s executive director. The money goes to the group’s exhibitions and other programs. Most of the people who administer Studio Montclair are volunteers; hers is the only paid position.

“We are trying to grow, get a physical location, and do more for the membership,” Baker said. Without the grant, membership dues, now \$65, might have to be raised. “Our members are artists who might not have a

lot of extra money to spend,” she observed. “It’s depressing.”

Montclair Operetta Club’s loss of government funding might not be visible to its public, said Richard P. O’Connor, MOC’s president. MOC receives about 3 percent of its annual budget from Essex County. But that money helps MOC to help other groups: it is one of the only organizations in the area that owns a rehearsal and construction space, O’Connor said, which it rents to other arts groups at cost. Without the grant O’Connor said, MOC would have to raise the rent. The public face of MOC, founded in 1925, might look the same, but the groups MOC rents its space to would have to make “hard calls.”

The cuts will hurt the arts drastically, and making up the difference would be hard, because “all flavors of giving are down,” O’Connor said. “I’m wondering why the people who theoretically represent me don’t get it.”

‘GETTING THE IMPRIMATUR’

The proposed cuts would affect the public in services they might not associate with arts. The Institute for Museum and Library services is threatened by the same part of the budget that threatens the NEA and the NEH, said Peter Coyl, director of the Montclair Public Library. Among the databases funded by IMLS, Coyl said, are Jersey Clicks, Rosetta Stone, Legal Information Reference Center, and Reference USA. The databases can be used for job searches, language learning, and for sales and other information.

“You can’t put a price on this kind of thing,” Coyl said. “Libraries have always been a great equalizer. The resources are free and open to anybody.” The Big Read is entirely funded by the NEA, Coyl pointed out. And the money the federal government would save by eliminating these programs is “a pittance,” he said. “It’s like saying, ‘I’m a million dollars in debt. I will not buy penny candy anymore.’ It’s a small, insignificant amount of money, but the return of investment states and cities get from this funding is enormous.”

According to arts.gov, the NEA website, \$1 of NEA direct funding leverages up to \$9 in private and other public funds.

Educational programs at the Montclair Art Museum, including programming for students, seniors, veterans and special-needs groups are also supported by federal funds, said MAM Director Lora S. Urbanelli in a release.



Christian McBride, left, plays bass on the stage of the Montclair Jazz Festival in 2014 with Antonio Sanchez on drums and John Schofield on guitar. COURTESY ED BERGER

Bob Feinberg, founder and chairman of the board of the Montclair Film Festival, said that money from NJSCA and New Jersey Travel and Tourism amounts to a little over 5 percent of the annual budget.

But it’s a very important 5 percent, he said.

“If you are a smart philanthropist, and doing due diligence about who you will support, you know in New Jersey that NJSCA has very rigorous vetting before they fund you. It sends a very valuable signal to other potential funders.

“Getting the money is important.

“Getting the imprimatur is important.”

For Walker, too, receiving money for Jazz House Kids was a “seal of approval.” But the loss of the NEA would have a deeper impact than a loss of income, she said.

The arts, she said, talk about “the very fabric of who we are. Quite frankly, it’s my dollars and your dollars. If those can’t tell the story of who we are, what is [that money] doing? Are we only going to be about law and order?”

When Lyndon B. Johnson started the NEA in 1965, “he was making an investment in the soul of people on that deeper level,” a level, Walker said, that embraces empathy and creativity and innovation. “Can America not afford it?”