

Artists' Perception of Management in Opera Theaters and Opera Theater Performance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study examines the perspectives of lyrical artists in Romania on how opera theater performance is influenced by key aspects of institutional management (such as planning, organization, motivation, and control) during the COVID period. The objectives of our study are the following: (1) to identify how institutional management was perceived by lyrical artists during the COVID period; (2) to identify the relationship between opera theatre performance and planning, organization, motivation, and control within opera theatres. The study employs a cross-sectional, non-experimental design and uses a survey-based questionnaire approach. The extended questionnaire comprises 36 items, with 19 specifically addressing the primary research question. A total of 135 lyrical artists participated in the study, of whom 89 (65.9%) were female and 46 (34.1%) were male. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms, and statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 22. The nonparametric Spearman's rho test reveals very strong positive correlations between artists' perceptions of the relationship between opera theatre performance and key management elements: planning, organization, training-motivation, and control within opera theatres. The findings indicate that as planning, organization, training-motivation, and control are strengthened in opera theatres, the performance of the opera theatre correspondingly increases. The results are discussed with reference to similar results reported in national and international. From an academic perspective, this article enriches the current understanding of the adaptation of the management model of opera houses in a hostile environment and provides managers with concrete guidelines on the systematic adaptation of their business models in hostile situations.

Keywords: Crisis management, opera theatre, public institution, entertainment.

JEL classification: L32; L82; M10.

Introduction

The perspectives of lyrical artists in Romania on how opera theatre performance is influenced by key aspects of institutional management—such as planning, organization, motivation, and control—during the COVID-19 period are the focus of this study, which explores these dynamics in detail. Our research is grounded in a review of specialized literature, personal experience in the field of opera, and a survey conducted with artists in Romania. The findings are pertinent to researchers examining the artist's circumstances during the pandemic, as well as to practitioners and managers in the performing arts sector who aim to gain a deeper understanding of artists' perspectives on management aspects within their field.

Opera is one of the most complex art forms, harmoniously combining theatre, music, and literature, and is referred to by Richard Wagner as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or, in English, 'total art'. It appeals to an estimated 2–3% of the global population (Agid and Tarondeau, 2010). Regardless of how much ticket prices rise, opera houses worldwide cannot achieve financial balance solely through revenues generated by productions or the quality of the artistic product, as they are unable to benefit from productivity advances comparable to those in the broader economy, thus resulting in the phenomenon known as cost disease (Baumol and Bowen, 1966).

The central argument of this theory posits that the state must subsidize "fine art" (including opera) to prevent its pricing from becoming prohibitively high and effectively excluding it from the market. State intervention is deemed essential for the preservation of art and culture, ensuring their accessibility to a broader public audience. Consequently, opera houses are compelled to rely on public funding from budgetary authorities (governments, in the case of national operas, or municipalities, in the case of state operas), as well as on tax-deductible sponsorships or donations. The opera genre is part of a larger economic equation, and without a healthy economic framework, opera has fewer opportunities to flourish.

The concept of opera is founded on two distinct yet interdependent coordinates: the artistic product, based on a musical score and a scenic concept, realized by multiple artistic categories supported by non-artistic staff; and the cultural institution dedicated to producing and presenting lyrical performances (operas). Two distinct aspects characterize this artistic organization: the artistic and the managerial. These aspects converge during the phase of artistic programming, the preparation of an artistic performance, or the planning of the organization's activities (Colbert et al., 2007).

Opera house management aims to ensure a balance between creativity and financial performance, a concept that encompasses both commercial and artistic dimensions. Frederick Gye, the director who transformed the Royal Italian Opera at Covent Garden into one of the foremost opera houses in 19th-century London, described opera management as a daunting endeavor (Dideriksen, Ringel, 1995). Within a cultural institution, management contributes to the organization's success in generating artistic, aesthetic, and moral values, as well as in promoting and disseminating them. It plays a crucial role in the effective realization of cultural and artistic creation and coordinates the ways in which this creation is received by the public.

COVID-19 plunged the global economy into its most severe crisis since the Great Depression and has had a significant impact on global health and economic development (Meyer, Niemand, Davila & Kraus, 2022). The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis triggered uncertainties of an unimaginable scale. Historian Reinhart Koselleck notes that, at least, we can be certain that the uncertainty caused by the crisis will eventually come to an end: "It is in the nature of a crisis that a decision is due but not yet taken. The general uncertainty in a critical situation is thus pervaded by the certainty that – uncertain when, but certain, uncertain how, but certain – an end to the critical state is imminent." (Koselleck, 1973). However, "The greatest challenge for businesses at this time is not uncertainty, but ambiguity—a condition in which the future is unclear, the past is unhelpful, and we don't even know what we don't know" (Kogan & Pahuja, 2020).

In addition to the presence of a threat, crises typically involve systemic disruptions, uncertainty, and stress (Woods et al., 2020). Although it began as a health crisis, the effects of COVID-19 quickly extended to other areas—economic, social, cultural, etc.—becoming a concrete example of the fact that the society we live in is made up of complex systems that mutually influence each other (Sayama, 2015). The profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all areas of culture has highlighted both the fragility and the resilience of the cultural and creative industries (UNESCO, 2022). The COVID-19 crisis had a profound impact on the world of opera and, like any crisis, was an unexpected and unstable event—a turning

point for better or worse (Bonner, 2003)—which brought to light various dysfunctions (Roux-Dufort, 2003).

Social distancing, repeated lockdowns, and disease control restrictions introduced a series of paradoxes within the artistic and cultural sector. While venue closures and job losses significantly disrupted cultural industries, the pandemic also provided new opportunities for arts engagement at home, including digital arts activities and live-streamed performances. These paradoxes and challenges extend to the audience as well: although many were unable to attend performances for nearly two years, at-home artistic activities became increasingly popular, and the demographic profile of people interested in the arts evolved. The pandemic highlighted the importance of the arts in everyday life: without the arts, the pandemic would have been merely isolation, and life would have been just existence (Chivu, 2020).

Opera artists and opera managers prioritized their objectives and successfully maintained the mission of opera amid the COVID-19 storm. Moreover, and ironically, the pandemic contributed the most to free access to opera and its democratization, through the online system. After navigating the crisis of Covid-19, crisis management should become one of the top priorities for policymakers, public officials, and executive personnel. The experience during the pandemic demonstrated the theory asserting that highly trained officials and other government authorities handle crises on our behalf (Hamilton, 2020) is incorrect.

Now, as before the pandemic, the organizational performance of opera houses reflects an artistic-economic dichotomy, encompassing both on-stage and off-stage performers (Auvinen, 2000). Thus, measuring performance in opera houses is challenging, as artistic success often intersects with economic success. Assessing organizational efficiency and effectiveness in opera houses is a pressing issue. Artistic excellence remains the primary objective of opera houses (Hoegl, 2002, p. 442), especially when public funding is sought (Lukas, 1994, p. 173), and it is also considered the most important success factor for an opera house.

1. Literature review

A crisis is defined as a time when normal operations are disrupted and there is increasing pressure for improved organizational practices based on crisis planning. Responses to crises can vary depending on the decisions made by management to implement change during the ongoing crisis. During the pandemic, the assumptions underlying the execution of plans underwent unexpected shifts. Planning is an important part of this process and, alongside organization and control, forms the core functions of management. On an economic scale, planning means initiative, and resilience becomes more important than efficiency. In opera theatres, planning also underwent a drastic change.

Before the pandemic, planning typically ranged from several months to two or three years in advance (at major theatres worldwide), with a certain degree of predictability and routine. However, with the pandemic, planning shifted to a day-by-day approach, based on the health measures imposed by the governments of each country. One of the main tasks of opera management during the pandemic was to ensure the continuity of operations, with day-to-day planning subordinated to this goal. Additionally, a new concept emerged, “hybrid programming,” which became widespread during the pandemic to refer to programming that included online streaming.

As far as the organization of opera theatres in Romania is concerned, they are managed by directors, alongside artistic directors, chief accountants, and both artistic and administrative councils. The working departments are generally divided into three: artistic, technical, and administrative. During the COVID-19 crisis, crisis cells were organized only in isolated cases. The opera artist is an individual who creates things based on talent, thought, wisdom, knowledge, an idea in mind, and the ability to use artistic rules. In art, the artist is the sole

legislator (Tatarkiewicz, 2015). Ensuring the preservation of the artist's identity, and implicitly their role during the pandemic, was structured along two main directions: artists with permanent contracts primarily waited for a return to the old normality, while independent artists sought new solutions for income sources and to defend their artistic identity. They became managers of their own careers, entrepreneurs with the talent in finding new work opportunities (Teran-Yepep and Guerrero-Mora, 2020; Goldman and Tselepis, 2021). Many fixed-term contracts were not renewed, and some artists were permanently laid off. Some of them received unemployment benefits or government support, but other artists or workers in the arts field could not access any form of aid. This was the case for artists working independently. They lost many contracts, without being offered alternatives (like rescheduled performances), without compensation for their losses, and, in some countries, even without access to government assistance. Although artists' behavior is not solely driven by economic thinking, and while they may replace economic income with "psychological" non-monetary income, ensuring their survival became paramount during the pandemic. Due to social distancing measures and the ban on public performances, most of the income that artists relied on disappeared (Tsioulakis and FitzGibbon, 2020). Artists belong to a special category, known as the "artist market," and classical economic thinking may not be applicable to this category (Weber, Zhen, and JJ Arias, 2022).

A new aspect that emerged during the pandemic was the "value perception" of artists. The sympathy shown towards them during this period contributed to an image marked by infantilization, vulnerability, and diminished value, which negatively impacted their status. Artistic activity is also part of a broader context within the economic profession, where "work effort" is seen as a cost for the employee and a benefit for the employer, with the assumption that "workers" aim to maximize their income, while employers aim to maximize profit. This economic thinking may not be accurate when it comes to artists, who are not trying to maximize their income, but rather seek to maximize their working time in their field and to achieve public success. For the same level of education, artists earn less than individuals in other professional categories. "Artists work fewer hours, experience higher unemployment, and earn less than members of the reference group" (Alper and Wassall, 2006, p. 814).

The control function represents the set of processes through which the organization's performance is measured and compared to the initial objectives, and it monitors how the pre-established goals within the organization have been achieved. The purpose of control is to verify, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the manner in which tasks are completed. In opera theaters, managers had to consider the importance of balancing organizational process control (planning, coordination, control, etc.) with creative autonomy, as it is an essential component of creative employees' satisfaction. In a healthy organization, the management roles outlined above must coexist simply because they are different, yet simultaneously complementary.

2. Methodology

The study employs a cross-sectional, non-experimental design and uses a survey-based questionnaire approach. The main research question was: How did lyrical artists perceive the relationship between opera theatre performance and the planning, organization, motivation, and control within opera theatres during the COVID-19 crisis? The objectives of our study are: (1) to identify how institutional management was perceived by lyrical artists during the COVID period; (2) to identify the perceived relationship between opera theatre performance and planning, organization, motivation, and control within opera theatres.

The study is based on prior experience in the field of opera and on quantitative data collected from responses to a questionnaire, with artists being perceived as an important resource for adaptation and resilience. Given the lack of literature addressing the topic of the

study, the sequential phases of our research, utilizing quantitative techniques (survey) for data collection, allowed for a detailed identification of the factors and the quantification of their relevance.

The questionnaire was constructed based on existing models in the specialized literature and is a cross-sectional observational questionnaire consisting of 36 questions, with 19 specifically addressing the primary research question to measure artists' perceptions of: 1) Opera theatre performance (2 questions, e.g., 'Was theatre management effective'); 2) Planning in opera theatres (2 questions, e.g., 'Was the proposed plan communicated to all theatre employees'); 3) Organization in opera theatres (5 questions, e.g., 'Has an analysis team been assembled, and has an action plan for the crisis been developed'); 4) in opera theatres (3 questions, e.g., 'Have measures taken ensured appropriate motivation for the artistic staff'); 5) Control in opera theatres (2 questions, e.g., 'Was the level of artistic activity in the theatre optimal given the circumstances').

Responses to the 19 questions were provided on a five-point Likert scale (1. Strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neutral, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly agree). Before broad distribution, the questionnaire underwent a pilot study involving 10 lyrical artists from Timișoara, who provided feedback on the items (clarity, comprehensibility, relevance). Suggestions offered were reviewed and incorporated into the questionnaire.

2.1. Participants

The sample was a convenience sample (Table1), and its size was not calculated in advance (a situation permitted in exploratory studies, as specified in the literature). A total of 135 lyrical artists participated in the study, of whom 89 (65.9%) were female and 46 (34.1%) were male. In terms of age, most respondents fall within the 36-55 years category (70 respondents, or 51.9%), followed by those over 55 years old, with 35 respondents (25.9%). The least represented category is that of individuals aged 20-35 years (22.2% of respondents).

In terms of tenure at their current workplace, the majority of respondents have over 10 years of experience (71 respondents, or 52.6%), followed by those with 1-3 years of experience (23 respondents, or 17.0%), and those with 5-10 years of experience (19 respondents, or 14.1%). Regarding the respondents' place of residence, the majority are from Timișoara: 60 (44.4%); Bucharest: 27 (21.6%); Cluj-Napoca: 11 (8.1%); Arad: 9 (6.7%); Brașov: 4 (3.0%); Lugoj: 3 (2.2%); Oradea: 3 (2.2%); Sibiu: 2 (1.5%); one each from Constanța and Cuvin (1.7%); 14 respondents (10.4%) did not specify their place of residence.

In terms of artistic category, the majority are classified as: soloists – 43 (31.9%); instrumentalists – 36 (26.7%); choristers – 23 (17.0%); actors – 10 (7.4%); conductors – 6 (4.4%). In terms of professional category, 84 respondents (62.2%) were full-time employed artists, and 51 respondents (37.8%) were freelance artists.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Item		Number of Respondents	Percentage of sample (%)
Gender	Male	46	34.1%
	Female	89	65.9%
Age	20 - 35 years	30	22.2%
	36 - 55 years	70	51.9%
	Over 55 years	35	25.9%
Tenure at their current workplace	1 - 3 years	23	17.0%
	over 3 - 5 years	8	5.9%
	over 5 - 10 years	19	14.1%
	over 10 years	79	58.5%
	Does not apply	6	4.4%

Place of residence	RO Arad	9	7.2%
	RO Brasov	4	3.2%
	RO București	27	21.6%
	RO Cluj Napoca	11	8.8%
	RO Timișoara	60	48.0%
	RO	14	11.2%
Artistic category	Actor	11	8.1%
	Ballet dancer	3	2.2%
	Choir singer	24	17.8%
	Conductor	6	4.4%
	Instrumental musician	36	26.7%
	Director	5	3.7%
	Solo Artist	43	31.9%
	Other	7	5.2%
	Professional category	Artist with a fixed contract	84
Freelance artist		51	37.8%

Source: Own elaboration based on analyzed data.

2.2. Data Collection

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to the target group, and the responses were collected from April 6 to June 30, 2024. The data were automatically recorded in Google Forms and then imported into Excel and subsequently into SPSS 22, the data analysis software, where the data were processed and analyzed.

2.3. Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 22. The statistical processing included both descriptive and inferential statistics. The preliminary data analysis involved checking for missing data and testing the normality of the score distribution. Descriptive statistical analysis included the arithmetic mean and standard deviation.

To determine the appropriate statistical procedures for testing the hypotheses, the normality of the score distribution was verified using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. These tests revealed a non-Gaussian distribution, which led to the application of the non-parametric Spearman's rho correlation test for rank differences.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Central tendency of the scores for the dimensions of crisis management in opera theatres.

Indicators	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Opera Theatre Performance	135	1	5.00	2.29	1.55182
Planning in Opera Theatres	135	1	5.00	2.28	1.55929
Organization in Opera Theatres	135	1	5.00	2.32	1.49369
Engagement-Motivation in Opera Theatres	135	1	7.50	3.65	2.33346
Control in Opera Theatres	135	1	5.00	2.29	1.54701
Valid N (listwise)	135				

Source: Own elaboration based on analyzed data

Considering the rating scale used (1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neutral, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree), the average scores in Table 2 indicate a below-average perception of the artists regarding the dimensions of crisis management in opera theatres (rather negative – between disagree and neutral). The only dimension that stands out slightly more (perceived somewhat more positively – between neutral and agree) is in opera theatres ($M=3.65$, $SD=2.33$).

Table 3 summarizes the results of the non-parametric correlation analysis for the perceived relationship between opera theatre performance and planning, organization, motivation, and control within opera theatres.

Table 3. Non-parametric correlation analysis for the perceived relationship between opera theatre performance and planning, organization, motivation, and control within opera theatres

Variable	Variable	Coefficient	Significance
Opera theatre performance	Planning in opera theatres	$r=.836^{**}$, $p < 0.001$	Statistically significant
Opera theatre performance	Organization in opera theatres	$r=0.87^{**}$, $p < 0.001$	Statistically significant
Opera theatre performance	in opera theatres	$r=0.89^{**}$, $p < 0.001$	Statistically significant
Opera theatre performance	Control in opera theatres	$r=0.94^{**}$, $p < 0.001$	Statistically significant

Source: Own elaboration based on analyzed data.

The non-parametric Spearman's rho test (Table 3) highlights statistically significant, direct, strong positive linear correlations between opera theatre performance and: planning in opera theatres ($r = 0.862$, $p < 0.001$); organization in opera theatres ($r = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$); in opera theatres ($r = 0.89$, $p < 0.001$); control in opera theatres ($r = 0.94$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the more the artists perceive crisis management in opera theatres, planning in opera theatres, organization in opera theatres, in opera theatres, and control in opera theatres as more pronounced, the higher they perceive opera theatre performance.

The results of this study should be viewed with caution due to some limitations. The first methodological limitation of the study stems from the non-random sampling method. Another limitation is the lower level of concern, or even indifference, among artists regarding management aspects (planning, organization, control). This type of analysis could be improved by seeking the perspective of opera managers in order to examine the individual logic regarding artists' interest and involvement in management processes.

Despite these limitations, the results of the study contribute to the development of knowledge in the field and suggest future development directions: conducting further research with a larger number of participants and using more tools to measure artists' perceptions of management in opera theatres. Other interesting research avenues could include a study on artists' perceptions of management aspects, as well as the effects of these perceptions on the future courses of action within the organization.

Conclusions

The objectives of this study were: (1) to identify how institutional management was perceived by lyrical artists during the COVID period; (2) to identify the perceived relationship between opera theatre performance and planning, organization, motivation, and control within opera theatres. The reported results lead to the conclusion that these objectives were achieved.

Opera is a traditional cultural sector where artistic creation and aesthetic parameters are central. During the COVID-19 crisis, it was vital for lyrical artists to continue their activity under safe health conditions, maintain their relevance, and stay connected with their audiences. Opera managers around the world were unprepared for a crisis of such magnitude, but the more flexible and agile they were—by abandoning traditionalism in the opera system—the more

successful they were in preserving the theatres they managed. The pandemic crisis, and particularly the lockdowns, forced artists and managers in the international art world to become aware of the fragility of “normality” in the artistic field. It was crucial for managers to communicate with artists and allow them to take initiative.

The study reveals that the more artists recognized the emphasis on crisis management, planning, organization, engagement-motivation, and control in opera theatres, the higher they perceived the performance of the theatre where they were employed. From an academic perspective, this article enriches the current understanding of the adaptation of the management model of opera houses in a hostile environment and provides managers with concrete guidelines on the systematic adaptation of their business models in hostile situations.

This study is particularly useful for students and researchers in music and cultural management. It is also intended to help practitioners from concert houses and opera management, such as general managers, artistic directors, marketing and communication directors. The data presented in this study contribute to addressing the gaps in the specialized literature on topics such as planning, organizing, engagement-motivation, and scheduling in opera theatres. A related objective of the study is to raise awareness not only within artistic departments but also among opera theatre management about the importance of encouraging artists to actively engage with these issues. Ultimately, the study has demonstrated that the critical conditions brought about by the pandemic can serve as an unexpected yet valuable test bench.

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