

Planning for accessibility & inclusivity, designing for variability rather than predictability!

Interview with Rory McLeod

Executive and Artistic Director, Xenia Concerts
Toronto, Ontario, Canada



Photo by Terry Lim

Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi

International Correspondent, PM World Journal
Paris, France

Introduction to the interviewee

Rory McLeod is a musician, arts executive and concert designer dedicated to creating inclusive and human-centered musical experiences. As Executive and Artistic Director of Xenia Concerts, he leads an organization recognized as a leader in accessible concert design and presentation in Canada.

Since joining Xenia Concerts in 2021, Rory has guided the organization through a period of significant growth, expanding its audience reach and strengthening partnerships with artists, presenting organizations, and disability service providers. Under his leadership, Xenia Concerts now produces more than 35 concerts annually and collaborates with a wide network of stakeholders, including musicians, venues,

educators, and community organizations. The organization has also been recognized as a finalist for the Toronto Arts Foundation's Arts for Youth Award in 2024 and 2025.

Rory's work focuses on embedding accessibility into all aspects of project design and delivery, informed in part by his studies in Inclusive Design at OCAD University. In addition to his leadership role, he is a frequent speaker and educator on topics including concert accessibility, social innovation, and collaborative leadership, and has worked with institutions and training programs across Canada.

As an active violist, Rory performs with orchestras and chamber music festivals across North America. His work across artistic, educational, and organizational contexts reflects a consistent goal: to strengthen the performing arts sector through inclusion, collaboration, and meaningful community engagement.

Email: rory.mcleod@xeniaconcerts.com

Website: <https://www.xeniaconcerts.com>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rorymcleodtoronto>

Interview

Q1: Thank you for accepting our invitation. Can you explain how you came to work at Xenia Concerts? I have seen that you are a musician.

Rory McLeod (McLeod): My path to Xenia Concerts is rooted in my work as a violist and my longstanding interest in how musical experiences are designed. Alongside my performance career, I've always been interested in shaping concerts with the full audience experience in mind—not just the artistic content, but how people encounter, navigate, and remember an event.

In 2013, I founded an initiative called Pocket Concerts, which presented small-scale performances in alternative venues across Toronto, including homes, offices, and cafés. While the goal was to create more intimate and interactive concert experiences, it also became a way to explore how every element of an event—from initial communication to the physical environment and audience expectation—affects engagement. Ultimately, I came to see concerts as opportunities for social connection and personal fulfillment through collective emotional experiences.

Through that world, I began to recognize some of the systemic and social barriers embedded in traditional concert formats, particularly for audiences who may have unmet accessibility needs or feel excluded by tacit sociocultural expectations. When the opportunity arose to join Xenia Concerts as Executive and Artistic Director in 2021, it was an exciting opportunity to address those barriers more directly and at a larger scale.

One of the things that stood out to me about Xenia Concerts was that, from its early stages, the organization was already applying a core principle of inclusive design: leadership by those most impacted. The founders (the members of the Cecilia String Quartet) had worked closely with individuals with lived experience of neurodivergence and disability, as well as caregivers, healthcare professionals, and community partners such as Autism Ontario. This meant that the design of their concerts was grounded in real-world experience, rather than assumptions about audience needs.

When I was hired, I was also struck by both the authenticity of the organization's mission and the strength of its approach, as well as the significant potential for growth. Xenia Concerts was already a national leader in inclusive concert design, but there was clearly an opportunity to expand its impact—both by reaching more audiences within disability communities across Canada and beyond, and by deepening the organization's understanding of accessibility and sharing that knowledge more broadly within the arts sector.

During my first year in the role, I studied Inclusive Design at OCAD University, which gave me a more formal framework for understanding and building on this work. Since then, my focus has been on applying these principles in a structured way—leading projects where accessibility is not an add-on, but a central design consideration shaped through ongoing collaboration with the communities we serve.

Q2: What kind of concerts do Xenia Concerts propose?

McLeod: Xenia Concerts produces what we call Adaptive Concerts—performances designed specifically to be accessible for neurodivergent, Deaf, and disabled audiences. While they are sometimes compared to relaxed or sensory-friendly performances, our approach is more comprehensive, integrating accessibility across all aspects of the concert experience.

This begins well before the performance itself. We provide detailed visual guides for every venue, helping audiences understand what to expect in terms of accessing the space, behavioural expectations, and available sensory supports. Our communication materials are also adapted using plain language and accessible formats so that individuals and families can make informed decisions about attending. A key aspect of our approach is that we aim to anticipate as many needs and remove as many barriers as possible in advance, while still ensuring that audience members can request additional accommodations when needed.

During the concert, we design the physical environment to support flexibility and choice, including accommodations for a wide range of sensory needs. We work with venues that offer adaptable layouts and adjust seating to allow for freedom of movement and improved physical accessibility. We also provide supports such as weighted blankets, balance pillows, fidget tools, noise-cancelling earmuffs and earplugs, floor mats, and a quiet room for breaks. Rather than trying to create a single “ideal” setup, we focus on building a responsive environment where individuals can meet their own needs.

In practice, this can look quite different from a traditional concert setting. We've had audience members bring a sleeping bag and lie at the front of the stage, while others use open space at the back of the hall to spin, move, or even do cartwheels while listening. We also often have teams of therapy dogs present. Beyond being a welcome addition to the atmosphere, they provide an important form of sensory regulation, allowing attendees to engage with the performance in a way that works for them.

A key component of our model is a structured training program that prepares musicians, partners, and volunteers to work effectively with our audiences. The Artist Training Program covers respectful communication, sensory and physical access needs, and introduces concepts such as the social model of disability and the neurodiversity paradigm. Our artists also adapt their programming to account for differences in attention and sensory processing and often lead movement-based activities from the stage to support audience self-regulation. We regularly feature Deaf, neurodivergent, and disabled artists, and in some performances, this includes Deaf performers providing musical ASL, adding another layer of accessibility and artistic expression.

Accessibility is also embedded behind the scenes. We work with artists to identify and meet their access needs, and our staff and Board take a dynamic approach to accessibility in internal communications, planning processes, and collaboration styles. This ensures that the principles we apply to the audience experience are reflected throughout the organization.

From a project management perspective, each concert is intentionally designed as an integrated system in which artistic and operational decisions serve the needs of a wide range of users—on stage, behind the scenes, and in the audience. Accessibility is not treated as an add-on, but as a core requirement that shapes planning, resource allocation, stakeholder coordination, and execution. This approach allows us to deliver experiences that are both inclusive and artistically meaningful.

Q3: What is your role at Xenia Concerts?

McLeod: As Executive and Artistic Director, I oversee both the artistic and strategic direction of Xenia Concerts. My role spans programming, organizational leadership, and the planning and delivery of our annual concert season, which includes more than 35 events each year.

A significant part of my work is stakeholder management. We collaborate with a wide range of partners, including musicians, venues, presenting organizations, disability service providers, schools, and care facilities. Each of these stakeholders brings different priorities and constraints, so a key responsibility of my role is to align all our collaborators around a shared vision that integrates artistic excellence with accessibility and inclusion.

I also lead our internal team of four staff, coordinating work across programming, production, communications, and operations. Given the size of the organization (four

staff members in total, with me as the only full-time employee), this requires a balance between strategic oversight and hands-on involvement in project planning and execution.

In addition to our concert programming, I coordinate, develop, and deliver educational initiatives that support both our collaborators and the broader sector. This includes artist training webinars, accessibility workshops, panel discussions, and written resources. Because this work is central to Xenia Concerts' current focus, we take a collaborative approach and engage as much as possible with the people most impacted by our programming, including artists and community members with disabilities. We also engage external consultants, partner organizations, and subject matter experts in developing educational materials, with additional support from Xenia's Accessibility Coordinator and Managing Director.

I also oversee fundraising, grant writing, and financial planning, and manage relationships with funders and our Board of Directors. Having experienced significant growth in recent years, an ongoing and ever-evolving challenge is to ensure that our projects are not only well designed and delivered, but that we have sufficient resources to keep our operations sustainable over time.

From a project management perspective, my role combines elements of program management, financial oversight, and operational leadership. I am responsible for setting direction, aligning stakeholders, and ensuring that our projects are delivered effectively while staying true to the mission of our organization and remaining closely connected to the needs of the communities we serve.

Q4: From a project management point of view, how do you organize the concerts? (teamwork, stakeholder management, etc?)

McLeod: Each concert functions as a discrete project within a broader annual program, and we manage them using a structured but flexible approach. At the outset, we define scope in terms of both artistic goals and accessibility requirements, treating accessibility as a core constraint that shapes all aspects of planning and delivery.

Our projects also operate on different timelines depending on their context. Public-facing concerts typically require 6 to 18 months of lead time, allowing for artist booking, venue coordination, and the development of accessible marketing materials. In contrast, concerts delivered in partnership with community organizations can often be planned on shorter timelines—sometimes within 6 to 8 weeks—requiring a more agile approach. This means we are often managing multiple project timelines in parallel, each with different constraints and levels of complexity.

Stakeholder management is central to our process. A typical concert involves coordination between a presenting partner, a venue, a group of musicians, accessibility advisors, and community organizations supporting the audience. These stakeholders often have different expectations and levels of familiarity with accessibility-focused

delivery, so a key part of our work is aligning priorities early and maintaining clear, consistent communication throughout the project lifecycle.

To support this, we rely on a small set of shared tools that help us stay organized across a large number of concurrent projects. For each season, we maintain a centralized planning spreadsheet that includes all core project information—dates, times, locations, performers, and key milestones—along with our standard operating procedures. Tasks are tracked using simple status markers such as “not started,” “in process,” and “complete,” which helps ensure clarity, accountability, and consistency across the team.

At the individual project level, we create a “Master Plan” document for each concert, formatted as an accessible shared document. This serves as a single source of information for our partners, team members, volunteers, and artists so that we can share key logistical, operational, and accessibility information. Consolidating information in this way reduces the need for back-and-forth communication and helps maintain alignment across the project.

A defining characteristic of our approach is designing for variability rather than predictability. Audience needs can vary significantly from one event to another, so we build flexibility into all systems, including the physical setup of the space, the structure of the program, the communication supports we offer, and the ways our team responds in real time during an event.

At the same time, we create clear mechanisms for responding to individual accessibility needs. Attendees can contact our Accessibility Coordinator by phone or email to request specific accommodations in advance. For example, at a recent concert, we set up an attendee with a direct audio input from the soundboard so she could connect her own headphones and adjust the volume to suit her needs. This kind of responsiveness complements our broader planning approach, ensuring that we can support both anticipated and individual needs.

Internally, our team operates with a high degree of collaboration and shared responsibility. Given our size, we rely on clearly defined roles, strong documentation, and regular check-ins to ensure coordination across programming, production, and communications. We also work closely with artists and partners throughout the planning process, rather than treating them as separate from delivery.

We also invest in scalable training systems. Our Artist Training Program is delivered through an e-learning platform, allowing musicians to engage with the material asynchronously from anywhere. This ensures consistency in how accessibility principles are applied, while also making the process more efficient than one-on-one training for each project. In the next iteration of our training program, we are including additional learning material for producers and presenters, so that we can train organizations how to deliver Adaptive Concerts as well as individual artists.

Finally, we operate iteratively. With more than 35 concerts each year, we treat each event as an opportunity to learn and refine our approach. Feedback from audiences, artists, and partners is integrated into future planning, allowing us to continuously improve both accessibility and overall experience.

From a project management perspective, one of the key lessons from our work is the importance of integrating user experience (including the experience of our partners and our artists) directly into project design. Rather than optimizing for efficiency alone, we focus on creating systems that can respond to a wide range of needs. This results in projects that are more complex to plan, but ultimately more resilient and effective in delivering meaningful outcomes.

Q5: What accessibility does Xenia address for the audience?

McLeod: At Xenia Concerts, we take an integrated, dynamic approach to accessibility, recognizing that barriers to participation can arise at many different points in the audience experience.

We address accessibility across several interconnected areas, including communication, physical access, the sensory environment, and social expectations. For example, we provide clear and detailed information in advance, including Venue Guides that combine images and text, so audiences can understand what to expect and make informed decisions about attending. We also design our concert environments to accommodate a wide range of sensory and physical needs, and we create a culture where different forms of audience engagement—such as movement, vocalization, or taking breaks—are welcomed rather than discouraged. To further accommodate sensory needs, we provide supportive items such as weighted blankets, balance pillows, fidget toys, and noise-cancelling earmuffs. When possible, we provide a quiet area and provide therapy dogs adjacent to the concert area so that people can take a sensory break or self-regulate while remaining connected to the musical experience.

A key aspect of our approach is balancing anticipation and responsiveness. We aim to identify and remove as many barriers as possible through thoughtful design, while also maintaining the flexibility to respond to individual needs as they arise. This includes providing clear pathways for audiences to request specific accommodations and ensuring that our team is prepared to respond effectively.

Accessibility for us is also intersectional. Barriers are not only related to disability, but can also be cultural, socioeconomic, or geographic. To address this, we take an inclusive and multicultural approach to artistic programming, presenting a wide range of musical traditions—from Western classical and contemporary music to Persian and Indian classical music, as well as jazz, R&B, hip-hop, and a variety of folk and popular styles from around the world. Working in a city like Toronto, where there is a rich diversity of artists, allows us to reflect and include a broad range of cultural experiences as part of our accessibility work.

Socioeconomic access is another important consideration. We offer low-cost tickets and a flexible refund policy that allows attendees to request reimbursement if needed, effectively removing financial barriers. This is particularly important for families with multiple children, who may already face financial constraints, and it is consistently identified as a key access point in audience feedback surveys.

We also address geographic barriers by bringing programming directly into communities. In addition to public concerts, we present performances in care facilities, schools, and community organizations throughout the region, including in smaller towns across Ontario and other provinces. This helps ensure that our programming is not limited to those who are able to travel to urban centres or traditional venues.

Finally, representation is an essential dimension of accessibility. We work with Deaf, neurodivergent, and disabled artists, and include them as performers and collaborators. This ensures that accessibility is not only about audience experience, but also about who is represented on stage and involved in the creative process.

From a project management perspective, accessibility can be understood as an ongoing, system-wide consideration rather than a discrete feature. It influences how projects are scoped and planned, how stakeholders are engaged, how resources are allocated, and how success is evaluated. By embedding accessibility throughout the project lifecycle, we are able to create experiences that are more inclusive, adaptable, and meaningful for a diverse range of participants.

Q6: Can you give some examples of risks faced? How do you anticipate the risks during the concert?

McLeod: The risks we manage are both operational and experiential. In addition to typical event risks, such as scheduling, logistics, and communication, we also need to consider how the environment, performance, and audience interaction may affect individual attendees in very different ways.

One of the most significant areas of risk is sensory overstimulation. Because our audiences may have a wide range of sensory sensitivities, elements such as sound levels, lighting, or crowd density can have a direct impact on their ability to engage with the concert. We mitigate this through careful planning (such as moderating sound levels, designing flexible seating layouts, and providing quiet spaces and sensory supports) as well as by offering detailed information in advance so attendees can prepare.

Another key risk area is real-time variability in audience needs, and the potential for people's needs to conflict with one another. Unlike traditional concert settings, we expect and encourage a wide range of audience behaviours, including movement, vocalization, and shifting attention. While this creates a more inclusive environment, it also requires performers and staff to be prepared to adapt in the moment. We address this through training, setting clear expectations with artists, and ensuring that our team

is equipped to respond calmly and appropriately as situations arise. Inviting all forms of behaviour can also create situations where one person's needs (for example a quiet listening environment) can conflict with another's (such as the need to vocalize or stim while listening). We mitigate this risk by reminding our audiences to show care and respect for one another, and by creating adaptable physical spaces where people can move to different areas or use sensory-limiting devices such as sunglasses or noise-cancelling earmuffs to regulate sensory input.

We also encounter risks related to stakeholder alignment, particularly when working with venues or partners who may be less familiar with accessibility-focused delivery models. To mitigate this, we prioritize clear and open communication from the earliest stages of a partnership, ensuring that both parties understand each other's goals, key contributions, and limitations. In some cases, this process leads to the decision not to move forward with a partnership if there is insufficient alignment or capacity. While these situations are relatively rare, they are important in maintaining the integrity and feasibility of our work while making the most of limited resources.

In some cases, risks are highly individualized. For example, we have worked with attendees who require specific accommodations, such as customized audio setups or help navigating from the subway stop to the concert venue. While we cannot anticipate every need, we build systems that allow us to respond to these requests effectively, both in advance and during events. Having a large team of enthusiastic volunteers helps!

At an organizational level, one of the more recent risks we have faced is managing rapid growth. Over the past four years, we have tripled our operating budget, which has required us to scale our operations quickly while maintaining the quality and care that define our work. We have addressed this by developing scalable systems mentioned previously—such as standardized planning tools and training resources—and by being intentional about the partnerships we pursue, ensuring that growth remains aligned with our mission and capacity.

Our overall approach to risk management is both anticipatory and adaptive. We invest heavily in anticipating potential challenges through design, planning, and communication, but we also recognize that not all risks can be eliminated in complex, human-centered environments. We have learned that one of the most important factors in managing risk in real time is to have sufficient staff and volunteer capacity to meet unanticipated needs. There needs to be slack built into the system for those times when a new pressure point is discovered.

From a project management perspective, one of the key lessons from our work is that risk management in these contexts extends beyond avoiding failure—it is about creating systems that can respond and adapt on the fly while continuing to deliver a positive experience. This requires a combination of structured planning, stakeholder alignment, and a high degree of responsiveness during execution.

Q7: How is AI impacting Xenia Concerts?

McLeod: At this stage, AI is not a central component of our work, but we do use it in targeted ways to streamline and accelerate administrative tasks. This includes drafting documents and agreements and helping us structure communications (particularly for things like grant reports) while still maintaining as much of a hands-on, personal approach as possible.

At the same time, we remain committed to the relational and human aspects of our work. Our approach to accessibility is grounded in trust, collaboration, and ongoing dialogue with the communities we serve and the artists we work with. You can't automate trust- or relationship-building.

Our strategic approach is also relational and human-driven. Xenia's vision and goals are shaped through community engagement and real dialogue, rather than top-down planning or automated analysis. For that reason, we intentionally resist outsourcing critical thinking, relationship-building, or strategy to AI. While it can be a valuable thought partner when used with care, those core aspects of the work remain fundamentally human-driven.

We also deal in an art form that is inherently human, that speaks to the most beautiful and imperfect parts of us. Everything we do as an organization is focused on creating opportunities for people to connect with this amazing art form and with each other, in ways that feel safe, supportive, and meaningful. There is no replacement for that direct communication from one human being to another, and music is a powerful tool for opening people up to connection.

From a project management perspective, I see AI as a useful tool within a larger system. It can enhance efficiency and support consistency, but it does not replace the need for an inclusive approach to design, stakeholder engagement, and decision-making. The challenge is to integrate these tools in a way that supports our work without diminishing the values that underpin it.

Q8: Do you have a last message?

McLeod: Yes: when you design a system, process, or products with diverse needs in mind, you can actually improve the experience of everyone who uses it. While Xenia Concerts' Adaptive Concerts are designed to create a supportive musical experience for people whose needs are met in other environments, we hear from many attendees and artists who don't identify as neurodivergent or disabled that our events are their favourite way to experience live music, or that they discovered that they benefit from the accessibility adaptations even though they don't *need* them. For me, this has been a powerful lesson that continues to impact my work, both at Xenia Concerts and in other contexts.

About the Interviewer



Yasmina Khelifi

Paris, France



Yasmina Khelifi, PMP, PMI- ACP, PMI-PBA is an experienced project manager in the telecom industry. Along with her 20-year career at [Orange SA](#) (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with significant manufacturers and SIM makers. Yasmina strives for building collaborative bridges between people to make international projects successful. She relies on three pillars: project management skills, the languages she speaks, and a passion for sharing knowledge.

She is a PMP certification holder since 2013, a PMI- ACP and PMI-PBA certification holder since 2020. She is an active volunteer member at PMI France and PMI UAE, and a member of PMI Germany Chapter. French-native, she can speak German, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and she is learning Arabic. Yasmina loves sharing her knowledge and experiences at work, in her volunteers' activities at PMI, and in [projectmanagement.com](#) as a regular blogger. She is also the host and co-founder of the podcast [Global Leaders Talk with Yasmina Khelifi](#) to help people in becoming better international leaders.

Yasmina can be contacted at <https://yasminakhelifi.com/> or LinkedIn:
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/yasminakhelifi-pmp-telecom/>

Visit her correspondent profile at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/yasmina-khelifi/>