

Case Study: The Music Village

Partner: Cultural Co-operation

Location: United Kingdom

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Introduction

The *Music Village* began in 1983 and is Europe's longest running festival of world cultures. Its geographic reach over the last two decades has spread beyond the 53 nations that form the modern Commonwealth to include some 3,000 creative practitioners from more than 80 countries in five continents. In that sense, the festival has evolved into a truly global event.

Yet it is - and will always remain - a child of the Commonwealth.

The festival was born out of the small and experimental crucible of creativity that characterised the new Arts Centre at London's Commonwealth Institute from 1980 to 1987. From 1986 onwards, *Music Villages* were organised by a new non-profit organisation, Cultural Co-operation (CC). This was formed by the Directors of the Arts Centre in the wake of the Centre's closure after a UK Government Review of the Institute that same year.

Activity

Each of the 22 *Music Villages* to date has, broadly speaking, shared the same format, namely:

- combined a mix of indoor events and outdoor events to cater for both specialist and general interests. Project partners for the popular free admission open-air Festival Weekends in London have included: Holland Park (1983-88); Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (1989, 2002-06); Gunnersbury Park (1990); Watermans Arts Centre (1991); Orleans House (1992); Clissold Park (1993); Richmond Riverside (1993-2000); and Regents Park (1994-2006);
- included a comprehensive programme of educational activities for school children, in partnership with the Education Departments of major cultural institutions, including national museums. Education Partners have included: Commonwealth Institute (1983-88); British Museum (1993-94, 1999-2004); Museum of Mankind (1995-97); Horniman Museum (1999, 2006); Museum of London (1999-2006); Imperial War Museum (2000-06);
- provided opportunities for debate, stimulated by expert speakers from around the world in evening and weekend seminars and, since 1994, in the context of a lunchtime Festival Club, with exhibitions, storytelling and food;
- presented Gala concerts and other evening recitals at more than 30 venues around the city;
- comprised a spectrum of art forms, such as visual arts, crafts, dance, costume, storytelling, cookery - and even hairdressing; and

- been admission free so that all sections of the community can attend, regardless of income and in a spirit of informal enquiry.

Impact

CC's newly framed mission took the Arts Centre's interpretation of the Commonwealth principles to its heart and applied these worldwide from then on.

The 17 *Music Villages* that Cultural Co-operation organised from 1987 to 2006 aimed, like the five Arts Centre ones before it, to do the following:

- foreground world cultural traditions that had never been seriously showcased in the West before and do so in novel ways that helped to illuminate understanding of them;
- encourage audiences to expand their understanding of 'quality', in particular which aspects of this 'quality' were culturally specific, and thus to be judged in their own terms, and which ones were more universal;
- achieve a balance between inclusion and quality;
- present world cultural forms in ways that captured, as far as possible, the spirit in which they are practised in their original setting;
- provide easy-to-grasp, yet authoritative, contextual information to help anyone encountering a particular cultural tradition for the first time, whether adult or child, to place it in its original milieu and thus make better sense of it; and
- make it easy, safe and welcoming to experience 'other' cultures at first hand, informally and with family and friends and in the presence of fellow citizens from different cultural or faith backgrounds with whom they might never normally socialise.

Lessons

- One of the less controversial steps originally taken was to programme certain activities into seasons with cross-cutting or overarching themes: the *Music Village* was the pre-eminent example of this. Such an approach encouraged appreciation of both the subtle differences between seemingly similar cultural traditions, countries or regions and the underlying unities between superficially divergent histories and aspirations.
- Themed programming delivers critically important economies of scale. It also greatly increases the impact of - and synergies between - disparate programme strands held together by a tight, central narrative.
- The festival has benefited from the fact that the mission of the *Music Village* was guided more by the values underpinning the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, potentially a far richer and more purposeful way of dealing with such a complex and contested area as world culture, and less by ensuring that each and every member nation had an automatic and equal share of the programme limelight - this, it was felt, ran the risk of leading to somewhat sterile, one-dimensional programming.