DEVELOPING CULTURALLY DIVERSE AUDIENCES

CASE STUDY: MELBOURNE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Multicultural Audience Development Project, 1999-2003

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Background

While able to trace its origins back to the 1880s, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra was formally established by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1940.

The Melbourne Symphony maintains a reputation as an orchestra of international renown and benefits from the positive publicity of the playing standards and conductors and soloists, and in particular, its the Chief Conductor and Artistic Director, Markus Stenz.

Each year, in excess of 250,000 people attend more than 120 performances by the Orchestra. This audience is made up of subscribers (in 2003, subscribers number over 16,000) single ticket buyers and attendees at free concerts. The subscriber renewal rate is exceptionally high – between 2002 and 2003 it showed an average of 90%.

Multicultural Audience Development Project

In 1999, the Melbourne Symphony successfully applied to the Australia Council under a then new initiative to provide funding for the placement of Multicultural Audience Development Coordinators at major arts organisations.

The application was prompted by a recognition that though there is a great cultural diversity among members of the Melbourne Symphony, its guest conductors and its soloists – from Australia and around the world – this diversity did not seem to be similarly represented in its audience. In a city as culturally rich and diverse as Melbourne, this seemed to be an anachronism - one more than worthy for redress.

Late in 1999 a full time coordinator was appointed to the role and for the first half of 2000, the project was launched and preliminary research was undertaken. In mid 2000, the project was interrupted and a review of its continuation was undertaken.

In consultation with the Australia Council, a decision was made to convert the Coordinator role to a part-time one, and thereby extend the duration of the project to better achieve the outcomes of the project. In July 2001, a new Coordinator was appointed and a marketing plan was devised.
**Audience demographic**

The Melbourne Symphony’s audience is recognised as being older (only 10% of subscribers are under 39, with 60% of subscribers aged 55 or older and 33% over 65), slightly more likely to be female (60%) than male (40%) and extremely highly educated (30% have post-graduate qualifications).

31% of subscribers live in households with income less than $30,000 pa, while 36% live in households with income over $50,000 pa. 14% subscribers live in households with income of over $90,000 pa.

There is no formal data available to verify the cultural background of the audience, but it is anecdotally believed to be composed largely of those with European heritage, from both Western and Eastern Europe. Consistently low attendance at Friday night concerts is understood to be due to a high number of Jewish subscribers who will not attend on Fridays. The Asian representation in the audience is less than is representative of the state of Victoria.

**Audience research**

Both quantitative and qualitative research provided a good starting point in devising new strategies. Statistical data had indicated the broad demographic that the Melbourne Symphony could look to in fostering more culturally diverse audiences and information collated from surveys and focus groups had identified obstacles to the attraction of the Melbourne Symphony to such audiences.

Several factors appeared to limit attendance. Most notably these were:

- **Lack of time and money**: these were commonly mentioned and were also around perceptions of costs at attending concerts.

- **Lack of Information**: these included information on how to attend and recommendations from those who do attend.

- **Language**: these included contacting Ticketmaster and obtaining information on how to attend.

- **Social barriers and feeling out of place**: they attended events with family and friends and would feel uncomfortable attending by themselves. They were also a strong perception that it was a formal environment with a strict dress code.

- **Lack of understanding**: some felt that attending a concert required specialist knowledge and could be difficult to relate to.
Key selling points

The key selling points for the Melbourne Symphony to these audiences are:

- The diverse representation of cultures within the Orchestra – 24.14% of males and 5.72 of females are from language backgrounds other than English;

- 26% of the players and management are overseas born;

- Cultural diversity of local and international soloists;

- Cultural diversity of main season conductors, (Chief Conductor is German, Conductor Laureate is Japanese, Principal Guest Conductor is Italian.);

- Development of a database with details of ethnically diverse media, organisations, clubs, groups and individuals;

- An open rehearsal program that can offer introductory access; and

- The education program through schools.

Recommendations

Recommendations that arose from this research were:

- Raise awareness of the Melbourne Symphony by using appropriate promotional methods, ie, publicity and word of mouth and personal recommendations.

- Consider creative ticketing arrangements for family and group discounts to assist in the removal of perceived social barriers.

- Develop understanding through community outreach.

- Create community partnerships by forging links with community organisations that are actively involved in creating and promoting arts events relevant to their communities.

- Create engagement by profiling musicians who can engage directly with communities’ experiences and interests.

- Shift the image by creating promotional material to reflect ethnic diversity and interest in engagement.
Objectives

The marketing plan that was motivated by this research set as a priority:

- Identification of specific communities for direct targeting.

- Formation of a “Multicultural Advisory Group” made up of representatives from the nominated target communities, to provide specific advice and general guidance to the Project.

- The production of community and/or language-specific promotional material.

- Initiation of strong relations with media for these communities, and other media, where appropriate (as indicated by repertoire, visiting artists, etc).

- Continuation of Open Rehearsal program, with direct invitations made to groups and individuals from target communities.

- Explore how the Melbourne Symphony can take its the Orchestra and smaller groups of players to the community.

- Collaboration with the Education and Community Outreach Program.

The primary areas of budget allocation included Advertising – press and radio, Artwork, Translation, Printing, Distribution, Direct Mail and Entertainment.

Strategies and approach

Specific communities for direct targeting

The ‘multicultural sector’ describes many communities that are as culturally diverse from each other as they are perceived to be from the mainstream. Rather than attempt a broad ‘multicultural’ attraction then, four communities were chosen for specific targeting: these were Melbourne’s Chinese, Indian, Russian and Vietnamese communities.

The rationale behind the choice of each of these was quite distinct, but factors for choosing Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese included population size and community location; exposure to, and participation in, western classical music, and media activity and accessibility.

In the case of the Russian community, the observation had been made that although there was a significant number of Russian single-ticket buyers among the audience, there were fewer subscribers. We wanted to explore how a better-acknowledged relationship with this community might lead to stronger links between us, and an increase in subscriber numbers.

Multicultural Advisory Group

Following the selection of communities, representatives from each of these were approached and invited to sit on a newly-formed committee to provide guidance to the Multicultural Audience Development Project.
The representatives chosen were community leaders, artists and cultural promoters, media identities and teachers. The Group was formed with the aspiration that it could assist in:

- Providing direct links/access to nominated communities.
- Fostering a sense of community ownership over the program.
- Advising the Melbourne Symphony on appropriate marketing methods.
- Increasing the awareness of cultural requirements and preferences, for both marketing strategies and in terms of audience participation.

**Community and/or language-specific promotional material**

In mid 2002, four Cultural Audience Development Brochures were produced – one in Chinese, another in Vietnamese, one in Russian and the final in English, stylised to appeal to Melbourne’s Indian communities.

These brochures were the outcome of months of community consultation, drafting, translating, editing and designing. The pamphlets contained basic how-to information about the Melbourne Symphony and a perforated section invited people to send in a postage-paid card to find out more. This card also entitles them to a special 2-for-1 offer for remaining concerts in 2002.

The key message on each of these pamphlets was 'Your Community, You’re Welcome'. The pamphlets had a two-fold purpose: to spread the word about the Multicultural Audience Development Project in a manner that was as welcoming as possible, and to build up the database of new potential audience by encouraging people to send back the postcard.

We made the offer a 2-for-1 because this gives the buyer a realistic sense of ticket price while also giving them a valuable discount.

The pamphlets were distributed via newspapers (ethnically specific AND local suburban), newsletters, community organisations, community centres, mail-outs, shops and tourist centres. A soft launch of the pamphlets was given at a pre-concert drinks function at the Melbourne Concert Hall and 100 invitees, from multicultural policy bodies, ethnic media, local council representatives and arts organisations were in attendance. View full text of the flyer produced for the Chinese community at [http://www.fuel4arts.com/files/attach/ChinseeTalk_A5.pdf](http://www.fuel4arts.com/files/attach/ChinseeTalk_A5.pdf).
The community we received the biggest response from was the Russian, closely followed by the Chinese, Indian and then Vietnamese. Since the collection of this data, direct mail initiatives have been undertaken, with a strongest response from the Chinese community.

**Media relations**
Through the dissemination of media releases, pamphlet inserts, paid advertisements and making Melbourne Symphony musicians and guest artists available for interview, several strong links have been forged with a range of ethnic media outlets, in press and radio.

A key to the success of this has been the input of the Multicultural Advisory Group, who have been most helpful by supplying information specific to each community. Useful counsel has been given in regard to community activities, significant event calendars, community leaders and other appropriate contacts and timelines for information delivery.

These are key aspects to ensuring that our efforts to get media attention are not wasted.

**Open rehearsals**
The opportunity to attend Open Rehearsals (there are a maximum of five per year available) has been strongly embraced by the Russian community, and this incentive has provided us with great in-roads for the promotion of other concerts and Melbourne Symphony activities. We have also had some success with inviting schools with high numbers of students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

**Community performance**
With main season performances almost every weekend, it is sometimes difficult to have Melbourne Symphony musicians available for non-rostered performances. However, wherever possible, small groups of players have been made available, and performances have been given at the Lygon St Festa, the Buddha’s Light Multicultural Festival, and for the Melbourne Symphony the Jewish Museum of Australia organised ‘A Russian Recital’.

These performances are fantastic opportunities for the Melbourne Symphony to show-off the playing diversity of the Orchestra and its members, and to further demonstrate the accessibility of the Orchestra.
Collaboration with the Education and Community Outreach Program

Of the four targeted communities, the one we have had the least success with is the Vietnamese community.

There was not a single return of the Cultural Audience Development pamphlet, despite the fact that this brochure had the greatest, and geographically widest, distribution. Interestingly, the testing process for this pamphlet had brought in a positive response from Multicultural Advisory Group members and individual contacts from the Vietnamese community. The language was said to be appropriate and the design was favoured.

An outcome of this has been a shifting of focus from adult groups to school levels. It is generally accepted that classical music audiences are composed of people who were given exposure to classical music at a young age, via education systems.

These people may not attend through their 20s and early 30s, but will likely resume an interest in their late 30s and 40s. Our feedback from the Vietnamese community indicated that the refugee experience of many of Melbourne’s migrant Vietnamese had minimised access to western classical music education. With this in mind, the Melbourne Symphony has invited schools with high numbers of students with Vietnamese backgrounds to Open Rehearsals, and Melbourne Symphony musicians have travelled to primary schools where they have given performances to class groups.

This year, an initiative of the Multicultural Audience Development Project will see the full Orchestra perform three Education concerts over one day at a secondary school in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Primary schools in the area have been invited, and recently the Melbourne Symphony has secured the services of musician-turned-comedian Hung Le as presenter of these Education concerts.

Outcomes

Among the four selected communities, the most improved audience development figures are from the Chinese community. A project that grew out of the high response to the Chinese Cultural Audience Development pamphlet was the organisation of Pre-Concert Talks, given in Cantonese and Mandarin, which provide information regarding concert repertoire, artists and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra to Chinese speakers.

Attending the talk is free with a ticket to the concert, and we have been pleased to observe that audience size doubled between the first and the second talk, despite the fact that the first talk offered a two-for-one ticket deal, whereas the second did not.

The Multicultural Audience Development Project at the Melbourne Symphony will cease in December 2003. Verifiable indicators have demonstrated that the Project’s efforts are being recognised in many of the communities nominated for targeting. In some cases that recognition has been pleasingly favourable and with others it has been suggestive of more effective approaches.
The final six months of this project will assess the ways and means by which the Melbourne Symphony will continue to support multicultural audience development in the longer term, without the resources afforded us by the Australia Council.

Perhaps the greatest lesson that has been learned throughout the project is the imperative that any efforts the Melbourne Symphony makes toward developing a more culturally diverse audience must be incorporated into the overall marketing strategy and direction of the organisation. While this is an area worthy of specialised attention, it cannot be viewed as distinct from other marketing efforts and it needs ongoing commitment and consistency of focus.