Toronto Chamber-Pop Orchestra created the following *Project Field Notes* in 2025 as part of their Balancing Act Level UP! Pilot Project.

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Toronto Chamber-Pop Orchestra
Caregiver Support for Freelance Artists – Project Field Notes

The following notes were written in 2025 by Barbra Lica, co-founder, bandleader, and lead vocalist of the Toronto Chamber-Pop Orchestra (TCPO). This document was created to share insights and reflections from TCPO's Level UP! Project.

Project focus: To offer a childcare stipend and caregiver supports to musicians involved in the production of the TCPO's first studio album: *Songs for Orchestra.*

Project inspiration: Nearly half of the members of TCPO are caregivers to young children, including myself, bandleader/lead vocalist Barbara Lica, and conductor/producer/pianist Joel Visentin. In light of this, we felt it was important to prioritize caregiver needs during the recording of our debut studio album, and to thoughtfully address member needs and open important conversations about accessibility within our music community.

Background and Context

Originally envisioned in 2022, the Toronto Chamber-Pop Orchestra (TCPO) was created to help reset industry standards for fair pay and respectful treatment by providing financially and creatively rewarding opportunities to Toronto freelance musicians—many of whom had faced reduced pay and smaller ensembles during the pandemic. Early on, TCPO identified caregiving as a significant barrier to member participation. Following a series of successful pilot performances across Ontario, TCPO secured comprehensive funding from the Ontario and Toronto Arts Councils to begin pre-production in 2024. Although our initial applications for additional compassion fund support through the Canada Council for the Arts were unsuccessful, funding from Balancing Act in October 2024 allowed us to continue and fulfill our core objectives.

Planning and Implementation

The project's active period officially began in January 2024, with the main recording sessions completed by December of that year and editing finalized by March 2025. Mixing and mastering are currently underway and scheduled for completion by June 2025, with the album release planned for November 2025.

Over the course of the project, 14 instrumentalists, 3 vocalists, and 2 studio engineers participated—half of whom identified as caregivers to young children. Musicians received financial support, which was primarily used to hire additional caregiving personnel and to cover transportation costs related to securing that care. TCPO also provided a licensed, screened caregiver during recording sessions and used Zoom in combination with Audio Movers software to facilitate remote editing, giving Joel and me greater flexibility to balance our caregiving responsibilities.

To reduce the need for large, hard-to-schedule rehearsals, musicians were given access to materials and video references from previous TCPO performances via Dropbox, enabling home preparation. Recordings were also deliberately structured in smaller groups to allow for more flexible scheduling.

Caregiver support funds were distributed through invoicing and e-transfer payments, which I coordinated. Throughout the project, we emphasized open communication—encouraging musicians to express their needs—and reinforced TCPO's ongoing commitment to setting new standards for compassionate, equitable participation in artistic projects.

Key Conversations

Conversations with stakeholders—including artists, producers, and engineers—explored barriers to participation, caregiver-related financial inequities, and the stress of balancing caregiving responsibilities with project commitments. These discussions were conducted informally via email prior to the recording sessions and continued in person throughout the process. Participants were actively encouraged to share their accessibility and caregiving needs openly.

All conversations were initiated by me, as the bandleader, clearly signaling the project's commitment to compassionately addressing caregiving barriers and confirming the availability of dedicated financial support. While individual responses varied, these exchanges offered essential insights that helped guide TCPO's evolving approach to effectively supporting caregiver-musicians.

Language Considerations

We found that the freelance caregiver-artists involved in our project were sometimes hesitant to request additional support, fearing they might be seen as difficult or burdensome. To address this, we made it clear that supporting diverse artist needs was

central to our collective's mission—especially in light of the inequities in the music industry that were exacerbated by the pandemic. It was important to emphasize that dedicated caregiver funds had been allocated separately from our operating budget, and we enthusiastically encouraged members to make full use of these resources.

One specific challenge arose around the on-site caregiver we provided during recording sessions. This arrangement was not ideal for every parent. In one case, a musician expressed concern about leaving their young child—who was feeling unwell—with an unfamiliar caregiver in an unfamiliar environment for an extended period. We responded promptly and sensitively by excusing the musician early and bringing in a substitute, significantly shortening the period of external care required while still allowing the original musician to remain involved in the project.

Sustainability

While our pilot successfully initiated critical conversations around caregiver accessibility and provided tangible supports, we recognize that true sustainability hinges on creating both creatively and financially rewarding opportunities—ones that justify the additional childcare expenses and time away from family that caregivers incur when participating.

For this recording project, we were able to offer artist fees in line with typical expectations for Toronto musicians, but we were unable to secure sufficient funding to fully cover additional costs such as instrument doubling, cartage, and pension contributions. We also had to compromise on our ideal recording conditions, including proper isolation for individual musicians, due to budget limitations. Given the increasing difficulty of securing public arts funding in Canada, our next strategic steps involve exploring alternative financing methods, such as private sponsorships and crowdfunding initiatives.

To consistently integrate caregiver accessibility into our future recording and performance planning, it will be essential to secure enhanced funding, develop and implement an effective marketing strategy to build momentum from this recording, and establish formal budgeting and communication frameworks specifically designed to address caregiver accessibility needs. These combined efforts will allow us to uphold both our foundational goal of offering equitable, lucrative work opportunities for local freelance artists and continue our commitment to actively removing participation barriers for caregiver-artists.

Future Planning

Moving forward, we aim to hold more comprehensive advance conversations with caregivers to better understand specific childcare needs. We also plan to create a roster of pre-approved caregivers who can be available in case of illness or emergencies. With our leadership's direct experience in caregiving, we remain strongly committed to continuing and expanding the types of caregiver support piloted in this project—contributing meaningfully to a more sustainable and inclusive industry for all caregiver-artists.

Additional thoughts

Caregivers in the arts are not a monolith—they represent a wide range of needs, comfort levels, and personal circumstances. Assumptions must be replaced with open, ongoing dialogue. Flexibility must be prioritized, as the unpredictability of caregiving often requires last-minute adjustments and personalized solutions.

For organizations like Balancing Act, it's critical to situate caregiving within the broader conversation about arts sector sustainability. Caregiving cannot be treated as an isolated issue; it is inextricably linked to the economic viability of careers in the arts. We encourage Balancing Act to expand its support by offering more networking opportunities and guidance on both public and private funding strategies—not only to make projects accessible, but to ensure they can succeed and grow. Training and mentorship in marketing, fundraising, and audience development would further empower projects to build their own momentum and future.

Ultimately, if we want a sector where caregiving is truly accessible, we must first build an industry where artists can afford to live, work, and care for others with dignity.