

# Case study



# Sound Investment: Making fundraising accessible



Photo credit: Investors and members of the public perform David Lang's Sound Investment commission Crowd Out for 1000 voices

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*BCMG is a registered charity based in Birmingham, formed in 1987 by players from the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Sir Simon Rattle – the Group’s Founding Patron. The Group has strong relationships with its Artists-in-Association Oliver Knussen and John Woolrich, and also with Thomas Adès.*

BCMG constantly seeks new ways of engaging more people with the most exciting artists of our time – be it through national, international or regional touring, its learning programme, specially devised Family/Schools Concerts, free Meet-the-Composer events, or a new series of Insight Events.

## **Objectives**

BCMG seeks to perform the most inspiring and forward-looking music of our time to the widest possible audience, to offer a diverse range of quality learning opportunities and to stir up interest in classical music as a living art form.

At the core of BCMG's work is the performance of new music. It is therefore essential to their achieving their aims that they raise sufficient funds to commission new work.

The Sound Investment commissioning scheme was launched in 1991 with two objectives: to raise money for the commissioning of new music and to share the thrill of bringing a new piece of music into the world with as many people as possible.

## **Target Groups**

To engage as many people as possible in the process of creating and sharing new music.

## **Process**

BCMG’s Artistic Director issues the commissioning of new pieces. These are a mixture of UK and international talent, and of young composers at the very beginning of their careers, mid-career composers and established figures. Recent Sound Investment premieres include: David Lang, Param Vir, Howard Skempton, Charlotte Bray, David Sawer, Richard Baker, Alexander Goehr, Tansy Davies, Silvina Milstein, Luke Bedford, Gerald Barry, Helen Grime, Brett Dean, Richard Causton, Simon Holt, Kevin Volans, Judith Weir, Jo Kondo, Dominic Muldowney.

The nature of pieces ranges from small-scale (John Woolrich, *The Mustering Drum*, for 4 percussionists), via a range of mixed BCMG ensembles (10-15 players), jazz collaborations (Dave Douglas, *Blue Latitudes*) to large-scale music theatre and dance pieces (Michael Wolters, *I See With My Eyes Closed*; David Sawer, *Rumpelstiltskin*); and even a piece for 1000 voices ‘shouting in the streets’ (David Lang, *Crowd Out*).

The composers currently awaiting premiere are Edmund Finnis, Helen Grime, Gerald Barry, Benedict Mason, Kevin Volans, Ivo Nilsson, Colin Matthews and Harrison Birtwistle.

This variety of genres, combined with the experimental nature of some of the commissions, means that the scheme appeals to a broad audience and that, once involved, donors remain engaged with the scheme and are more likely to make repeat donations.

All money raised goes directly towards the commissioning of new music: the commission fee is divided into Sound Units. The cost to fund a sound unit was originally set at £100 in 1991, however this was raised in 2007 to £150 – the level it sits at currently – to help bring it in line with the proportional rise in commission fees over that period. This rise brought the price to where it would be had inflation been taken into account over the intervening years.

Having a single price for the Sound Units keeps the scheme democratic and simple, allowing as many people as possible to become involved in commissioning new music. For example, they can spread the cost of their £150 donation over a number of months by direct debit.

BCMG promotes the scheme through reviews and newspaper features, BCMG concerts and their website, but discovered that word of mouth was also a powerful tool. Sound Units have proven to be popular gifts for birthdays, Christmas, weddings, birth and retirement!

Benefits for Sound Investors:

- An invitation to rehearsals and a special reception at the premiere.
- The opportunity to meet the composer.
- The chance to receive a score signed by the composer.
- Being kept up to date with the progress of the piece before and after its premiere.
- Acknowledgment in score and concert programme.

Sound Investors are kept up to date with news of their past commissions, as well as news on any current commissions they are supporting. BCMG try to keep investors informed of known forthcoming performances and recordings of their pieces, or news of the same composer where it is relevant. Sound Investors also receive regular e-newsletters with general updates on the scheme, and twice a year they receive a catalogue with news on who BCMG is currently commissioning.

Increasingly the organisation tries to engage donors via social media and with digital content, such as rehearsal videos and interviews with composers, as well as a short promotional video advertising the scheme.

## Outcomes

Sound Investment is a pioneering audience development and fundraising scheme that shares the thrill of the commissioning process, connecting audiences, composers and performers. It is a democratic fundraising and audience development model. Many Sound Investors are also audience members and know BCMG well, however the Group has also had people sign up who have come across the scheme yet are unfamiliar with BCMG's work. The idea has changed the landscape for the commissioning of new music and has been taken up by ensembles in the UK and across the world.

So far it has involved 350 individuals from all over the UK (and abroad) and raised over £300,000 for BCMG's commissioning, resulting in 73 new works (a further 8 are awaiting premiere). Gerald Barry's commission in February 2015 will be the 75<sup>th</sup> Sound Investment premiere.

Depending on the size of the piece, each commission will have between 25 and 65, usually around 35, individual donors. The vast majority (over 60%) of the 350 Sound Investors are 'serial investors' and have supported more than half of all Sound Investment commissions. One couple has already supported 74 pieces so far!

BCMG has around 100 'active' Sound Investors at any one time – these are donors who are supporting composer(s) whose pieces are still to be premiered – and many Investors return to the scheme after a break.

Investors range from teachers, a biochemist and a Shropshire smallholder to members of a local community group who clubbed together to buy a Sound Unit. Approximately 50% of Investors come from the West Midlands region, the rest from all over the UK (15% from London, 8% South West, 7% East Anglia, 6% South East) and from abroad. For example, BCMG have Sound Investors living in Aberdeenshire, Fife, Northumberland, Yorkshire, Wales, Devon, Somerset, Essex; and overseas in Switzerland, France, Germany, USA.

The Sound Investment scheme has brought many benefits including:

- The confidence to commission further ahead in the future, safe in the knowledge that there will be an audience group keen to support;
- Supports management and artists through the enthusiasm of the Sound Investors;
- The creation of a supportive environment for premieres;
- The creation of a direct link between the commissioned composer and the audience;
- The ability to build relationships and develop a wider audience;
- Increased audience numbers.

This high level of donor involvement, which they nurture one-to-one, also leads to more donations to other BCMG causes, including through higher level giving schemes.

From a fundraising point of view, Sound Investment has led to:

- Donations for recordings;
- Donations for concerts and education work;
- Legacy provision in Investor's wills;

BCMG Foundation - a giving scheme allowing individuals to support the core of BCMG's work more generally, going beyond specifically supporting commissions.

## Key points for effective practice

The main challenge was to grow the pool of Sound Investors without having the resources to advertise widely. BCMG is a small organisation, without a big fundraising budget and with only one fundraising staff responsible for individuals, charitable trusts and foundations and statutory funds. At the beginning of the scheme, it took a while for the snowball effect to happen.

Now many individuals come through word of mouth and the scheme regularly gets mentioned in national newspaper reviews. For example, in recent years Sound Investment has been in the news as the best investment in uncertain times – from the *Big Issue* to the *Telegraph* to the *Financial Times*, as well as local press such as a two-page feature in the Birmingham Post.

It is important to note that, given the creative process involved and the variety of work produced, there is no normal lead time for raising funds and commissioning work. Some commissions will be premiered very soon after they are released to the public, for example in the same calendar year or the next season; others may take many years to come to fruition - it entirely depends on the nature of the project and scale of the commission. As such, it becomes essential that, throughout the process, the Sound Investors are kept up to date with how their commission is developing. The BCMG is very good at sharing any titbits from the composer as and when they receive them.

Sound Investment is an adaptable model adapted by other ensembles from as far afield as New Zealand, The Netherlands and the United States, as well as the UK. This includes London Sinfonietta, Britten Sinfonia and New York based Bang on a Can.

BCMG has periodically carried out evaluation work with Sound Investment, both internally and externally, in order to help them take the scheme forward. This research enables them to receive feedback from their Sound Investors and find out more about what they think

about the scheme, such as whether the pricing of Sound Units is at an appropriate level and if they feel the benefits they receive by way of a thank you are sufficient.

They now regularly give advice to other arts organisations about fundraising from individuals, formally and informally, most recently to Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, Masterclass Foundation in Bristol, the British Arts Festival Association (BAFA), an Arts & Business major donor masterclass, and the Nieuw Ensemble in Amsterdam.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Through this scheme, Sound Investors can meet and become friends with fellow donors, composers, players, conductors and BCMG staff at rehearsals. Sound Investors have become like an extended family to BCMG; they take ownership of the pieces they've supported for the future, following their supported composers' careers - and BCMG - around the world. Consequently, they become invaluable advocates for BCMG's work and for the Sound Investment scheme.

With a new agreement over media rights with BCMG musicians, the Group plan to make the most of digital platforms to engage with Sound Investors. This will allow the organisation to connect with Investors who are unable to join in person for rehearsals or can't travel to Birmingham for the premieres of pieces they've supported, for example by providing recordings of the premiere performances.

Previously schools and community arts groups have joined together and bought Sound Units in the scheme, and this an area that has the potential to be explored further where appropriate.

## Additional information

<http://www.bcmg.org.uk/commissioning/sound-investment/>

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