

How to build meaningful donor relationships and retain long-term support

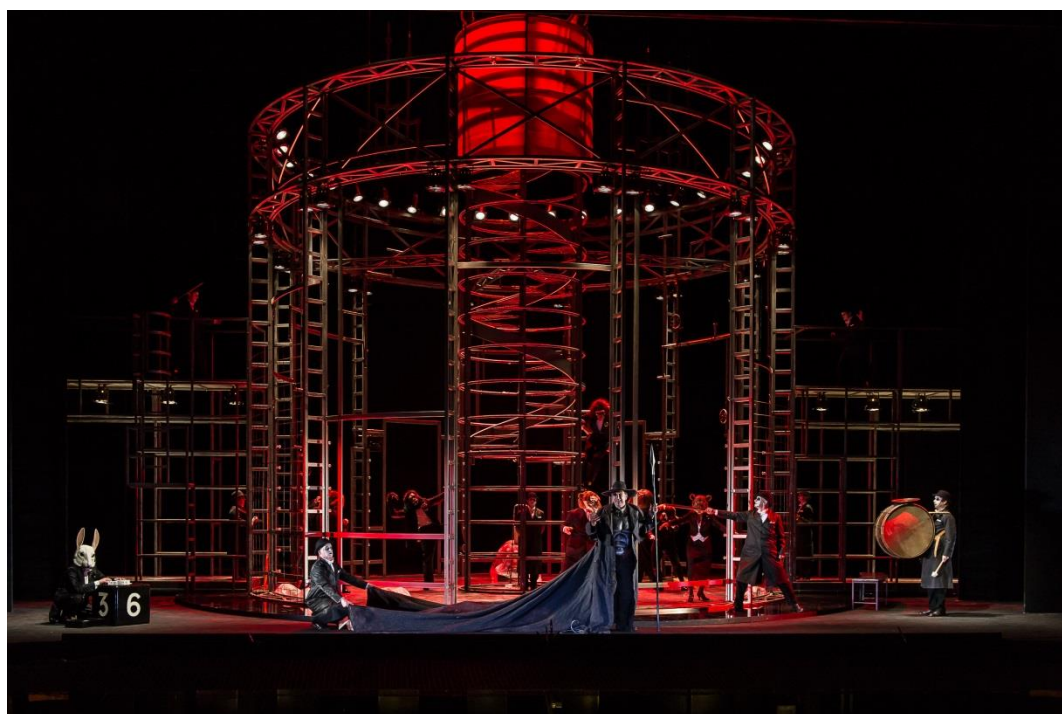


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Published 2015

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Welsh National Opera (WNO) is an opera company founded in Cardiff, Wales in 1943 and gave its first performances in April 1946. The WNO tours extensively in Wales and England as well as to other parts of the world. Annually, it gives more than 120 performances of an average of eight main stage operas to a combined audience of around 150,000 people. It gives regular performances in Cardiff, and Llandudno, in Wales, and Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool, Milton Keynes, Oxford, Plymouth, and Southampton in England. It has also recently launched an annual residency at the Royal Opera House in London. Because the number of performances in England exceeds the number in Wales, Arts Council England is the company's largest source of grant funding, together with the Arts Council of Wales.

The Company has always provided a mix of traditional and less-well-known operas. In 2004, WNO became resident at the new Wales Millennium Centre a performing arts centre in Cardiff Bay.

The opera company consists of a professional orchestra (Welsh National Opera Orchestra) and a professional choir (Welsh National Opera Chorus). Sometimes, the orchestra and the choir perform at events independently of one another. The orchestra and the choir often perform at St David's Hall in Cardiff and at other venues throughout Wales and England.

Objectives

Welsh National Opera believes passionately in the energy and emotion that great opera inspires. They present exceptional and ambitious productions, building new audiences and reaching out to communities and young people. They seek to keep ticket prices affordable and tour across Wales and England because they want as many people as possible to enjoy live opera. However, they can't do this alone; WNO relies on individuals who believe in the power of opera to support and be part of their efforts.

Target Groups

Individuals who are passionate about the art form.

Process

WNO Friends scheme was founded over 50 years ago by some of their most committed and enlightened supporters. Understanding the challenges involved in staging great opera, they set up a new charity to raise funds to support WNO.

WNO Partners is a higher tier of support, which provides a vital collective fund to enable the company to achieve its ambition. This in turn comes with a higher level of benefits. In addition to this, offering a further incentive to give, donations from people living outside of London and Cardiff were matched by the Foyle Foundation last year.

WNO seeks to offer its supporters increased access to the company and to the art form. Friends receive priority booking, a regular magazine and have the opportunity to attend dress rehearsals in Cardiff. A lively programme of social events and opera trips organised by local branches ensure that donors remain engaged and are able to share their passion for this art form with a group of likeminded individuals.

Outcomes

WNO now has approximately 700 donors who have supported them consistently since 2000 (when the database system was set up, but probably actually going back more years) and about 30 of those are what the WNO would consider medium to major donors. Of this group around 10 to 15 people give over £10K per year in a consistent way.

Key points for effective practice

WNO's strategy for retaining major donors, relies on a combination of maintaining its high artistic standards and innovative programme combined with excellent donor care, and this is key to a happy and fruitful partnership. They maintain close relationships with key donors, and in particular with those that hold wider expertise as advisors as well as donors. In this way they feel genuinely involved and part of the family, which is vital to sustaining the relationship.

Key points to sustaining these long term relationships are:

- Establishing common ground;
- Maintaining a programme of fresh and interesting work;
- Creating a forum for shared experience and, through this group, a sense of family/belonging;
- Consistently finding innovative new ways to engage the donor with the art form;
- Using personal skills and experience of the donor to strengthen and enrich your relationship;
- Building on your shared passions with the donor.

One such example being a major donor who has had a longstanding involvement with the Company and was co-opted onto the Board, on which he served for more than 10 years. During this time he has supported the Company both through his family trust and privately. This successful donor relationship has been based on mutual respect and passion for opera on both sides.

Conclusions and recommendations

By committing themselves to creating meaningful, long-term relationships, WNO have made the best use of their resources to help build a secure future for the organisation.

Whilst these types of relationships may not always result in immediate gifts, the long-term return from donors can be far greater. Building a sense of trust with your donors is crucial if they are to give substantial gifts, and this can only be done with time. Once you have this trust a donor will often be more likely to pledge more than they had originally anticipated.

Whilst reduced subsidies are not necessarily the ideal situation for producing opera, an expensive and resource heavy art form, WNO have demonstrated how developing a sustainable model for private sector fundraising can serve to enable artistic ambitions to be fulfilled in an environment where government subsidy has been reduced for many organisations and cannot be relied upon year-to-year. In the short-medium term planning cycle this means the organisation is able to plan ahead with confidence and continue to be ambitious with their work.

Additional information

<http://www.wno.org.uk/supportus>

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