

An apparent instability may actually guarantee a future: the World Youth Orchestra case

Descrizione

Given the substantial changes that are happening in the cultural sector in the recent years due to the unstable economic-political environment and the challenges that today's society arises, the need for cultural organizations to engage in more spontaneous and more innovative ways of managing is essential.

Taking a look at the classical music sector, in particular to youth orchestras, it is understandable how it might be difficult for many organizations to reinvent themselves and keep up to the changing environment, due to their public nature, the relevant size of the institution, the high fixed costs (offices, pay of staff, rehearsal rooms, etc) and the heavy reliance on public support. In addition, musicians are selected and booked for an entire year or season, making it possible to have a prepared (but rather fixed) repertoire to offer in case opportunities for extra concerts arise.

Opposite to these well-established youth orchestras there are smaller realities, often less known, but that are able to deliver high quality performances with fewer resources, thanks to their lighter structure and the capability to move where chances are offered.

The World Youth Orchestra represents an example of an unconventional model of youth orchestra, which seems to be able to survive to the precarious conditions in which it operates. It was founded in 2001, by the Rome-based Association MusicaEuropa. During its ten years of activities circa 600 musicians at pre-professional level, aged between 18 and 28, and representing 49 countries from the five continents, have performed with it. This orchestra represents an exception in the realm of classical music productions, as it only exists when performances are

scheduled. In other words, the orchestra is not a stable one: musicians are selected and invited to play every time there is a new concert. They gather three to four days before the premiere in the city that will host the event, or a neighboring one, in order to prepare the program. Considering the costs that arise for forming the ensemble, in order to reach economies of scale the World Youth Orchestra usually organizes tours instead of single performances. Once the touring is over everyone flies back home. So far the orchestra has performed in many European countries, but also in North Africa (Algeria and Morocco) and in the Middle East (Palestine, Jordan, Israel).

The secret formula that permits a small association such as MusicaEuropa to keep working on the World Youth Orchestra project is its flexible and easily adaptable winning model.

The association managing the project is composed just by three people on an annual basis, while extra personnel (such as an assistant to the general manager and an orchestral manager) joins the team in those periods when most of the activities are concentrated. Some of the tasks, mainly regarding communication and graphics, are outsourced as the internal staff does not have the competences to do them, or it is faster and convenient to hire a professional.

For what concerns the orchestra, being in contact with many conservatories, academies and universities worldwide, it can select the best music students. It is newly formed ad hoc for each project, thus avoiding the cost deriving from a fixed ensemble. Members can potentially change every time, according to the artistic needs: each program might require different instruments and a different number of musicians, as they are not the same for all of the music pieces composed. For instance, some music pieces include a part for *piccolo* (a small flute sounding an octave higher than the ordinary one), while others do not; or some might need two, three or more horns or trumpets, as there is a part to be played for each of them.

In addition, the World Youth Orchestra can count on a trustable network of conservatories, universities, public and private bodies, with which it has been

cooperating for ten years now. The success of most of the partnerships shows how there has been a careful selection process, aimed at identifying those organizations that could best fit with the association's soul and objectives. These organizations are highly influential in the final outcome of each project and tour, because of their knowledge of the local reality and their own connections, developed in many years of activity in their territory. Moreover, they provide human and material resources, such as music professors, instruments, rehearsal spaces, accommodation and the like. Moreover, collaborations with organizations and single professionals active in the music and education sector facilitated the delivery of good quality performances and activities.

Compared to other orchestras, the World Youth Orchestra can keep its operating costs (office rent, bills, and pays of staff) relatively low; and all other entries in the budget arise only in the moment when a tour is organized. As a consequence, the more concerts are planned, the more total cost increases; however, the more activities the orchestra has, the easier it is for it to cover its fixed costs, as they are charged to more than one project.

Considering the general financial constraints and the difficulty to get funds, the management is doing great efforts in order to keep the costs as low as possible. Working on tours, the main expenses (flights, cachet of conductor and soloists, and scholarships for musicians) are diluted among all concerts. However, most important is the search for in-kind support given by hosting organizations, partners, patrons, supporters, etc. To make an example, in some occasions the orchestra managed to stay for free in the dorms of a conservatory; it was offered a rehearsal space; or it was allowed to use those instruments, such as timpani, which are too big to bring around and are usually rent. This clearly facilitates cutting a relevant percentage of the total cost.

The innovative feature of the World Youth Orchestra derives from the unstable nature of its model, which might actually represent the future: pursuing quality and counting on an extended international network of connections, the lack of strict links to any specific location, be it a theater, a school, or a nation, renders the orchestra free to actually move wherever there are projects to implement, there are funds and logistic

support, and there is an audience to entertain. It can access opportunities without being constrained by where they are at a given moment.

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