

Precursors to Audience Development In the Management of Performing Arts Organisations: An Evaluation of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra

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Abstract

Audience development strategies are an important aspect of consideration for arts organisations that are looking to build a sustainable long-term audience base. The impetus for having strong audience development strategies arts organisations is even greater for arts organisations operating on government funding, as they are expected to contribute to the cultural development of the communities they operate in. Audience development strategies have often been considered as external to the marketing and branding of an organisation. Utilising the Annual Report of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra as a case study, this paper shows how Audience Development strategies must be integrated into a cohesive marketing and branding strategy of the organisation so as to be able to reap its benefits.

Keywords

Arts organisations, Performing Arts, Arts marketing, Audience development strategies, Singapore

Introduction

Established in 1979, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) is one of Singapore's longest surviving orchestras. Founded under the patronage of the late Dr Goh Keng Swee, who was then the Minister for Defence, the SSO was instituted with support from public funds.² Currently housed within The Esplanade, the SSO performs in excess of 30 ticketed shows yearly as well as providing numerous free programs as part of their audience development program.³ Performing a wide range of Western works from Brahms to Strauss, the SSO has toured numerous countries and is regarded as Singapore's national orchestra by title as well as public recognition.⁴

Yet even prior to its institutionalisation in 1979, the roles of the SSO in Singaporean society were already spelt out. In response to a letter proposing recommendations for the establishment of a national orchestra, Dr Goh wrote:

The purpose of the orchestra is not merely to entertain converted music lovers but to educate Singaporeans in good music taste. ... [T]he orchestra must understand that its role in Singapore is different from that in other countries, and that it must not consider it beneath its dignity to perform in secondary schools, and indeed, to take part in the general musical education of secondary school children.⁵

This however is not astonishing. Since the conception of cultural policy in Singapore, policymakers have seen the arts as an important tool in supporting the government's economic and social objectives. If the key reason for supporting the development of a national orchestra in Singapore was for the purpose of educating "Singaporeans in good music taste," then a social distinction has already been made.⁶ Although the organisation's mission statement cannot be found on its website, a statement from a main sponsor's website lists the organisation's aim as such:

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² Chew, Emrys. *Goh Keng Swee: A Legacy of Public Service*. Singapore: World Scientific, 2012. 282. Print.

³ Singapore Symphony Orchestra. *Annual Report 2012/13*, 2013. Web. 10 Dec. 2014

⁴ Ting, Lisabel. "Glowing Reviews for SSO Proms Debut." *AsiaOne*. 7 Sept. 2014. Web. 10 Dec. 2014. <<http://news.asiaone.com/news/showbiz/glowing-reviews-ss-proms-debut>>.

⁵ Chew. 282

⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984. Print.

“A full-time professional orchestra with 96 members, SSO aims to enrich the local culture scene, serve as a bridge between the musical traditions of Asia and the West, and provide artistic inspiration, entertainment and education.”⁷

As a government-funded entity receiving approximately 70% of its funding from government sources, the emphasis of SSO’s aims should undeniably be on the enrichment of the Singaporean society. While this enrichment may take on numerous forms, this paper focuses on evaluating the SSO’s audience development, marketing, and branding strategies of 2012 with respect to its organisational aims and in relation to the enrichment of the local cultural scene. Ultimately, this paper also aims to place marketing and branding strategies of the arts organisation under the broader framework of audience development.

Audience Development

The term audience development has been defined as numerous as the organisations which utilise it. The term in itself can be seen from two perspectives – audience development as an organisation’s aim to increase audience numbers, or the development of the audience as an individual. Yet, when the term audience development comes to mind, it is usually the prior. The National Arts Council of Singapore also looks at audience development in this perspective, seeing the primary goal of audience development as to “reaching new audiences and markets.”⁸ Kawashima Nobuko in his paper *Beyond the division of attenders vs. non-attender: a study into audience development in policy and practice* subdivides audience development further, into 4 distinct component: Cultural Inclusion, Extended Marketing, Taste Cultivation and Audience Education.⁹ Nobuko’s segmentation provides a better framework for the evaluation of audience development activities. This section of the paper will utilise Nobuko’s subdivisions of taste cultivation and audience education in evaluating the outreach events the SSO has to offer, leaving the remaining two for the next sections.

The financial year of 2012/13, saw the Singapore Symphonic Orchestra performing a total of 11 free “community concerts” with audience figures at their free performances and open rehearsals hitting 22,659 attendees. Another 13 ticketed children’s concerts would bring the total figures of what the SSO has described as “Outreach Concerts” to a total of 32,830. This figure comes in close to the audience figures at ticketed concerts which stand at 37,337. While the audience attendance figures at these outreach concerts may seem to indicate a potential for growing audience figures at ticketed events, the statistics do not make a distinction between new attendees, and audiences who have attended ticketed SSO concerts in the past. In light of this, the paper will first examine the various components of the SSO’s audience outreach program so as to assess the impact on audience developments within a framework of the organisation’s goals and social welfare.

In addition to the free community concerts and the ticketed children’s concerts the SSO also partners with numerous local institutions to bring music to students.¹⁰ Collaborating with the Swire Group, the SSO has in recent times introduced \$10 (SGD) tickets to subscription concerts under the Swire-SSO Ticketing Scheme for Schools, this in addition to the readily available student and senior concession prices.¹¹ In 2013, the SSO’s effort in bringing the underprivileged of society for an evening of music in the park is also another meaningful endeavour.¹² In addition to the above, as part of the SSO’s aim to improve music appreciation in audiences, the orchestra highlight the integral role that pre- and post-concert dialogues play in making the concert-going experience more enriching for audiences; schools participating in the Swire-SSO Ticketing Scheme also receive a tailored music appreciation talk.¹³ The

⁷ "Singapore Symphony Orchestra." *TOTE Board*. TOTE Board. Web. 10 Dec. 2014. <<http://app.toteboard.gov.sg/web/contents/Contents.aspx?ContId=1075>>.

⁸ "Market and Audience Development." *Market and Audience Development*. NAC, 21 Oct. 2014. Web. 11 Dec. 2014. <<https://www.nac.gov.sg/grants-schemes/grants/market-and-audience-development>>.

⁹ Nobuko, Kawashima. "Beyond the Division of Attenders vs Non-attenders: A Study into Audience Development in Policy and Practice." *University of Warwick Centre for Cultural Policy Studies Research Papers* 6 (2000): 3-25. University of Warwick. Web. 12 Dec. 2014.

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/35926/1/WRAP_Kawashima_ccps_paper_6.pdf>.

¹⁰ Singapore Symphony Orchestra. *Annual Report 2012/13*, 2013. Web. 10 Dec. 2014

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

opening of selected rehearsals to the public is also seen by the SSO as a means of providing the public with “a better insight into the making of a concert performance”.¹⁴

Yet in spite of the numerous initiatives by the SSO in the year of 2012/13, a survey conducted by the National Arts Council indicated that attendance at western music performances fell from 7% to 4% between the years of 2011 and 2013.¹⁵ What went wrong? The SSO’s provision of pre- and post-show activities as well as music appreciation talks can be seen as a means of achieving the audience education aspect of audience development, while playing a variety of works over numerous shows increases audience exposure to various genres, and would therefore constitute taste cultivation.¹⁶ Since programs satisfying these two aspects have been seemingly satisfied, I would assert that the ineffectiveness of these programs, as seen by the general falling audience figures, lie in the fact that the programs have been targeted at the wrong audience segments. In his paper, Kawashima proposes that the audience education and taste cultivation aspects of audience development yields greatest effectiveness when targeted at existing audiences.¹⁷ In this regard, it is possible to deduce that the effectiveness of such programs rely on a pre-existing interest in the subject matter to yield positive results.

By the SSO’s delivery of audience education to schools and children as a component of its outreach performances, we can deduce that the orchestra’s aim of providing audience education is based on the underlying assumption that the provision of audience educational programs would contribute to the “nurturing of the next generation of arts and culture participants” – a sentiment shared by numerous other arts and cultural managers in Singapore.¹⁸ Therefore, the SSO’s dedication to providing a substantial number of children’s and youth-centric performances stems from the organisation’s desire to develop potential future audiences.¹⁹ However, without an inherent interest in the subject matter, a relentless onslaught of education programs to “develop” new audiences remains an exercise in futility since, as Kawashima points out, the aim of education is to enhance existing audiences’ understanding and enjoyment of the artistic goods they currently consume. That is to say that the greatest impact of audience education lies in its ability to retain existing audiences as opposed to indoctrinating new ones.

Similarly, taste cultivation operates on the same premise; there needs to be a pre-existing interest in the art form for the cultivation of the existing taste to ensue. In this regard, it is important to distinguish repeated exposures, in which participation may not stem from personal choice, from taste cultivation. A number of outreach programmes provided by the SSO is targeted primarily at schools and children – as such, the youth and children who partake in these events may often attend not on their own volition, but rather on the insistence of school authority or parents. In this light, it is only logical to deduce that the promotion of such programming is targeted at these figures of authority who assume that they are beneficial to the audiences who would be subject to it. As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink – even if you tried explaining to the horse that the water was most excellent/or slowly developed it into Fanta. The mandatory nature of these events, to these attendees, is representative of distrust in an individual’s ability to develop their own tastes and preferences independently.²⁰

However, the above does not mean to say that the provision of other forms of free audience outreach programming is not effective in creating a larger pool of potential paid audiences. In *The Economics of Art and Culture*, James Heilbrun and Charles Gray write: “The goal of outreach programmes aims to, as the name suggests, reach out to new audiences, since “Art is said to be an acquired ‘taste,’ in the

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ NAC. "Engagement in Arts and Culture." *2013 National Population Survey on the Arts*. Singapore: National Arts Council, 2014. 34. Print.

¹⁶ Kawashima. 9

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ "Strategic Direction 1: Bring Arts and Culture to Everyone, Everywhere, Every Day." *THE REPORT OF THE ARTS AND CULTURE STRATEGIC REVIEW*. Singapore: National Arts Council, 2012. 29. Print.

¹⁹ Kawashima points out that the distinction between Audience Education and Arts Education is an artificial one, as such, I have taken the liberties to apply the ACSR’s Arts Education recommendations to the Audience Education aspect of the SSO.

²⁰ Hansen, Ron. "Stuck in the Groove: A Critique of Compulsory Schooling | Canadian Education Association (CEA)." *Education Canada*. Canadian Education Association (CEA). Web. 11 Dec. 2014. <<http://www.cea-ace.ca/education-canada/article/stuck-groove-critique-compulsory-schooling>>.

sense that you have to be exposed to it in order to develop the taste.”²¹ The SSO’s provision of community concerts can be said to serve this purpose. Yet, while it may be true that the audiences at these events were in no ways coerced into attending, as I have highlighted earlier, it is challenging to ascertain the impact of these outreach programs; Since in order to do so, one would have to be able to distinguish between new attendees, and audiences who already frequent ticketed concerts. Yet even if one were to assume these events successful in acquainting new audiences with this form of music, the new challenge to audience development lies within the domain of extended marketing, or as Kawashima defines it, the focus “on people with high attendance potential but who are not yet in the customer group.”²²

Marketing

The extended 7P marketing mix, comprised of Place, Price, Promotion, People, Process, Physical Evidence and Product, is often utilised in the arts. However, for the purpose of limiting this discussion, only Price strategies will be discussed. The reason for this stems from firstly, the clear indication of its utilisation within the SSO’s annual report; and secondly, *The National Population Survey on the Arts’* assertion that the slower economic growth of 2012 and 2013 may have been contributing factors to the decrease in spending on the arts.²³ If indeed the economic slowdown is correlational to the decrease in attendance figures, the situation highlights that Singaporeans are price sensitive not only in terms of a direct increase in ticket prices, but the cost of ticket prices in proportion to disposable incomes. The link between price and audience development is set forth clearly by Michael Kaiser. In his book, *Strategic Planning in the Arts: A Practical Guide*, Kaiser states: “Audiences’ inability to pay increased ticket prices and arts organizations’ inability to build new audiences rapidly enough have all conspired to limit earned income.”²⁴ The fact that outreach events constitute 40% of the total performances produced each year by the SSO, and ticket sales only make up for only approximately 6% of the organisation’s annual operating income is clear evidence in support of Kaiser’s assertion, and demonstrates that neither the outreach nor price strategies of the SSO have been effective.²⁵

The reason for the ineffectiveness of the SSO’s price strategy is clear. Concessions are targeted primarily at students. As discussed in the earlier section, programmes targeted at this demographic fails to gain traction since the decision-makers are not the target audience itself. Furthermore, even if school programmes lead to an increase in student attendance at ticketed events, the disposable incomes of students remain low, and would as such have a limited impact on overall ticket revenue. Furthermore, the Swire-SSO Ticketing Scheme only applies to bulk ticket purchases made by schools, and is not a price extended to students on an individual basis. In this regard, not only does the attractive pricing of \$10 not yield substantial attendance numbers at the expense of lower revenues, but the price also positions SSO poorly to compete in a market environment where arts education programs to schools can be provided more conveniently and at a lower cost.

This however, does not undermine the SSO’s good intentions of providing students with access to performances situated in concert halls. It is without a doubt that the experience of listening to an orchestra perform in a concert hall is in many ways much more satisfying than listening to the same piece in a park; based on the simple reason of acoustics.²⁶ In this regard, introducing audiences to the concert hall experience as opposed to letting them stay satisfied with free performances in the park serves a twofold purpose of raising the individual’s enjoyment of the music, whilst simultaneously increasing ticket revenue. Yet in order to do this, a financial incentive ought to be developed to encourage these outreach event goers to attend ticketed shows in concert halls. At present, it seems that the lack of pricing strategies targeted at this demographic has served as one of the barriers for the progression from casual listener to serious concert-goer. As such, the development of appropriate pricing strategies for such audiences would contribute to the goals of audience development at both levels.

²¹ Heilbrun, James, and Charles M. Gray. *The Economics of Art and Culture*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.

²² Kawashima. 9

²³ NAC. 12

²⁴ Kaiser, Michael M., and Paul S. Engler. *Strategic Planning in the Arts: A Practical Guide*. New York: Kaiser/Engler Group, 1995. 28. Print.

²⁵ Singapore Symphony Orchestra. 49-51

²⁶ Patynen, J., S. Tervo, P. W. Robinson, and T. Lokki. "Concert Halls with Strong Lateral Reflections Enhance Musical Dynamics." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2014): 4409-414. Print.

Branding

Philip Kotler, defines a brand as “a complex symbol that can convey up to 6 levels of meaning,” which he goes on to specify as attributes, benefits, values, culture, personality, and users.²⁷ In short, a brand is the sum totality of an organisation’s actions which defines it in the eye of the public. Kawashima’s final constituent of audience development is cultural inclusion, which will be discussed in this segment of the paper in relation to branding. While Kawashima refers to cultural inclusion as pertaining predominantly to minorities who are least likely to attend the arts as a result of social reasons, for instance poverty, I believe that the concept of cultural inclusion, and exclusion, would pertain to the general populace as well.²⁸ Utilising theories from Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, I will illustrate why the greatest stumbling block in the Singapore Symphony Orchestra’s audience development strategy, might just perhaps be its branding, and therefore establish an organisation’s brand as yet another factor which ought to be recognised in audience development strategies.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu states that in society, it is the individuals with a high volume of cultural capital who determine what is in good taste – a statement which is evidenced by Dr Goh’s statement on the role of a national orchestra in bringing to audiences good taste. Furthermore, while these tastemakers do not constitute the majority of society, the majority then, which is in possession of lower volumes of overall cultural capital, accept these prescriptions of taste. This forms the distinction between “high” and “low” culture, which in turn, results in the majority constituents of “low” culture, defining themselves in relation to the minority. These distinctions are therefore representative of a symbolic violence which the powerful impose on the weak.²⁹

Yet symbolic violence does not only apply to the sphere of arts activities. While the most straight forward demonstration of this symbolic violence would be the imposition of arts activities on unwilling audiences, symbolic violence also presents itself in class distinctions stemming from differences in education, income, age; and numerous other false hierarchies present in society.³⁰ In the SSO’s annual report, both the Chairman and Music Director make distinctions between the orchestra’s ticketed audience and attendees at their community outreach events.³¹ The Chairman’s statement on the accessibility of ticketed events to all Singaporeans stemming from its low prices³² demonstrates the SSO’s aim of inclusiveness to all sectors of the society.³³ The decrease in attendance at western music events is indicative of society’s reluctance to take up the SSO’s offer of bargain ticket prices. The Singapore Symphony Orchestra’s brand image is not indicative of this cultural and societal inclusion – one of the reasons stifling audience development initiatives. An analysis of the orchestra’s annual report is sufficient in validating this statement.

The notion of western classical music as a constituent of high culture, reserved for society’s elites and literati is a premise that has remained till this day.³⁴ Even if not held by all members of society, it is propelled the greatest by the individuals who partake in its creation and enjoyment. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, two key members of the SSO have made the distinction between ticketed concert goers, and outreach attendees. This distinction is only made clearer by the segmentation of the orchestra’s audience demographics in its statistics– The first set of statistics for ticketed concert events, and the second for “outreach concerts”. In the images accompanying the statistics, the crisp tuxedos of the performers in the concert hall are clearly juxtaposed against the casual polo shirts which they performed in at the park. If the attire of performers at community concerts were intended to be inviting, then newly inducted ticketed audiences accustomed to this image would no doubt be confused, if not intimidated by the gravity of tail-coated performers in the concert hall. If brands are indeed on some level symbolic of an organisation’s “personality”, then the SSO’s persona may perhaps suffer from dissociative identity disorder – which is not a fault in the case of an actual person.

²⁷ Kotler, Philip. *Marketing Management*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002. Print.

²⁸ Kawashima. 8

²⁹ Bourdieu

³⁰ Tilly, Charles, Jim Sidanius, and Felicia Pratto. "Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression." *Contemporary Sociology* (1999): 120. Print.

³¹ The Singapore Symphony Orchestra. 2-4.

³² Chairman Goh Yew Lin states that the lowest price tickets are available at \$15 to all audiences.

³³ *Ibid.* 3.

³⁴ Tuchman, Gaye, and Nina E. Fortin. "Chapter 4: The High Culture Novel." *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989. Print.

Long suffering patients of a split-personality do not possess the same level of control over the personalities they exhibit the way an organisation does. In the pages dedicated to publicising the fundraising activities of the orchestra, the images and text do nothing but to support the notion of western classical music for the elites. Images of suited men and gowned women are supplemented by words such as “black-tie”, “auction”, “Steinway & Sons”, “bidding”, “Piaget”, and “Damiani”, at not parties but “soirees”, where the individuals who can afford the above “support the orchestra’s many public performances and outreach activities” which as we know from the same annual report, are attended by casually-clad people in the park.³⁵ Do these images and text not propel the notion that the paying users of the orchestra are the similarly suited men and women who also attend soirees and adorn themselves in Damiani and Piaget?

The \$15 standard priced ticket available to all audiences is as such a myth, as it fails to consider the ancillary costs a new concert-goer has to bear before the individual may deem himself worthy of attending a ticketed event. Or even if, when the casually clad first-time attendee takes his place in his \$15 seat, doesn’t this image of suited-men and gowned-women impair the line of sight between him and the performers on the stage? In this light, the brand image of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra has only served to clarify the societal distinctions Bourdieu has written about, and even if unintentionally, served to exclude rather than include potential participants lacking the financial or educational means.

Conclusion

The Singapore Symphony Orchestra has already all the makings of a world class act, its performances abroad are met with critical acclaim, and they are often joined by notable musicians in the creation of new works. 70% of the orchestra’s annual operating revenue coming from public funding is a good enough reason for the provision of a classical musical experience to the masses without having to pander to the grand salvational motives of society’s upper echelons. Besides, the musical tastes of the masses, as indicated by the *National Population Survey on the Arts*, lie not in classical music but in performances of Popular, Rock, Indie, and Alternative music genres.³⁶ Wouldn’t it be more equitable then to appropriate public funding to where the masses would benefit from it most?

If the Singapore Symphony Orchestra truly aims to enrich the local cultural scene as opposed to merely entertaining converted music lovers, it is time for them to project a brand image as an orchestra for the people and not a specific societal group. Perhaps only then, will we see true audience development in all iterations of the term, and an organisation that will be supported by the funds from the public as opposed to public funding.

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³⁵ Singapore Symphony Orchestra. 44-46.

³⁶ NAC. 34

- [11] *THE REPORT OF THE ARTS AND CULTURE STRATEGIC REVIEW*. Singapore: National Arts Council, 2012. Print.
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