

# Arts, Money and Markets

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to contribute to an understanding of how the procurement of resources influences artistic production with a special focus on performing arts. Special attention is given to both artistic and customer oriented quality and an anticipated conflict between art and the market. A case study based mainly on interviews was conducted. Findings indicated that art producers were rather unaware of the market wants and the given considerations with respect to artistic quality were only fragmentary. However, the conflict between art and market was identified, as were possible ways of handling the conflict.

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of how the procurement of resources influences artistic production. The study focuses on performing arts. In a classic work Baumol and Bowen (1966) called attention to the problems of compensating cost increases with improved productivity within that type of arts. Thus, the economic problems ought to become more severe than in other areas of the artistic field; but in some way or other, the art producers must face the problem. In this study, special attention was given to

the concept of quality, both artistic and customer oriented, and an anticipated conflict between art and the market.

### **Artistic quality**

Artistic quality is normally not considered to be the same thing as market oriented quality. But quality could, according to Kotler and Scheff (1997, 532), be regarded as the most important reason for the success of an art product. They meant that promotion activities would otherwise become counterproductive. It is not evident what Kotler and Scheff actually meant by good artistic quality. Evidence often seems to be lacking when the matter is discussed. Some authors have used the expression “artistic value” instead of “artistic quality” (e.g. Botti, 2000, 20) but the meaning of the concepts seems to be the same.

But what, then, is artistic quality? Blaug (1976, 142-143) said that, except for purely technical considerations, everything was of a subjective character. The Swedish director Smeds (1999, 31) expressed the same opinion, but added some components within the concept *artistic quality*, things connected with magic or going beyond rational comprehension. Good artistic quality could, according to her, reveal new knowledge or the most secret things in human life. Other authors, e.g. DiMaggio (1987, 207) have expressed the importance of innovativeness and virtuoso performance and high-quality stage settings or costumes as important parts of artistic quality. Botti (2000, 20-23) stated that artistic products have a potential artistic value mainly depending on their uniqueness of emotional interaction. This value could be estimated on four different levels: artist, champions, experts and consumers. Those levels could be regarded as a development of what Hirschman (1983, 49) said about the primary audience within three different marketing concepts: the self, peers and industry professionals, and the public-at-large. In a study of Swedish art glass production Skeppner and Walfridsson (2000, 100) found that a high level of artistic expression was manifested in a

similar way: through innovativeness and exclusiveness. Bordwell and Thompson (1990, 43-45) recommended four formal criteria for artistic quality of films: complexity, originality, coherence and intensity of effect. There seems to be at least some sort of agreement on innovativeness and technical standards as important components in artistic quality, but we probably have to accept that the concept artistic quality contains so much subjectivity that we will never reach consensus on what it really is. In a study concerning the programme planning at a Swedish theatre, good quality seemed to be more or less synonymous with the personal preferences of the people within the theatre (Wahlberg 1997, 143, 148).

Bourdieu (1989) presented an important discussion on the judgement of taste as a social phenomenon. He rejected the idea of definite quality criteria, since he felt they showed a lack of respect for the tastes of ordinary people. Artistic quality could be regarded as a social construction. This does not, however, mean that everything is as good as everything else; if so, we have had a straight market oriented quality concept.

### **The market**

And what is a market? Even many years ago, a widening of the market concept for nonprofit organizations to include financing matters was called for (e.g. Kotler 1980; Kotler and Andreasen 1991; Lovelock and Weinberg 1984). Colbert, Nantel and Bilodeau (1994) considered financing in that way and identified four submarkets: the consumer market, the distribution market, the state as a market and the sponsorship market. Gummesson (2002) has stressed the necessity of directing marketing activities towards personnel in order to encourage their desire and ability to participate successfully. In this paper, the market is defined as everyone being in control of resources that could be turned into income for the art producer. Four different markets and their motives were identified:

- Paying audience and distribution agents
- Different levels of government
- Sponsors and donors
- Personnel and volunteers

### **Art versus market**

The meaning of adapting to the market is not only to try to satisfy the paying audience or the distribution agents. It could also be a matter of giving the politician something in exchange for public funding in order to facilitate the receipt of future grants. Corporate sponsoring is normally regarded as something that takes place on an exchange basis. Donors of different kinds will probably become more generous if they are shown that their money is used in ways that appeal to them. It is also reasonable to think that art producers try, at least sometimes, to meet the wants of their personnel, even if this could jeopardize artistic quality.

In opposition to the market-oriented quality, some authors contend that art producers should not be concerned about market demands. In an often-cited article, Hirschman (1983, p. 46) said that the most important goal within art production was the artist's own desire to express himself. Holbrook and Day (1994, 138) have discussed how far the artist could go in his artistic integrity without becoming egocentrically stubborn. They gave no precise answer, but they stated that art dies when it goes commercial. Kolb (2000) and McLean (1997), among others, are discussing the problems with the influence of contributors on artistic production. In the late seventies, the French sociologist Bourdieu (1986, 131-133) discussed a collective denial of commercial interest with at least the pretence that nothing besides artistic considerations was at issue. He meant that it was more or less forbidden to aim at profit in the art sector. A producer or vendor that went commercial had condemned himself both ethically and aesthetically. At the same time, he lost the future long-term possibility of

changing his symbolic capital into economic profits. The official disavowal of commercial aspects was the only way to come to terms with the economic constraints of this “bad-faith economy”. Bourdieu (1986, 153-154) saw the opposition between the commercial and the non-commercial in e.g., bourgeois theatre and avant-garde theatre. In the art sector, success also could be viewed with suspicion. The artist Andy Warhol was still more critical to the pretended denial of the commercial interest in art production. He meant that all art actually was commercial; it was only a question of different ways to market it and for him, the only aesthetic criterion was the capability to generate money (Warhol, 1975, 92). Björkegren (1993, 178-180) has pointed at the phenomenon that art-related businesses, such as film companies and publishing houses, could work with two separate strategies: a cultural strategy and a commercial strategy. The cultural strategy, where artistic quality was an important part, was good for the image; the commercial strategy brought financial gain.

### **Three research questions**

- How do producers within performing arts experience the expectations of the market?
- How are artistic considerations expressed within performing arts?
- How do producers within performing arts behave when meeting the demands of the market?

### **Methods**

The study was a case study consisting of four cases, all of them located to a regional centre in the north of Sweden: two independent theatre groups, one semi-professional symphony orchestra, and one artist who mainly performed folk music in different constellations. The cases were based on interviews and to some extent documents and resulted in extensive

descriptions (available in Swedish in Wahlberg, 2001). The first interview in each case was with a leading person within the group. From the interviews conducted, it was possible to find other relevant informants. In total, 20 people were interviewed; for geographical reasons three interviews were performed via telephone, the rest were face-to-face interviews.

## **Empirical study**

### *Case A*

Case A was an independent theatre group of approximately ten people founded in 1987. Grants from local, regional and central governments financed about 50% of the costs. There was no money from sponsors or donors. Normally, the theatre group sold performances to different distribution agents, companies and schools. Most of the production targeted children and young people up to 16 years of age. All productions were low-budget, normally there were only one or two actors on stage in the performances and the design was very simple. The actors themselves wrote the plays. This way of performing was motivated as an artistic choice, but the members also knew that there was no money for proceeding in another way.

To some extent, the theatre participated with actors as consultants in staff training activities in different companies. Other external jobs such as teaching were occasionally accepted. The group had considerable financial difficulties, and during several months every year, there was no money for salaries. Money for their subsistence was then obtained through unemployment benefits. During such periods, the personnel worked for the theatre on a voluntary basis. But the problems did not end here; sometimes, there was no money for paying bills and taxes. The group had had contacts with the crown bailiff's office and was on one occasion very close to bankruptcy, but in the end an advance on the grant saved them.

The starting point for the programme planning of the theatre group was an artistic manifesto stating among other things that this was a theatre that wanted to say something about today

from a regional and equality perspective. The group also wanted to be a powerful non-commercial alternative to the commercial culture. The leader of the group said that they had no desire to perform for traditional middleclass women; instead, they wanted to reach people who did not normally attend the theatre. For economic reasons, the group had recently been forced to stop producing performances for adults. It had not been possible to sell the requested number of performances. At a more specific level, the programme was decided on the basis of the age of the children for whom they wished to perform. In a way, that age depended on what was left when the programme of the large regional theatre was set. Normally there was a group decision about the topic for the play and then the members discussed different ideas within that topic. The leader said that they did not want to perform classical plays that were placed in modern contexts; it was better at the outset to use present-day conditions as a point of departure. They could not afford to buy new manuscripts, so normally someone within or at least connected to the group took care of the writing. Sometimes, parts of the plays were tested on young people from the planned audience. But still they meant that it all was about giving the audience what they didn't know they needed. The group also talked about "positive enforcement" as a tool to meet an audience that itself had not chosen to come to the theatre. Consequently, the group regarded it as necessary to adapt to the experiences of the audience. The theatre company was aware of the wants of its buyers. Schools were interested in plays about e.g., racism and mobbing. To satisfy these buyers was not an artistic choice, but according to the group, it definitely was possible to perform a play of that kind artistically. The leader of the group meant that people within the theatre were good at selling. There were two important channels for selling: a catalogue that was produced by a regional representative for buyers and a sort of trade show where different producers could present what they had to offer. Some potential customers were phoned, in other cases they just waited for orders to come. Within the theatre, they knew that the buyers wanted uncomplicated arrangements and the group always tried to make it safe and comfortable for the buyer.

The leader of the theatre meant that the relationship with the representatives of the grant givers was good. Occasionally, he had discussions with politicians and government employees. The theatre had no corporate sponsors. The leader said that they preferred to sell performances to companies rather than begging for sponsorship money. For a specific project, e.g., during the summer, he could regard sponsoring as a realistic way to find money for the production. Most of the employees had worked with the theatre from the start. They had accepted low wages, but at the same time, some fringe benefits made life a bit easier. The personnel complained about tour condition: old cars, basic hotels, chilly stages and frugal food. After 15 years, they found it more difficult to accept their poverty, but they could hardly imagine another way of living. They felt free and had a lot of variation in their work. Probably, they were allowed to take care of things that would have been off-limits to them had they worked in another organization. They considered it an opportunity for professional growth. However, there were definitely problems in recruiting new group members. One solution was to maintain contact with people, even if they left the town to live elsewhere.

### *Case B*

Case B was also an independent theatre group, but neither the actors nor the musicians were regularly employed. People were only hired for specific productions and were paid only for performances, not for rehearsal time. The company was managed by an artistic leader who applied for grants when he had an idea for a new project. He normally wrote the plays and the musical scores for the productions. The artistic leader was assisted by two young women who subsisted on unemployment benefits and these three people managed the theatre group. Altogether, the group produced eight plays. With a few exceptions, critics had been rather favourable. Performances were sold to distributing agents. Normally, tickets were not sold directly to the audience. The theatre had no permanent public funding, but the projects had been fairly well financed with grants. Only approximately 20% of the income

came from sold performances. It is important to add that a lot of voluntary work was done: people worked for nothing or only low pay.

The programme choice was based on an artistic idea shared by people wanting the same thing: a mix of different types of art combined with a touch of avant-garde and ham. All their plays had a regional connection. The artistic leader was pessimistic about the possibilities of gaining acceptance in the region for new and untraditional ways of performing. This theatre group could, however, at least in the short run, survive in spite of small audiences and few performances. There were almost no fixed costs, so when no performances were sold, there were only low residual costs. If there was no idea for a new project or no way funding of it, it was also possible to wait.

One of the women on the management team stated that they only performed plays that they liked themselves and wanted to pass on to others, but not to the traditional "snob audience". It was important "not to sell one's soul to the Devil, to ingratiate oneself to others". She said that she did not even think of the possibility of earning money.

As mentioned, there was little short-term dependency on gaining an audience for the performances. But in a longer perspective, the management team knew that the distributing agents could grow dissatisfied by repeated losses. The theatre had no communication with the agents until rehearsals had begun. One of the informants meant that the distributing agents were represented by people with a traditional theatre ideology. An incident that was indicative of the problematic relationship with the distribution agents occurred when approximately one hundred representatives of the agents had accepted an invitation to an extra performance with wine and peanuts. Only three showed up. Not a single performance was sold.

The artistic leader had no idea of what the politicians thought of the theatre. As far as he knew, not a single politician had seen their last play. In his opinion, they were only interested in the number of performances and spectators. He himself had no interest in contacts with the politicians. The management team was not interested in corporate sponsoring either. They met no interest from the companies and they thought it was too much work for too little money. They felt like beggars.

The motivation for participating in the performances could scarcely have been financial gain. The feeling of participating in what they regarded as a vanguard project, the opportunity to develop their own capabilities and the mere joy of doing what they liked seemed to be more important than money. The artistic leader was paid for his work if any money remained after the other participants had been paid and the expenditures covered. The leader earned quite a lot of money on writing for television, so he could survive without being paid for his work with the group. None of the participants in the performances could make a living out of the income from this theatre; but for some of them, it could become an important supplementary income. People who had full-time employment elsewhere seemed to regard the payment more as recognition of their professionalism.

### *Case C*

Case C was a semi-professional symphonic orchestra, founded in 1934, with approximately 60 musicians. The orchestra had three productions a year. The number of concerts varied, but there were at least two of each production. The conductorship alternated between four conductors, all of them well known in Sweden and in demand in other parts of Europe as well. The orchestra consisted of professional symphony-orchestra musicians and teachers from both the academy and the music school. There were also a great number of music students from different levels and some competent amateurs.

The financial situation of the orchestra was relatively stable. Direct public funding accounted for approximately 50% of the income. The contribution from corporate sponsoring was 15% and box office money contributed 30%. Considering the economic value of the time the music teachers in the town were allowed spend working with the orchestra, public funding rose till around 70%.

Normally, the audience had no direct influence on the programme. One of the conductors meant that the wants of the musicians and the level of difficulty for the orchestra were much more important. He also meant that the wants of the audience were not always artistically interesting. The president of the orchestra expressed a slightly different opinion. He meant that it was acceptable that the audience liked Mozart, despite the fact that it posed only a minor challenge for the orchestra. Even classical "hits" could be acceptable – it was always possible to improve the performance of them. New symphonic music could be a bit problematic due to its complexity; longer rehearsal periods were needed. Nonetheless, for a specific concert, it was necessary to find the proper blend of music. Sometimes the programme was set on the basis of what was suitable for soloists. Earlier, the acoustic conditions had limited the choice substantially, but during recent years, the new concert hall at the university had improved the possibilities. The orchestra did not rely on distributing agents but it was possible to buy tickets at a box office for performing arts in the very centre of the town. There had been discussions concerning the number of concerts of each production. Only one concert could be enough for the normal audience and would result in lower costs, but the musicians wanted two and it was preferable to allow the audience two options.

Local government seemed to appreciate the orchestra. Without its generous help, there would be no high-quality symphony orchestra in the town. A former president of the orchestra took care of the contacts with sponsors. He was a former manager of a local bank and had good relations with many companies. He was convinced that many companies wanted to be

associated with the orchestra and its high-quality concerts. But neither the local government nor the companies had even tried to influence the programme.

The conductors and the soloists were always paid, but not well paid. A reason for the acceptance of low pay seemed to be that many of the soloists had a connection to the town or were friends of someone in the orchestra. Some of the professional musicians were also paid and teachers from the music school could, to some extent, count this as part of their job. Music students at the academy received a symbolic payment. In short, most of the musicians participated for reasons other than monetary gain. The reason seemed to be a combination of a wish for professional development and simply doing what they loved. Some of the interviewees explicitly said that the orchestra's objective was to give the members opportunities to play, not to satisfy the audience.

#### *Case D*

Case D was a musician and his co-musicians. His instrument was the violin. He played in a well-known folk music group and in a duo. Altogether, he performed on stage 75 to 100 times a year. He was also an author of plays and other texts. And at the same time, he worked full-time as a civil engineer.

A major problem within the folk music group was that the four members lived in four different towns with substantial distances in between. But the fact that they had played together for 25 years, since childhood, made it work. Another problem was that all of them had ordinary jobs, and that forced them to restrict their playing to weekends, summer and Christmas. Normally the group performed 30 to 40 times a year. However, to celebrate 20 years of playing together, they took a leave from their ordinary jobs and worked full-time with the group for 14 months. There were some problems at the outset, but eventually they earned enough for their upkeep. During this period, the group also had some public funding. Later on, there was

no such funding and normally they had no corporate sponsors. The potential for sponsorship was insignificant.

The Case-D individual's co-musician in the duo played the accordion and had been a bass player in a well-known music group during the seventies, but had since worked as a photographer in a company of his own for many years. The duo had played together for ten years and most of the performances were sold to companies and other organizations that wanted entertainment at dinners or conferences. Sometimes, a distributing agent bought performances and arranged for them to play for paying audiences.

The folk music group had an active repertoire of forty tunes, but with some rehearsal, they could play another hundred. They had also worked for many years with the Cullberg Ballet, a well-known Swedish dance company. The Case-D individual was uncertain as to how many tunes could be played by the duo. Sometimes, they performed things that they had never rehearsed together. The repertoire was broad, and when they arrived at a venue, they tried to get an idea of the people in the audience. An important part of their shows were the narratives between the tunes. The musician saw an advantage of having a conventional "daytime" job: he was not in need of the income and could decline an offer to play if the circumstances around a specific concert did not appeal to him.

His writing was of various kinds. He had written short stories for the local newspapers, an unpublished novel, song lyrics and several plays and shorter texts for radio, theatre and film.

The performances generated a substantial amount of money, but going on tour with the folk music group was particularly expensive and in the musicians own opinion, not much was left when everything had been paid for – the group wanted to live well when they were on the road. Although there must have been a considerable sum of money left over, the musician said that he had never thought of the payment when he accepted an engagement. The

important thing was the potential for an agreeable performance. His co-musicians also had full-time jobs, and they meant that playing together was the best thing they knew, much better than their ordinary jobs. The musician meant that his income from writing was very modest. All money he earned from writing and from the duo went to a company he had with a friend. This company did a lot of unprofitable things such as travelling to do research for new projects, publishing books they knew they were going to lose money on, and dinners with people with whom they wished to maintain contact or develop relationships.

## **Findings**

None of the cases has given any indication that art producers have a reliable knowledge of what the market wants. No traditional marketing research concerning audiences or distributors was conducted. The consensus seemed to be that audience satisfaction was most important. The distributor's satisfaction did not seem to be of equal importance. In the cases studied, there were actually several examples of obscure or even prejudicial opinions about both the audience and the distributors. Theatres sometimes seemed to target an audience that had no desire to go to the theatre – and were subsequently surprised when few people showed up for the performances.

The art producers seemed to have no idea about the degree of artistic freedom in relation to different levels of public (government) funding, or even what public sponsors wanted in return for the grants. Most of the producers were not at all interested in corporate sponsoring. They felt, at least partly, that their product was of no interest for companies. There also seems to have been some antipathy towards discussing matters of exchange.

In a way, viewing personnel as part of the market was problematic, as they also had a direct influence over artistic decisions. The objectives of personnel and artistic objectives

sometimes coincided, though this was not always the case; e.g., better wages or a better car for the tours were sometimes a higher priority than an artistically interesting arrangement.

When a discussion of quality occasionally appeared, it could be mixed up with political values of equality or regional matters. One type of artistic positioning, on a more general level, was the intention to perform simply with few actors. These arrangements agreed well with the actual budget restrictions. Another type of positioning was of the vanguard type, with ideas of multi-artistic performances. However, interpreting the exact meaning of these different positionings was rather complicated. Another way of looking at artistic quality was to consider technical skill or the ability to find new ways of artistic expression, but this gave no clearly expressed consideration of matters of artistic quality. These considerations were evidently handled in another way, perhaps with the help of intuition and experience.

As long as the market supplied the performing arts producer with the necessary resources, no major problem seemed to exist. But quite likely, this producer must have adjusted his artistic ambition to realistic expectations. It has become apparent that producers have realised that they have limited room to manoeuvre. If audiences were too small, there was a risk that neither distributors nor government or sponsors would want to participate in the financing of the proposed production. Perhaps not even the personnel would wish to participate under such circumstances. Without an audience of the planned size, the artist's interest in performing diminishes and the situation becomes devoid of pleasure. And art must bring joy to the performer (*homo ludens*).

Some evidence was found that producers have tried to influence different parts of the market in order to receive more resources. Another way has been to tackle the costs. Decreases in costs that left the artistic production intact seemed to be preferred to those resulting in lower artistic quality.

## Scientific contribution

The study has shed light on the difficulties in identifying an explicit conflict between artistic considerations and market expectations and concludes by specifying different ways of handling that conflict.

- Lower artistic ambitions and adjust to the market (*homo economicus*).
- Simply continue as before and hope that someone will eventually pay the bills – or face the bitter consequences.
- Stop producing (only possible when fixed costs are moderate).
- Combine artistic work with work in other arenas as a way of financing the artistic production.
- Handle the conflict intuitively, based on experience.
- If the producer wants to do what he is actually able to do, the potential conflict is eliminated (internalisation).
- A collective denial of commercial interest combined with at least the pretence that nothing besides artistic considerations is at issue. The important thing is that others will not perceive that any conflict is being handled. Actually, no conflict should even be seen in the art producer's own mind.

Finally, there may be a need for discussion as to whether artistic production actually differs from other types of production. The answer is that there are differences, the most important of which probably have to do with artistic freedom and that art, for many people, has value besides economic value. For art producers, a rational *homo economicus* is not enough: good art presupposes a *homo ludens* as well. Perhaps this may be true for traditional commercially oriented companies as well as for art producers.

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