



Case Study 5

CHELTENHAM SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Concerts for Charity and Growing Audiences

What we do

Cheltenham Symphony Orchestra gives at least six concerts a year, generally two in Cheltenham, the rest in towns further afield. Out of the six, we try to strike a deal with a couple of charities whereby they commit a certain sum of money in advance towards our costs and then retain any profits. This formula has worked successfully on many occasions, the highlight being a profit to one charity of over £3000. A profit of over £1000 is not uncommon.

What they do

The charities have to work hard to achieve such financial success, by actively promoting the event among their supporters. Clearly they must have the confidence and the organisation to do this; after all what they are doing is pledging money already received from their supporters in the hope of making more. This need not be a risk if they know what they are doing (or can take our advice graciously!) It generally seems to depend on there being at least one of their committee members taking charge of the promotional and financial side.

Our prior position is that we have our own core audience of a certain size which is reflected in the sum pledged by the charity. Any ticket receipts above that pledged sum are assumed to have come from their efforts rather than ours. Over the years we have developed a good relationship with a few charities but it has to be said that they are fewer in number now.

Keeping the scheme going

We approach a charity at no less than two-year intervals. In the interim their circumstances and priorities may have changed; there may have been changes on their committees, depriving them of a key member in the organisation of concerts, with whom we may have developed a working relationship. So I'm afraid that the search for charity partners is a continuous one. Having said that, in fairness to ourselves I must add that we are not financially dependent on these deals with charities. Our financial affairs are in good shape, thanks to players' subscriptions, supporters' donations and some sponsorship. And our treasurer ensures that we live within our means – choice of music, venues and soloists can greatly affect our expenditure. So it would not be a disaster if a year went by without a concert for charity.

Other benefits

But there is another side to this. Giving concerts for charity is good for our image locally (important in this age of dwindling outside sources of finance). We believe that potential sponsors are impressed by the way that these concerts try to reach out to a wider community (one of the aims expressed in Making Music's five-year plan). A very generous recent payment was described by the donor as part of their Community Partnership programme, evidently recognising our work in this area. In addition, last but not least, such concerts are always good social occasions for the charities.

Finally, as part of our Tender Loving Care initiative, we send copies of our twice-yearly newsletter and concert publicity to all the charities/sponsors/donors that have helped us previously, keeping them informed of our activities and, we hope, that bit more sympathetic towards us when we ask them for help. We also make good use of our website (www.cheltenham-symphony-orchestra.info) to spread our message.

How we work with smaller charities

What I have described above works well with larger charities or with charities with which we have built up a good relationship over time. But there are of course others. Last year we began to run a scheme whereby a number of small local charities each take a block of tickets for a concert of their choice. They sell them at our usual price of £12, keep £10 and pay us £2. There is no prior commitment such as was described above. The more tickets they sell, the more profit accrues to them. There is little profit to us, but then those extra audience members would probably not otherwise have come to the concert (and we hope that after that first experience they will come again!)

Another strand in our search for larger audiences is the emphasis we place on performing with children and young people. For the past five years we have invited a junior school choir to perform with us at Christmas; we give a concerto opportunity to the county Young Musician each year; and we have just, for the fifth year in a row, booked a soloist from among the winners of Making Music's Awards for Young Concert Artists (AYCA) scheme. All these initiatives serve to bridge the gap between generations and to foster an interest in playing an instrument: there has been a measurable and sustained increase in interest in the school mainly involved.

None of the above is rocket science. Growing one's audience is not achieved by one new initiative alone. It takes several – and it takes time. But looking out at our audiences (and at the risk of sounding smug) I would say that we are making progress.

Comments and further ideas from other groups would be very welcome

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