

# Chapter 26

## Resilience of Symphony Orchestras to Challenges in the COVID–19 Era: Analyzing the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra With Porter's Five Force Model

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### ABSTRACT

*With the growing number of orchestras and competitions from other media and popular music, orchestras are experiencing higher competition. The world's current trend of art culture is unfavorable to the growth of symphony orchestras and their development of audience base, especially under the COVID-19 pandemic. This study analyzes how Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, a professional orchestra, can retain its leading status, broaden its audience base, and remain resilient to these challenges. Porter's five force model was applied to investigate its operating environment obtained from various information sources to suggest multiple strategies to gain more audiences in local and international markets. This study contributes to discernment for symphony orchestras to implement new strategies to gain resilience from the unprecedented difficulties. Scant studies focus on the marketing and operations of symphony orchestras during the COVID-19 era, especially in East Asia.*

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## INTRODUCTION

A symphony orchestra is a big group of music players who perform orchestral pieces in multiple musical instruments under the instruction of a conductor (Beranek, 2004). As symphony orchestras encounter various unprecedented challenges under the COVID-19 pandemic and changing audience preferences, they should take prompt and effective measures to ensure their present and future development are sustainable and resilient to uncertainty (Bibu et al., 2018; Tengblad & Oudhuis, 2018). In particular, Tengblad & Oudhuis (2018, p.8) highlighted three objectives for achieving resilience in organizations, and the rest of this chapter labels issues related to these objectives with *R1*, *R2*, and *R3*, respectively, for clearer and simplified presentation:

- (R1) developing long-term competence,
- (R2) being efficient, reliable, flexible, and
- (R3) managing challenges and exploiting opportunities

The Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra (HKPhil) was selected as the case of this study as it is a flagship orchestra of the city and one of the most successful in East Asia (Kita 2017; Chang 2017). First established in 1947, HKPhil (2018) aims at inspiring audiences with the finest music-making. Being subsidized by the Hong Kong government, the Swire Group, and many sizable international companies (HKPhil, 2021), HKPhil has become the best orchestra in Hong Kong. HKPhil is also perceived as one of Asia's most classical orchestras. Singaporean classical music commentator Dr. Chang (2017) reviewed that HKPhil was a class act. Hiroyoshi Kita (2017), the Osaka Symphony Hall general manager, also commented that performances delivered by HKPhil were at the highest level worldwide. In 2019, HKPhil became the first orchestra registered in Asia to be granted the reputable Gramophone Orchestra of the Year Award (HKPhil, 2020). HKPhil's long history and reputation have laid a solid foundation for *R1*.

HKPhil presents more than 150 concerts per season, including mainstage concerts, education activities, and city tours. To maintain audience loyalty, HKPhil has also established a membership scheme, the Bravo Club, which allows members to enjoy exclusive privileges like price reduction on tickets, prioritized booking, and telephone hotlines (HKPhil, 2018). HKPhil facilitates audiences by cooperating with multiple websites to sell their tickets, such as URBITIX, KLOOK, and POPTICKET (Li et al., 2022). HKPhil's well-established value chain has laid a solid foundation for *R2* (Cheung et al., 2021).

A big challenge faced by symphony orchestras is to adapt to modern society's needs and widen their audience base in the changing environment. In the past, music appreciation was one way, without much communication between performers and audiences (Kawase, 2014). Today, the audience experiences an overpass connecting audiences and performers in stage shows (Chan, 2019). However classic or fabulous an orchestra is, it has to interact more with the audiences in the recent decades in resilience to widen its audience base (Pitts & Spencer, 2008). Further, the change in art culture and the challenges of the Internet and social media have led to uncertain operating leadership for the orchestra to keep its prestigious status in the industry across the region.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a massive lockdown of performance venues, cancellation of many concerts and outreach activities, and international exchanges were extremely difficult (Yu, Lam, & Chiu, 2022; Huang et al., 2021; 2022; Wang et al., 2022). Yet, increasing online performances and social media recordings provide more choices for audiences and contribute to the preservation of musical culture (Mak et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2022). To face these challenges and opportunities (*R3*), this study examines the literature, international music journals, newspaper articles, online information, and first-hand observation to investigate the current situation of HKPhil under the

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