

Chapter 21

Orquestra Filarmônica de Minas Gerais: An Artistic Business Model Which Enlightens Business Complexities, Challenges, and Affirmation

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ABSTRACT

The lights gradually dim. Like an army of warriors dressed in black and white, one hundred musicians enter the stage under the applause of the public. They take their positions awaiting the entrance of the concertmaster, who solemnly advance to the first chair acknowledging, one more time, the applause. A sound from the Principal Oboist is heard, followed by the other musicians, looking for a common understanding, each one searching to meet the proposed “A.” Then, all stay quiet. With a determined and resolute pace, the Maestro enters the stage moving to the podium, warmly greeted by an expecting audience. The Symphony is about to start. Could it be that this moment, though, is much more than an experience of bringing to life a musical work from the past? Could this also be the utmost symbol of an ideal demonstration of society’s quest for organization, functionality and purpose?

INTRODUCTION

Can a symphony orchestra be valuable as a viable contemporary example of business models that can be applied to areas outside the scope of artistic endeavors?

Not many people associate the existence and function of symphony orchestras in plural societies as a sign of economic health and wealth of the communities they serve. They are often perceived as living dinosaurs insisting in justifying their existence in a world that, more and more, distances itself of all sorts of consumption of that which is regarded as “high culture”. Their product seems to be unappealing to most people, particularly the younger generations, who are brought up without any exposure to their

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message, much less their institutional relevance. Nonetheless they persist, some of them even thrive, while others, depending on their ways of sustainability, perish.

From their first signs of life in seventeenth-century Europe, orchestras (and music creation in general) were always supported by a group of few interested people that not only appreciated music as an art form, but also responded to society's quest for "emancipation" through knowledge, cultural absorption and the exploration of artistic and spiritual matters. These patrons were, for the most part, aristocrats who commissioned works and maintained, in some cases, symphony orchestras in their communities, with the intent of making their realms more progressive and representative of the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment. To have an orchestra in their midst was a sign of prosperity and development. It was during this era, particularly in countries where the aristocracy was truly knowledgeable and relatively broad-minded, that music and orchestras flourished.

Although there were examples of occasional use of instrumental groups in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-centuries, perhaps the first organized ensemble with the goal of performing regularly in its community was the orchestra of Mannheim, formed mainly by composers and accomplished instrumentalists. They became responsible for establishing a concept of what a "symphony orchestra" should be, but also demonstrated, thanks to the talent and singular virtuosity of its members, the potential of what that sort of ensemble could accomplish. Its influence was felt immediately in other centers in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as other courts, like in Berlin, Vienna and other smaller cities, followed its example, and eventually surpassed its dominance.

Throughout the nineteenth-century, and with the increasing participation of the state in supporting symphonic and especially operatic activities, orchestras became more established and fully professional. Their presence and existence were now seen not only as a sign of prosperity and local status, but as an extension of a general will for reflecting the Romantic ideal that Art was able to transform people and had a profound effect in the advancement of the mind and spirit of those they served. The dynamics of this relationship between creators, performers, supporters and society, led to an era of great artistic and institutional progress around Europe. Many orchestras were created and flourished. Almost all of them state supported.

With the Industrial Revolution a new middle class was formed, eager to partake of the "advantages" of nobility and with the economic means for it. Composers and Musical Societies started to promote regular series of concerts, making the access to classical music relatively more democratic. The figure of the virtuoso soloist helped even more the advancement and consolidation of the concert experience as a well-accepted form of cultural fruition and entertainment. Figure like Paganini, Liszt, Chopin, became international celebrities, adding to the cult of respected composers, such as Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann and many others.

At the end of the nineteenth-century, as the New World develops and starts to participate in a more "global" economy, sharing material and spiritual goods and emulating the cultural norms of the day, countries in the Americas imported the concept of symphony orchestras, but not necessarily their models of sustainability. While in Latin-America orchestras were established directly mirroring their European counterparts in terms of state funding, orchestras in the United States relied exclusively on patronage.

The first American orchestras, like those of New York and Boston, started as community projects and not as a matter of public policy. Their source of funding was not government, but wealthy patrons or philharmonic societies, whose members were amateur musicians or dedicated music lovers. As orchestras developed around the country, that model became the norm, creating a direct bonding between institution and community. The lack of dependence on government funding proved to be less of a challenge

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