

MAIDSTONE ORCHESTRAL SOCIETY (MOS)

A VIEW FROM OUTSIDE IN

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Introduction

I visited the Maidstone Orchestral Society (MOS) inspired by impressive audience attendance figures. I had received them via word of mouth and by the Making Music South East Survey 2006. I must declare at the outset a little partiality with the orchestra. My late father was a member of it during 1930's, and one of the conductors is well known to me via my parents. The editor of a 44 page booklet: "Maidstone Symphony Orchestra: Past, Present and Future" (Janet Ash: Maidstone Orchestral Society 2003), is the sister of a neighbour.

As Training and Development Officer South East for Making Music, one of my briefs is supporting music societies and disseminating information on good practice. Being outside MOS makes it easier for me to blow the trumpet for them when it comes to publicising success.

It is my hope that other music societies may pick up on a few of the practices that MOS has, whether or not they are an orchestra. My view from the outside in, allows me, I hope, to be reasonably objective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Steve Migden and Janet Ash, as chairman and past chairman respectively of MOS, for kindly giving me their time to be interviewed for this paper, and also for being so open in our discussions.

Inside Operations

General

- Maidstone Orchestral Society (MOS) is the umbrella organisation which organises five Maidstone Symphony Orchestra (MSO) concerts per season
- MSO sees itself as a "community" orchestra, not an "amateur" orchestra
- There are two types of Members of MOS: subscribing members (who are the season ticket holders) and playing members (of MSO)

Season tickets

- 2006 -7 was the society's 96th season.
- There are around 550 season ticket holders (subscribing members)
- Season ticket holders get 5 concerts for the price of 4
- New season ticket holders are offered half price tickets (i.e. 5 concerts for the price of 2) to encourage them to join
- The Gift Aid scheme forms are offered to subscribers
- Subscribing Members feel they belong to a club, e.g. because they are invited to an open rehearsal of MSO after the AGM, followed by a party; they have personal contact with the Membership Secretary; the Conductor gives a brief "chat" to the audience prior to each concert

Friends of the Society

- Season ticket holders are invited to also become Friends of MOS
- An annual subscription as a Friend of MOS is a minimum of £12.50 per seat in addition to the season ticket price.
- The price of the Friends' season ticket is frozen for four years.
- Friends of the orchestra are invited to meet the players in the concert interval
- Friends have a separate Committee of 5 Trustees, which include the Chairman and Treasurer of MOS

The Programme

- Getting the right soloist to attract the audience is seen as a priority starting point for the programme planning.
- Soloist is usually a rising star young musician or a recognised name.
- For 2007-8 season, firm booking arrangements for soloists began in October 2006
- The professional conductor is also the Music Director and he chooses the programmes bearing in mind the wishes of the orchestra and Committee, any composer anniversaries, the educational requirement in the Society's Constitution, and the need to avoid any repetition of works within at least 7 years.

Management: The Committee

N.B. The Committee does not get involved with the day-to-day running of the orchestra

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- **The Chairman** is always a playing member of MSO
 - **The secretary** and the **membership secretary** are different posts and are always non-playing members
 - **Committee** comprises at least 12 members: Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Membership Secretary, Chairman of the Friends of MOS, plus
 - Three from the 'member' audience
 - Three orchestra membersIn addition, there may be 3 ex-officio Committee members, including the Vice Presidents and Music Director/Conductor
 - **Publicity officer** is not a playing member: press activities are outside the players remit
 - **The Music Director/Conductor** has choice of music but liaises anecdotally and makes his proposal to the committee
 - With five concerts per year the conductor's first priority is to organise the soloist and the work to be performed.
 - **The annual season brochure** includes artwork by the artist who attends rehearsals (Emma Abnett) and this enables the orchestra to have an artistic outreach element.
 - **A MOS newsletter** is included in every concert programme.

The players/Orchestral organisation

- Only 50% of the players live in Maidstone.
- There are no auditions: players are self-selecting
- Wind players are found by recommendation via the professional circuit (but are all voluntary players)
- School-aged students of grade 8 standard (such as those found in the Kent County Youth Orchestra) are encouraged to become playing members of MSO as part of the learning process for a minimal subscription of £25 per annum.
- Adult playing members pay a subscription of £50 p.a. (Gift Aid brings this up to £60)
- The conductor's special connections are very valuable
- The Orchestral Secretary, Concert Manager, Librarian, and the person who books the soloists are likely to be members of the orchestra, but are not on the MOS Committee (they may be invited to attend any meetings)

Potted History

Please refer to 'Past, Present and future' edited by Janet Ash for further details. This is available for £3 including postage and can be obtained by sending a "Feedback" message on the MOS website at www.mso.org.uk. The Maidstone Orchestral Society at one time promoted two professional concerts per year by the London Mozart Players and three for the Maidstone Symphony Orchestra. When the grant for the professional orchestra ceased the society could no longer afford to promote the two 'professional' concerts. The ticket sales alone do not cover the cost of the concerts then or now. The

mailing list and Friends scheme was carried forward from the time when the MOS was promoting the two types of concert.

Special aspects

- The conductor's dedication and continuity is seen as a huge asset
- The loyalty of the voluntary players, whether they are normally a professional player, semi-professional player or amateur (in the sense of not a paid player in their outside working life) is also seen as a really big attribute to the orchestra's success.
- A Sunday rehearsal of four and half hours duration one week before the concert is an integral part of the rehearsal schedules for each concert, with any professional paid extra players essentially involved.
- There is one sectional rehearsal per concert

Committee commitment/activity

- **Chairman** works on approximately two days per week and liaises with Local Councils
- **Secretary** works on 1 day per week (approx) and liaises with the publicity team
- **Treasurer** works on less than one day per week
- **Season ticket** administration occupies two weeks continuously in the summer (July) and several hours prior to and at each concert, selling single tickets. At the May concert, audiences are invited to apply for season tickets by June 30th for the following year
- **Publicity** is arranged by the publicity team with promotional articles for each concert every month in all catchment area parish magazines.
- **Critiques** are not published by the local paper (Kent Messenger) but they will publicise forthcoming concerts.
- **Further publicity** is on the web site at www.mso.org.uk

The Audience

- 90% of the audience come via word of mouth
- There is a network of about 1,000 on the mailing list, 50% age 65 and over
- There is no annual children's concert
- The current operations seem to work well

Money

- 'Solvency' years tend to come round in about four-year cycles. A big budget project may have to be recouped over the next few years
- Private donors have assisted at the time when grants were lost
- Although there is pride in running a successful organisation, don't take things for granted.

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- Don't be complacent, and continue to remind local (County) councillors that the Maidstone Orchestral Society is a local premier orchestra.
 - Though there is no Service Level Agreement (SLA) as it is not needed by the County Council there is an annual grant £3,500, agreed for 3 years at a time, which is renewable
 - In addition, the society has enjoyed a bonus of some £1650 per year over the past 2 years by way of "free lets" of the concert hall for its designated civic concerts
 - The Chairman expressed his disappointment to Kent County Council for their less than adequate recognition and inclusion of music making and listening in their publication "Vision for Kent". The current concert hall is a dual purpose sports hall/ concert venue.

Outside View

A little qualification

In working across the South East of England I am able to see the very wide variety of ways that Making Music member groups function. Every one is different.

I hope some groups, whatever the differences, will find they would like to develop some of the practices mentioned here, and pick them up for their own use.

Reasons for choosing Maidstone Orchestral Society as a case study

- A member group orchestra which regularly has audiences of 700 to 850 attracts the arts manager's eye as one worthy of studying to see how this is achieved. When the repertoire includes music which is not always the most popular there is an even bigger incentive to take a closer look.
- Member groups often say that they can't get people to work on the committee and that performing members just want to perform, not manage the society. Maidstone Orchestral Society has a very dedicated committee, a large proportion of which are not performing members of the orchestra. There may be a strong connection between this and the orchestra's success.
- The mailing list of about 1,000 is a large number compared to most Making Music volunteer-managed member groups. The number of season ticket holders of over 500, is similarly unusual. To know how this is managed and achieved is information worth airing to a wide public.

Questions & Answers

- **Question:** Having previously administered and promoted both professional, (London Mozart Players), and 'amateur' concerts together, did this give the society a head start with regard to status and the size of its mailing list?
- **Answer:** It probably helped but it doesn't mean that other organisations have to promote professionals too. BUT it may well indicate that there is a big advantage

in societies promoting not just their own activities. Getting together for joint marketing, with its potential to create a more predictable income would seem to be a good idea.

- **Question:** Are the MOS circumstances unique and not able to be created elsewhere?
- **Answer:** Categorically – NO

- **Question:** Is the fact that a large part of the committee is not made of playing members of the orchestra an asset to the organisation.
- **Answer:** YES. There is a balance between players and non-players on the committee so the outsiders do get the inside view. It is possible that some members of the committee have an extra dedication to the work as they may have the time 'free' that the players don't have while they are playing!

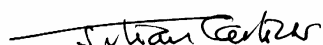
Outcomes and Summary

For member groups wishing to expand audiences and develop their management structure, the MOS model can be used to identify key areas leading to success, as follows:

- A large mailing list of 1,000 and over.
- A season ticket scheme with at least 500 season ticket holders.
- Strong professional artistic direction which is stable and loyal.
- A dedicated committee whose jobs are clearly identified and whose skills are used to the full to perform these jobs in a totally business-like manner.
- An insistence that the status of the group is kept high in the eyes of Local Government.
- A publicity team which is effective and keeps the awareness of the groups' (MSO/MOS) activities as high as possible locally, e.g. via Parish Magazines
- Artistic standards that are consistently respected.
- The committee can spend time running the group as a business, a good proportion of which can manage this because they are not performing in the group as well.

Recommendation

Joint marketing with another or several other groups is worth the effort.



Julian Carlick: Winchester June 2007