

An Observation on Selected Malaysian Western Art Music Organisations' Audience Development Efforts During Pre- and Post-COVID Era

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Abstract

Faced with financial constraints and sustainability concerns, many organisations implemented adaptive measures following the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the suspension of live concerts. As live Western art music in Malaysia regains momentum, organisations are building new audience bases and re-engaging prior audiences through creative strategies. Such strategies, namely alternative programming, personnel changes, and expanded artistic horizons, reflect a shift towards aligning with post-pandemic audience interests. This study examined the audience development efforts of four Malaysian Western art music organisations before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Using an observational approach, data were collected from publicly available online resources. The findings indicate that alternative programming, personnel changes, and expanded artistic horizons played a crucial role in aligning organisational practices with post-pandemic audience interests.

Keywords: audience development, classical music, COVID-19, Malaysia, western art music organization

Introduction

Audience development has been a prominent topic within the cultural management sector since the 1990s. According to The Audience Agency, audience development is defined as an approach to “extend the range and nature of relationships with the public”, assisting organisations to “achieve their creative ambitions” while remaining “financially sustainable” (Torregiani, 2020).

Audience development efforts have been prioritised in cultural activities and can be observed in initiatives such as the European Commission-funded ADESTEⁱ project. The project aimed to implement a pilot training course for audience developers in the United Kingdom, Denmark, Poland, Italy, and Spain in 2013 (Cuenca-Amigo & Makua, 2017). Germany, on the other hand, pursued similar efforts through more localised approaches during the same period. These initiatives were shaped by shifting demographics resulting from regional political conflicts, as well as increasing pressure on public spending due to national debt (Mandel, 2012).

Malaysia presents a distinct context in Asia owing to its unique market conditions and aesthetic perceptions. According to the Department of Culture and Arts of Malaysia (Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara, 2023), the country has a total of 464 registered performing arts organisationsⁱⁱ. By comparison, Singapore reported 5,374 such organisationsⁱⁱⁱ in 2022 (National Arts Council of Singapore, 2023). Even without isolating Western art music organisations from these statistics, the contrast highlights a significant disparity in cultural supply and demand between the two neighbouring countries.

Zhang and Li (2021) observed that Malaysian audiences receive limited music and arts education in public schools and often display a strong preference for popular music genres. As a result, Western art music organisations in Malaysia frequently adopt engagement strategies tailored to local market conditions. Two examples are presented below to illustrate this observation.

The Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) is one of two salaried professional orchestras in the Klang Valley (Chong, 2022). A review of its 2017–2018 season shows that the MPO programmed 22 Western art music concerts, alongside collaboration concerts with Cirque de la Symphonie and the Ballet of Armenia, Family Fun Day concerts, as well as other recitals and performances (MPO, 2017). For several years, the orchestra sustained this programming model, presenting high-quality concerts while demonstrating adaptability through cross-genre collaborations, popular repertoire adaptations, and accessible events for families and differently abled audiences.

The other salaried professional orchestra, the state-owned National Symphony Orchestra (NSO), presented one orchestral concert in November 2018 in celebration of its 25th anniversary (Istana Budaya, 2018). Its concerts are often priced at RM30, allowing greater accessibility for audiences from lower-income backgrounds (Syahirah, 2023).

Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations and performance venues faced significant challenges in adapting to evolving restrictions. The Malaysian government enforced inconsistently disruptive but inevitable lockdown policies to ensure that “essential” industries were gradually allowed to resume operations, while “non-essential” industries remained subject to restrictions due to the risk of social or mass gatherings (Yeoh, 2021). Owing to these restrictions, 93% of musicians in Malaysia were negatively impacted by COVID-19 lockdown measures, according to a May 2020 report by the Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA) (Lee & Lee, 2022).

This situation revealed a “tragedy of the commons” scenario, in which freelance artists and musicians who relied on live activities as their primary source of income were left particularly vulnerable, as few platforms offered alternative solutions to address prolonged suspensions with no clear end in sight. As a result, there was an upsurge in advocacy among arts practitioners and organisations, calling

for sustainable changes to support freelance artists during future crises (Lim, 2020; Sedon et al., 2021).

Following the imposition of restrictions, many Western art music organisations in Malaysia adopted alternative strategies to maintain productivity among their members and to remain connected with their audiences. Observed examples include weekly broadcasts by the Jesselton Philharmonic Orchestra in Kota Kinabalu (Lee & Lee, 2022), the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's "MPO Plays On" series launched on its YouTube channel (Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, 2020), and the Malaysian Brass Outreach Project's "Guest Series", which introduced the Malaysian public to orchestral instruments through videos featuring local teachers and artists (Malaysian Brass Outreach Project, 2020).

Live Western art music events gradually regained momentum in 2021 following the easing of lockdown restrictions. The Western art music organisations discussed above can be observed building new audience bases and re-engaging prior audiences through alternative strategies, including new concert series and the restructuring of organisational business models (Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, 2024b).

Within academic discourse, discussions that specifically address audience strategies in the Malaysian cultural landscape, particularly those focused on Western art music, remain limited. This study seeks to address this gap by comparing strategies employed by selected Western art music organisations before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, a period described by Sedon et al. (2021) as having profound effects on audience behaviours, preferences, and engagement practices. The analysis focuses on three key aspects: alternative programming, personnel changes, and expanded artistic horizons. By examining these dimensions, the study aims to provide insights into evolving audience development strategies within Malaysia's Western art music landscape, offering perspectives that may assist other arts organisations in navigating audience engagement challenges.

Methodology

Data Collection

For this cross-sectional observational study, data were gathered from publicly accessible online sources, including official websites, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, and digital marketing materials of selected Malaysian Western art music organisations. These platforms offer valuable real-time insights into organisational strategies and audience engagement (Bakhshi & Throsby, 2012; Chan & Coetzee, 2019), while ensuring that no privacy violations occur.

The study examined two distinct periods: January to December 2019 for the pre-COVID period and January 2023 to August 2024 for the post-COVID period. These timeframes were selected based on several established considerations (COVID-19 [SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus] Resources, n.d.; Koivumäki, 2023; Malaysian Ministry of Health, 2024):

- i. Malaysia recorded its first four official COVID-19 cases on 25 January 2020.

- ii. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, affecting 114 countries, as reported by the American Society for Microbiology.
- iii. Although most businesses resumed operations by 2022, the World Health Organization announced that the Omicron variant surpassed the Delta variant on 11 January 2022, followed by a spike in active COVID-19 cases in Malaysia.
- iv. As described by Koivumäki (2023), an orchestra's concert season typically runs from late summer, usually between September and October, to the following spring, typically between May and June, with a summer break between seasons.
- v. This research was initially conceptualised in September 2024, and August represented the most recent complete month available for inclusion in the study period.

A purposive sampling approach was employed to select organisations with a strong online presence and active engagement within the Malaysian Western art music sector, ensuring relevance to audience development efforts. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) the organisation regularly presents performances that include works by Western art music composers; and (b) the organisation is either a salaried professional orchestra that performs regularly or an ensemble primarily composed of professional musicians with experience in salaried orchestras.

Based on these criteria, the following Western art music organisations were selected for the study: the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO), the National Symphony Orchestra of Malaysia (NSO), Kuala Lumpur City Opera (KLCO), and the Philharmonic Winds of Malaysia (PWM).

The study systematically documented information from posts and materials related to alternative programming, personnel changes, and expanded artistic horizons within each time frame. To ensure consistency and accuracy, a data logging sheet was used to record key details, including dates, event titles, concert venues, concert types, ticket prices, and observed themes (Groves et al., 2009).

Data Analysis Framework

The data were analysed using a coding framework structured around three key themes:

- i. Alternative Programming: Shifts in concert programming and the introduction of new formats in response to audience preferences and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic were examined.
- ii. Personnel Changes: Changes in artistic leadership, ensemble structure, or staffing that influenced audience development strategies before and after the pandemic were identified.
- iii. Expanded Artistic Horizons: The ways in which organisations diversified their artistic and outreach initiatives to engage broader audiences were explored. This included examining how concert programming and outreach

strategies aligned with each organisation's artistic vision and mission, with particular attention to shifts in emphasis between the pre- and post-COVID periods.

Findings

Programming

In terms of programming, it was observed that there was a decrease in the overall number of concerts presented per year by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO). In its 2019 season, the MPO presented a total of 36 concerts, along with 17 additional concerts affiliated with orchestra members, resulting in a total of 53 concerts. By comparison, the orchestra presented 29 concerts in the 2023 season and only 13 concerts up to June 2024 (MPO, 2023, 2024a).

Kuala Lumpur City Opera, on the other hand, presented two major operas in the pre-COVID period, Verdi's *La Traviata* and Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. In the post-COVID period, however, a notable increase in the number of showcases and performances was observed. This resulted in a total of six performances during the post-COVID period, along with two scheduled events, the *La Bohemia Festival* in September 2024 and a full production of Puccini's *La bohème* in October 2024 (KLCO, 2024).

The number of concerts presented by the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) and the Philharmonic Winds of Malaysia (PWM) showed no significant difference between the pre- and post-COVID periods. The NSO presented five public concerts in 2019^{iv} under its *Lambang Sari Series* (LSS)^v, while the PWM presented an average of two concerts per year. However, differences were observed in the nature of programming when compared with pre-COVID practices. These observations are discussed further in the section on artistic horizons.

Personnel Changes

In the MPO's recent *Harry Potter* concert (2024b), it was observed that the orchestra comprised 39 salaried members, of whom 19 were Malaysians (48.71%). The same concert also engaged 41 substitute musicians, 23 of whom were Malaysians (56.1%). This represents a substantial increase in Malaysian representation compared with the 2019 roster, which included only seven Malaysian musicians out of a total of 66 members (MPO, 2018). The orchestra has historically faced public criticism for the underrepresentation of Malaysian musicians (Rastam, 2021; Soo, 2021).

Compared with its 2019 concerts, which featured only six cellists within the section, the NSO's 2024 concert engaged a total of 76 salaried and guest musicians. This marks a notable increase in ensemble size relative to previous performances (NSO, n.d., 2024).

Kuala Lumpur City Opera conducts annual auditions for chorus and soloist positions (KLCO, 2018). Following the departure of Colombian conductor Juan Montoya in 2022, after eight years as music director (Montoya, 2022), KLCO engaged a succession of conductors, including Yap Ling, Lien Boon Hua, and

currently Dr Bernard Tan (KLCO, n.d.). In the pre-COVID period, the opera orchestra typically featured an ensemble of 4-4-3-2-1^{vi} for strings, 1-1-2-1^{vii} for winds, 2 trumpets, 2 horns, 2 percussionists, and 1 keyboard, amounting to approximately 26 players. By contrast, the orchestral showcase in August 2024 involved 37 musicians, representing an increase of 29.7% in ensemble size (KLCO Orchestra, 2024).

Artistic Horizons

Before the pandemic, the National Symphony Orchestra primarily presented classical music in conventional orchestral settings and maintained a limited social media presence. Its first Instagram post appeared on 26 September 2019, followed by the launch of its Facebook page three days later (NSO Malaysia, n.d.). During and after the COVID-19 period, these platforms were used more actively to promote public concerts, open rehearsals, and festive programming, contributing to the development of a stronger online presence (NSO, n.d.).

Following the temporary closure of its resident venue in 2023 (Chua, 2023), the NSO expanded its artistic direction by presenting a broader range of concerts. This included collaborations with the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in opera productions, as well as performances featuring local and international soloists such as violinist Domenico Nordio, pianist Muzaffar Abdullah, and saxophonist Scarlet Gouk (NSO, n.d.).

Kuala Lumpur City Opera's mission emphasises "promoting Western opera music ... through stage performances and concerts" while also "developing emerging talents" (KLCO Website). As noted earlier, the organisation presented an orchestral showcase in August 2024 following an open call for aspiring musicians earlier in the year. While similar initiatives had been undertaken previously through the establishment of its orchestra academy in 2022, the continuation of this initiative in the post-COVID period reflects a broadening of KLCO's artistic scope. This expansion enables larger orchestral forces in opera productions, encourages community participation, and aligns organisational activities with stated mission objectives.

The Philharmonic Winds of Malaysia adopted a comparable approach by establishing a youth division, Philharmonic Winds Youth Malaysia, in which young musicians receive training from PWM members. The youth ensemble presented a concert in December 2023 (PWM, 2023b). PWM also broadened its artistic collaborations, including a Valentine's concert in 2023 featuring jazz pianist Michael Veerapan, following an earlier Celtic-themed collaboration with the Royal Malaysian Police Band.^{viii} In addition, the organisation actively promoted Malaysian composers such as Yeo Chow Shern and Issac Chia by commissioning new works and arrangements for performance (PWM, 2023a).

Conclusion

This study examined the audience development efforts of selected Western art music organisations in Malaysia before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on three key areas: alternative programming, personnel changes, and expanded artistic horizons. The findings indicate that these organisations have responded to post-pandemic challenges by adapting their programming strategies, reassessing organisational structures, and broadening their artistic and outreach initiatives in order to align more closely with evolving audience interests. Malaysian Western art music organisations are evolving and adopting initiatives such as interdisciplinary collaborations, performances beyond resident venues, accessible ticket pricing, and social media-driven audience development. These efforts, seen in projects such as KLCO's *Opera for Kids* and PWM's youth division, reflect a shift from traditional marketing towards fostering deeper connections with audiences.

Interviews with these organisations could reveal valuable insights into their motivations and challenges, while metrics such as demographic growth and participation from underrepresented groups could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches. Further exploration of the relationship between public policies and funding could also illuminate the evolving dynamics between these organisations and their audiences.

The pandemic has not only tested the resilience of these organisations but has also unlocked new opportunities for reinvention in audience development. By leveraging their unique strengths and adopting innovative initiatives through alternative programming, personnel changes, and expanded artistic horizons, a key question emerges regarding the sustainability of these initiatives: are they a post-pandemic passing trend, or will they become a permanent part of the landscape?

Notes

ⁱ Short for *Audience Development Strategies for Cultural Organisations in Europe*.

ⁱⁱ It is not clarified in the data whether the statistics include only for-profit and non-profit companies or also societies.

ⁱⁱⁱ This number includes 4,830 for-profit and non-profit companies and 544 societies registered with the Registry of Societies in Singapore.

^{iv} The poster for *Festive Season with the NSO*, a concert organised in December 2019, was labelled as the fifth concert of the National Symphony Orchestra's *Lambang Sari Series*. This indicates that there were at least four other concerts organised prior to this.

^v A series of concerts by the NSO featuring classical music, which began in the black box theatre space at Istana Budaya, named *Lambang Sari*.

^{vi} The sequence of numbers represents the number of players engaged for the first violin, second violin, viola, cello, and double bass sections.

^{vii} Similar to the above, but this set represents the number of players engaged to perform the flute, oboe, clarinet(s), and bassoon in the woodwind section.

^{viii} Although the Celtic-themed concert took place in April 2022, which falls outside the defined post-COVID period of this study, it is important to highlight it as it demonstrates PWM's trajectory leading into this period.

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Biography

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Alwin Ru Kiet Wong is a flautist, music educator, and licensed counsellor based in Kuala Lumpur. He teaches flute and serves as a part-time lecturer at several institutions, and has performed with various ensembles in Malaysia. He has also conducted workshops on managing music performance anxiety and delivered mental health talks as part of employee assistance programmes for various organisations. His research interests include the use of music as a therapeutic tool, with a current focus on music reminiscence therapy and its effects on individuals with dementia. He is currently collaborating with psychiatrists, psychologists, and musicians on related projects.