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Brooklyn Philharmonic may face bankruptcy

THERESA AGOVINO



REPRINTS

The Brooklyn Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, which traces its roots back 156 years, may have played its last note.

The struggling institution's board is seeking ways to keep the doors open, such as finding a major cash infusion or a merger partner to avoid having to file for bankruptcy, sources close to the institution said. These sources wouldn't disclose a timetable for the decision or how much the orchestra needed to survive.

At this point, the orchestra mainly exists in name only. It has no staff, no season and meager financial assets. The orchestra played its last and only concert of the 2012-2013 season in June, and after that, Artistic Director Alan Pierson's contract wasn't renewed. It could offer a partner its reputation for artistry, a collection of donors and the possibility of joining the Philharmonic in a yet-to-be-reconstructed headquarters in a decommissioned firehouse that the city is leasing to it for \$1 a year.

"Despite the Brooklyn Philharmonic's tremendous artistic successes over the last couple of years, the orchestra continues to experience financial difficulties. The board of directors is considering all options," said Jack Rainey, the board's chairman, in a statement.

The orchestra's woes are just the latest in a series of hardships that have befallen several of New York's performing-arts organizations. In the past six months, the New York City Opera and Dance New Amsterdam have filed for bankruptcy.

Part of the problem for all these organizations is that charitable giving hasn't fully recovered from the recession.

Audiences are also dwindling. The Brooklyn Philharmonic, like other orchestras, faces a static audience for its art form. Nationwide, 9% of adults attended at least one classical music event in 2012, a number that had held steady since 2008, according to the National Endowment for the Arts. However, that figure had fallen from 12% to 9% between 2002 and 2008.

"It's not great, but at least the downward trend stopped," said Jesse Rosen, president of the League of American Orchestras. "All performing-arts organizations are having a problem because audiences can stream what they want on demand and curate their own experience."

Mr. Rosen said that many urban orchestras such as the Brooklyn Philharmonic have had challenges finding new audiences as traditional patrons moved out to the suburbs. The orchestra was forced to cancel its 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 seasons and stopped using the Brooklyn Academy of Music as the main venue for its big concerts in 2009 because it was too expensive to perform there. Grants, contributions and fees fell by half during the five years ended June 2012, to \$1.4 million. The orchestra's revenue was \$4.4 million when the firehouse lease was included in its financial statements. Assets after liabilities totaled \$2.6 million, but that included \$3.2 million related to the firehouse lease.

Speculation about bankruptcy mounted after the two canceled seasons.

That fate was avoided as the institution worked hard to remain relevant in a world of changing tastes. In 2011, it hired corporate executive Richard Dare as its chief executive and Alan Pierson of the well-respected ensemble group Alarm Will Sound to shape its repertoire. During the 2011-2012 season, DJs and Brooklyn musicians were asked to propose a new version of the finale of Beethoven's Third Symphony. Bedford-Stuyvesant native and hip-hop artist Yasiin Bey, formerly known as Mos Def, was the artist in residence. A critic for The New York Times praised Messrs. Dare and Pierson and the board for responding to the "needs of its audiences in a way that has been truly inspiring."

That didn't last long. Mr. Dare resigned from his post late last year to take charge of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. He resigned from that post after only nine days when The New York Times disclosed that while he was a teacher, he had been charged with "an attempted lewd act" upon a 15-year-old girl, whom he later married. The Times reported that the case was eventually dismissed.

Even so, one former employee who requested anonymity said the revelation hurt fundraising efforts. It was unclear if the Brooklyn Philharmonic's board knew about the charges that arose when the Times was investigating whether Mr. Dare had been truthful in representing his business accomplishments.

Additionally, earlier this year the orchestra said it was moving ahead with long-delayed plans to move into the decommissioned firehouse. However, sources say the project is on hold.

Mr. Pierson is still praised for his vision, but creativity was never really the Brooklyn Philharmonic's problem. "It needs a good business plan," said Mr. Rosen.

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