

Hong Kong Sinfonietta – An Evaluation of its Branding, Marketing and Audience Development Strategies

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Abstract

Hong Kong Sinfonietta is one of the local flagship orchestras in Hong Kong, which has been bringing classical music to people in its own city and abroad since 1990. It has been exploring and adopting various ways to promote and advocate classical music to a wider variety of audience in recent years. "Opening Doors", its theme for the season of 2013 and 2014, is exhibiting its continuous effort in development. The positioning of Hong Kong Sinfonietta in the local context, as well as the mission statements, are considered as consistent and realistic with its perceived image in the public. The strategies in branding, marketing and audience development would be discussed in the essay to evaluate their respective effectiveness and validity. These three aspects are significant guiding principles for a performing arts organization on how resources should be allocated productively and efficiently in order to achieve its missions and visions. As one of the nine major performing arts groups funded by the Hong Kong Government, it is substantial to assess the administrative and managerial performance of Hong Kong Sinfonietta to determine whether it has demonstrated its professional image as a reference and a role model to the rest of the local performing arts groups, and represented Hong Kong as a culturally-vibrant city in Southeast Asia.

Keywords

Hong Kong Sinfonietta, Orchestra, Branding, Marketing, Audience Development

Introduction

Hong Kong Sinfonietta (HKS), one of the local flagship orchestras, has been bringing classical music to people in Hong Kong and abroad since 1990. "Opening Doors", their theme for the season of 2013 and 2014, is exhibiting the continuous effort for HKS, in which they have been exploring and adopting various ways to promote and advocate classical music to a wide variety of audience in recent years. Their strategies in branding, marketing and audience development would be discussed in the following to evaluate their respective effectiveness and validity.

Branding

The brand identity becomes a very essential part to any arts group as they are competing with performers, audiences and funding etc., it is important to tell people what makes the group unique and stands out from others. An effective brand drives the whole organization, especially in its marketing function.² Branding is even more significant when it comes to performing arts, as the performances offered to the audience are intangible experiences that can not be previewed before the audience paid for their tickets. Hong Kong Philharmonic (HK Phil) and HKS, the two only western orchestras under the "Big Nine" major performing arts groups recognized by the Hong Kong Government, are quite distinctive in this case. Even though both of them are regarded as professional orchestras, HKS tends to be more local, which is linked closely to the mission of HKS:³

- To further the integration of the art of music with the lives of the people in Hong Kong
- To elevate the status of the art of music and musicians in Hong Kong
- To achieve the best quality of music making possible with emphasis on promoting local talents as well as those in the neighboring regions

HKS clearly put their focus in the context of Hong Kong, from their Artistic Director and musicians, to their administration and management, with a majority of them locals. This characteristic has also been

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² Joanne Scheff Bernstein, *Arts Marketing Insights* (USA: Jossey-Bass, 2007) 193

³ HKS Annual Reports from 2011 to 2014

recognized and distinguished from HK Phil by the audience. And in the case of HKS, Yip Wing-sie, their Conductor and Artistic Director since 2002, has been the symbol of the trust between the organization and its publics, which could be also regarded as a brand for such symbol, while the trust has been developed and nurtured over time.⁴

Besides, a distinctive brand could also help in attracting people or patrons and corporates to develop into potential collaborations, such as partnerships and sponsorships.⁵ HKS has not been sponsored by a wide range of corporates, the major sponsors in the past three years included three local companies, namely the CLP Group, Shun Hing Group and Chow Sang Sang, which matched with the positioning that HKS takes as a local orchestra. It is normal for corporates to choose which group they would sponsor, and there are many factors affecting their decision, such as the group's mission and vision, their target audience and the other sponsors the group is currently having.

Moreover, as mentioned above that the product offered by performing arts organizations are typically intangible experiences, audience would sometimes rely on their brand to determine whether their "products" are suitable for them, since the brand is already a vehicle that carries the organization's missions and messages. So if audience would like to listen to lighter classical music played by a majority of local musicians or if they are looking for high-quality educational concerts for children, they should be able to identify HKS immediately. "A strong brand will encapsulate the experience and help the potential audience member feel more confident about what they are buying."⁶

Referring to the missions of HKS, they have been working closely with local artistic talents but not only limited to musicians. Apart from commissioning new works by local composers every year, they have also initiated the HKS Artist Associate Scheme since 2006 to engage distinguished local talents to make collaborations with the orchestra, such as choreographers, dancers and creative artists. It is an active way to provide more diversified programs to the audience and this might even attract people who are originally not so keen on classical music concerts but like to appreciate other art forms. The entire experience gaining from attending a concert is no longer limited to listening, but also satisfying the audience's visual needs. Such collaboration and the emphasis on local artists, once again, make HKS's brand more prominent and links closely with their mission statements.

Marketing

"The works presented on the stages are the *raison d'être* of performing arts organizations."⁷ Undoubtedly the offering, i.e. product, is the most important component in the marketing mix of HKS. They have provided 60 programs with 138 performances in 2013 – 2014, which are grouped under the headings of "Learn" (educational), "Relax" (easy listening) and "Appreciate" (mainstream classical programs), as well as some free concerts and other affiliated programs such as master classes, workshops and talks.⁸ This formula has been used for several years while the "Learn" series has become a representative offering by HKS, for example, the collaboration in a music project each season with the local-born cartoon character, *McDull*, and the educational concerts specifically designed for children and parents. Such positioning in targeting kids' audience is definitely a workable and long-term model for HKS and striking a good balance between artistic visions and audience preferences is undeniably crucial in programming.

Apart from the core product, the expected and augmented products have to be taken into considerations as well. Members of the audience often have different levels of expectations regarding their services to-be-received and experience to-be-gained. Product augmentations are playing the role to go beyond what are normally expected and enhance one's experience in a positive way, thus ending up with higher satisfaction.⁹ HKS currently does not provide many of these augmented products, for example, subscription packages and early-bird tickets purchase or discounts are not available for audience. Though HKS has been organizing a lot of educational concerts for children, affiliated educational programs for other concerts, such as pre- or post-concerts talks for ordinary audience or members from

⁴ J.S. Bernstein, *Insights* 208

⁵ Marta Massi and Paul Harrison. "The branding of arts and culture : an international comparison" In *Deakin business review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 19-31 (Australia: Deakin University, 2009)

⁶ Heather Maitland, *The Marketing Manual* (UK: Arts Marketing Association, 2000) 272

⁷ J.S. Bernstein, *Insights* 90

⁸ HKS Annual Report 2013-2014

⁹ Philip Kotler and Joanne Scheff, *Standing Room Only* (USA: Harvard Business School Press, 1997) 193

the public who are not familiar with classical music, are not yet launched. These augmented products are essential, as they are actually reinforcing the relationship between the organization and its existing customers, as well as reaching out to potential audience, so as to arouse their interests and keep an ongoing communication with them, eventually stimulate their actual purchase and increase the consumption of the core product.¹⁰

Regarding the performance space, HKS has been a venue partner with Hong Kong City Hall since 2009 under the Venue Partnership Scheme by the Hong Kong Government, so the majority of their performances are held in City Hall. Although this could be considered as a restriction regarding their development in serving audience in the demographic sense, HKS is trying to fully utilize the benefits of being a venue partner as they have been organizing small-scale concerts in the foyer instead of regular performance spaces. Besides, HKS is also working under the ArtisTree Residency, where they have conducted performances in ArtisTree, a multi-functional venue on the east side of the Hong Kong Island, as well as a few concerts at the University of Hong Kong in the western part of the Island each season. Since audiences often depend on consistency of location in order to identify the organization¹¹, the widespread within the Hong Kong Island is sufficient for HKS, who is flexible in grouping musicians into chamber ensembles without losing the focus as a whole of a medium-sized orchestra.

Being one of the leading local orchestras, HKS is also regarded as an ambassador to represent the vibrant cultural scene of Hong Kong and display it to the rest of the world. Touring is not simply changing their performance locations, it allows them to share their music to a wider audience base, and at the same time, gaining international reputation as well as raising the public profile of the performing arts organizations.¹² In the previous two seasons, HKS had been to five countries to showcase their music, which includes participating in *Festival International de Piano La Roque d' Anthéron* in France in 2012 and *La Folle Journée au Japon* in Tokyo in 2013.¹³ Via such practices, especially performing in foreign festivals, musicians are able to mingle with other arts professionals as a cultural exchange experience to enhance their professional development and also get in touch with new audience who are not familiar with Hong Kong, this would be a good opportunity to introduce HKS in the context of Hong Kong's cultural development.

In terms of promotion, one of the objectives is to “penetrate deeply into the selected market, reach as much as possible, and surround them with enough information and stimuli to motivate them to a purchase”¹⁴, however the promotion strategies HKS using are quite traditional, including a season brochure and respective posters, flyers and leaflets for each production. There are also press releases and promotional videos available online, but it seems to be too standard and routine that minimizes the significance of attracting audience and delivering the messages to them. Though these acts are relatively raw and the focus is placed mainly on the above-the-line advertising, the result is regarded as satisfactory since HKS had managed to reach out to around 130,000 people in average per season from 2011 to 2014, which is almost one-fifth of the total attendance in all Western and Chinese classical music performances¹⁵. But in order to improve the situation and encourage more people to become their audience, for both one-off and loyal, the effective use of online marketing or promotion through the Internet could help in attracting adolescents and young working class. HKS has their own Facebook Page and Youtube Channel, but these are not used extensively to reach a broader audience and create one's awareness, and it is also a common problem among all performing arts groups in Hong Kong. Besides, sales promotion is not an appealing method in below-the-line communications of HKS, as they usually only offer 10% discount for group booking of four or more adult tickets for many of their concerts, and as they do not have a subscription campaign so early-bird discounts are missing as well. It is advantageous to have short-term sales promotion, such as discounting and special offering, as an incentive in return provided to this specific group of audience who have already committed to buy a certain number of tickets for the concerts.¹⁶

¹⁰ J.S. Bernstein, *Insights* 92

¹¹ *Ibid.* 98

¹² *Ibid.* 100

¹³ HKS Annual Reports from 2012 to 2014

¹⁴ Michael House. “The Marketing Mix” in Joseph V. Melillo, ed. *Market The Arts!* (USA: Fedapt, 1983) 71

¹⁵ Hong Kong Annual Arts Survey Report Highlights 2011- 2012 by Hong Kong Arts Development Council, p.9

¹⁶ Marian Fitzgibbon and Anne Kelly, eds. *From Maestro to Manager* (Ireland: University College Dublin, 1997) 172

Apart from the above-mentioned impersonal communications, the personal-related methods would also be essential for the promotion of performing arts groups. The word-of-mouth marketing is always the most influential factor towards people's ticket buying decisions and preferences.¹⁷ But the challenging part is how to plan strategies in order to persuade the existing audience to spread the messages to other people, and it is not easy to measure and evaluate the strategies applied. Since HKS is realistic and clear towards their own branding and positioning, so the perceived status of the current audience members are more or less the same with what HKS would like to achieve. As a result, if the audience marketers are trying to "sell" HKS to their own network of friends, the overall image could be well presented by them. Moreover, publicity efforts, especially the professional critics in newspapers and magazines, could not be underestimated. HKS's annual reports and season brochures have strategically included plenty of quotes from critics or reports by the mass media, like *South China Morning Post* from Hong Kong, *American Record Guide* from the USA and *L'Eco di Bergamo* from Italy, to show that they are significant and well-recognized in both local and international contexts.

In addition, HKS has provided merchandise for interested parties, including T-shirts, stationery and CDs. It is a favorable act for orchestras to record CDs as a promotion of their good music. HKS produced two CD albums *This is Classical Music* in 2008 and *This is Classical Music 2* in 2010, which achieved Platinum and Gold records respectively. In 2014, they released their third CD album *This is Classical Music 3: The Animals Came In One By One*. All these three CDs feature some well-known classical masterpieces from Baroque Period to the 20th Century, in particular, the recent production, themed under Animals, includes a number of classics that children are more likely to be interested in, such as *The Carnival of the Animals* by Saint-Saëns and *Children's Corner* by Debussy. When the CDs are available and placed in the front of house before and after the educational performances, this would be a way to boost the CDs sales, and simultaneously promote HKS as a reputable orchestra in Hong Kong. Since it is a convenient place for parents and children audience to buy it without making extra efforts to the record stores, and they could have some valuable tangible goods, apart from the program brochures and flyers received during the concert, to take away to wrap up the whole experience in attending a concert.

Furthermore, The prices of the ticketed concerts by HKS are mainly divided into three categories, with an average of HK\$360 as the highest and HK\$150 as the lowest with HK\$240 in between, and concessionary tickets, usually half-priced, are available for full-time students, senior citizens and people with disabilities or financial difficulties for most of their concerts. It is a conventional division as most of these concerts are taken place in the Concert Hall of Hong Kong City Hall, in which the seats are grouped into Stalls, Upper Stalls and Balcony, i.e. the closer the stage, the higher the ticket price. One exceptional case is the weekday morning performance that HKS presented, which is HK\$100 per ticket and HK\$60 as the concessionary price, and complimentary coffee and tea are served after the one hour concert. This is a reasonable pricing since the time of this concert is unusual and primarily targeting people who either do not need to work in the morning or those who have a flexible lunch hour. When comparing with HK Phil, HKS has a standard pricing strategy for all performances, as HK Phil would charge differently according to the variety and popularity of performers and repertoire. It goes from the lowest HK\$90 for a classical concert suitable for families to the highest HK\$1980 for the renowned pianist Lang Lang.

Audience Development

Developing audience is a vital aspect in performing arts organizations. It is "a planned process that involves a relationship building between an individual and the arts, as well as enhances and broadens specific individuals' experiences of the arts."¹⁸

For a long-term perspective, arts education, especially for young kids and youths, has been a trend to be a part of audience development in all arts groups, due to a study conducted in 1996 showing its effects on participation in the arts – the richer an individual's arts education, the greater his/her participation.¹⁹ Education allows the future audience to learn how to appreciate and understand arts; it is actually a long-term audience development. As some of the non-attenders of arts events fear that they have no deep understanding and knowledge in certain arts forms, so they might not feel

¹⁷ J.S. Bernstein, *Insights* 112

¹⁸ Heather Maitland, *A Guide to Audience Development* (UK: The Arts Council of England, 2000) 5

¹⁹ P. Kotler & J. Scheff, *Standing Room Only* 517

comfortable and enjoyable when attending performances, but if they are equipped with relevant arts appreciation abilities, they would be more likely to go to arts events.

HKS has been very active in offering educational concerts to people from different walks of life and they could also be regarded as a pioneer in Hong Kong to provide music performances specially designed for babies (0-3 years old). HKS is not merely introducing classical music to them, they are offering them experiences in a live performance setting, in order to engage them as a participant and an audience, this would help them to develop as an active listener and a knowledgeable music lover in the future. It is an advantage for HKS to start as one of the first local arts groups to educate the younger generation, which has been gaining some sort of reputation, then people, both current and potential audience, would think of HKS when it comes to these kinds of educational concerts. However, arts education is not limited to children, it should also extend to adults and current audience. Some programs in the “Learn” series of concerts are designed for people who are not familiar with classical music, such as “*Short-cut to Classical Music*” and “*Know Your Favorite Orchestral Tunes*”²⁰, but there is, in fact, a challenge on how to persuade them to buy a ticket. As a preparatory step, HKS regularly organizes some free concerts in the foyer of City Hall and ArtisTree, with solos and small ensembles playing easy-listening classical pieces within an hour, to attract non-frequent attenders and potential audience by reducing the formality of traditional orchestral concerts.

Apart from arts education, subscriptions have also been popular and successful in audience development for many years²¹, and the result is more immediate when comparing with arts education. Since many performing arts organizations are not able to sell enough tickets to fill up the seats on a regular basis²², it is commonplace for them to launch a subscription campaign, particularly those groups who are usually having a lot of productions every season, so that they could guarantee a certain number of attenders, as well as secure part of their revenue, as the subscribers often paid in the beginning of each season. Danny Newman, author of the book *Subscribe Now!*, also suggested that subscriptions allow some experimental artistic decisions on program planning, such as including some unfamiliar and non-mainstream repertoire, people still need to buy tickets for some programs that they might not be interested in due to the pre-assigned subscription packages.²³

However, HKS did not launch any subscription campaigns and they solely dependent on single ticket buyers for their concerts. They are quite fortunate in such context as among their 48 tickets concerts in the 2013 – 2014 season, 37 of them were sold out with an average of 97% audience attendance.²⁴ In spite of the encouraging number of single ticket sales, and the fact that HKS is a government-funded “Big Nine” performing arts groups, it is understandable that guaranteed income sources might not be a must to support the organization financially, subscription plans or alternatives with similar ideas should still be adopted in the long run to enhance independence and sustainability. As a professional orchestra in Hong Kong for fifteen years, the reputation HKS have already been established with a solid track record, which should have engaged a strong audience base who has built loyalty towards HKS. A membership scheme could be introduced to this group of existing audience, in which a membership fee is charged to let them enjoy ticket discount benefits, priority seating arrangement and some exclusive meet-the-artists sessions to retain and revitalize their interests. Moreover, flexible subscription packages could also be offered to audience, such as targeting on the parents and children who like to attend the “Learn” series of concerts, just like engaging them to sign up for a music education program throughout the year. HKS have also included some cross-disciplinary performances and concerts featuring works by new local composers in their existing programs, they could also be packaged with common classical concerts to create perks for usual concertgoers. These subscription campaigns would be beneficial economically and artistically in terms of the growth of HKS.

Conclusion

To sum up, from the above evaluation and discussion on branding, marketing and audience development of Hong Kong Sinfonietta, their strategies implemented in these areas are quite strong to a certain extent. They are consistent in terms of fulfilling their own missions, especially their emphasis

²⁰ HKS Annual Report 2013-2014

²¹ J.S. Bernstein, *Insights* 209

²² P. Kotler & J. Scheff, *Standing Room Only* 262

²³ J.S. Bernstein, *Insights* 211

²⁴ HKS Annual Report 2013-2014

on the promoting local talents and the role of an educator by producing plenty of educational concerts, which eventually create a clear positioning and a strong brand to stand out from all classical orchestras in Hong Kong. However, possibilities in audience development should be further explored in order to stay competitive as the market, in Hong Kong and the neighboring regions, is growing fast. HKS have been receiving acclaim from audience and critics across the globe, one of the newspapers in Canada, *Le Devoir Montréal*, expressed their appreciation after their touring in North America – “Hong Kong Sinfonietta has proven to be an orchestra worthy of bearing the flag of its country.”

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