

The MSO: A Symphony of Cultures?

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The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) has just returned from what, by all accounts, has been a highly successful nine-day, five-concert European Tour. Following performances at London's Royal Albert Hall, the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, ad-man and MSO board chairman Harold Mitchell was effusive about the sell-out performances and rave reviews it attracted, hailing the tour as "triumphant"¹.

It seems the MSO has really come of age as an international class act that reflects well on Melbourne's ever-rising cultural star.

But how well do the players in the orchestra and the singers in the MSO Chorus reflect the cultural diversity of Melbourne's population? Are some segments of Melbourne's diverse population under-represented among the performance and operational support roles that underpin the MSO's success? And, what about the MSO patrons who provide financial support?

Last year, we went to two MSO performances at the Hamer Hall in Melbourne that also included the MSO Chorus – Verdi's Requiem and Handel's Messiah. The printed programs for both events included the names of orchestra and choir members, as well as the management and patrons. Given OriginsInfo's interest in names and their origin, this was an opportunity too good to miss.

From the two programs, we compiled lists of 335 performers (musicians and choristers), 260 patrons and 49 management staff. Although the numbers are relatively small for detailed analysis, we were able to draw numerous statistically valid conclusions and make some indicative observations.

The Origins software allocated one of 257 codes to each first and family name combination in the lists we collected. These 257 codes were aggregated into a smaller number of categories to improve statistical reliability and offer us some insight. Origins also assigned a gender code.

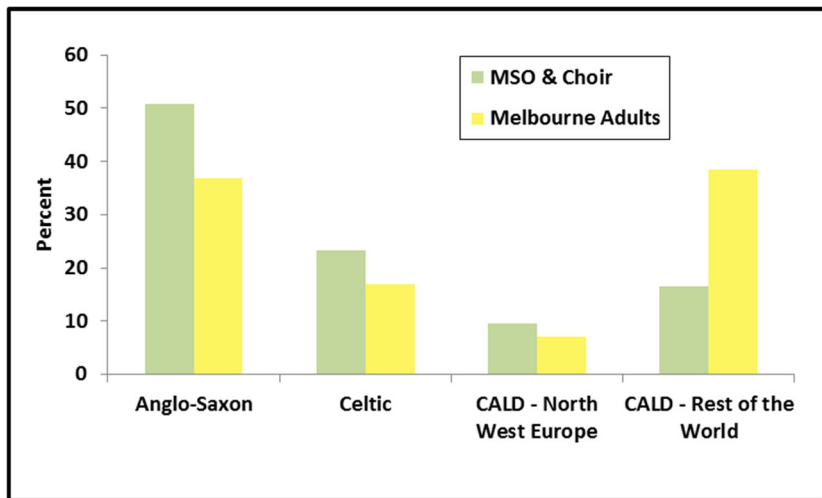
We compared the three lists with the Melbourne adult population, similarly coded by Origins, to see if any cultural segments were represented to a greater or lesser extent than expected, given their presence in the wider market.

In our results, we collectively refer to names of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic origin as Anglo-Celtic and we also use the term Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) to describe names that are non-Anglo-Celtic. CALD divides into "CALD: NW Europe", and "CALD: Rest of the World". Where relevant, we also refer to more specific cultural groups where such observations are statistically valid.

MSO musicians and singers show a strong skew towards Anglo-Celtic and "CALD: NW Europe" name origins with a particularly strong representation of English, Welsh and German names. On the other hand, there is a significant under-representation of East Asian and Balkan names, while names of Greek, South Asian, South East Asian and Islamic origin are virtually absent.

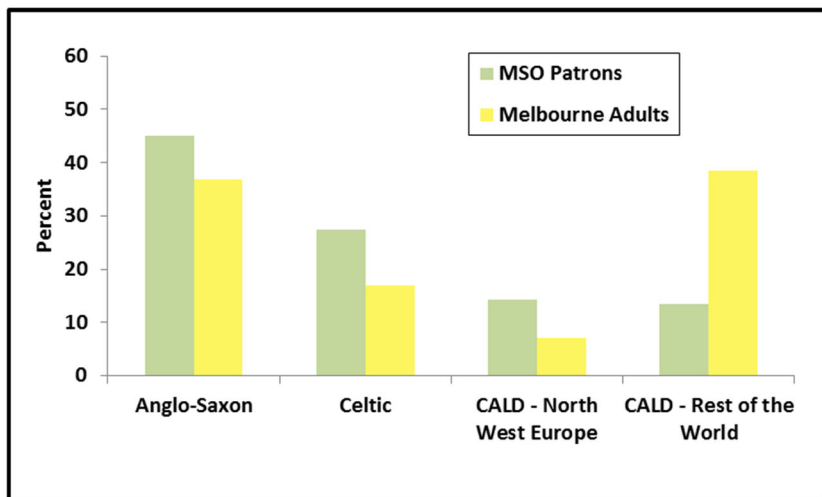
¹ The Age, Business Day, Saturday, August 30th 2014, p6

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra & Choir Cultural diversity compared with Melbourne Adults



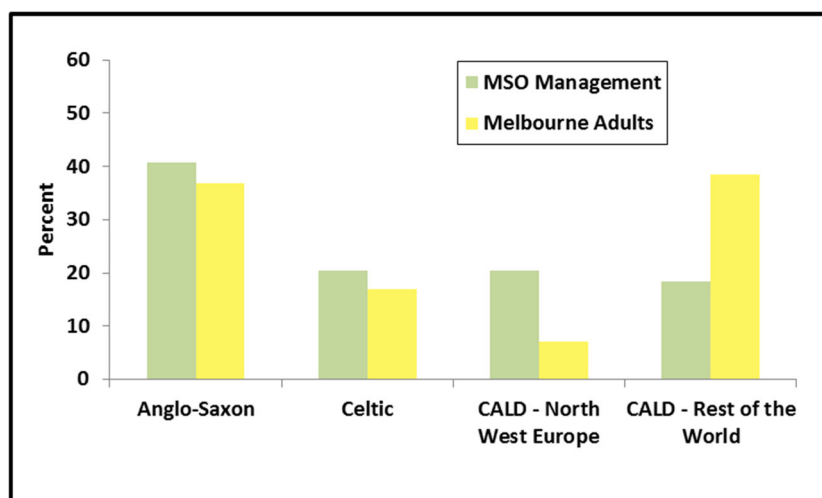
The patrons who provide financial support for the MSO are similarly skewed in their cultural heritage. Anglo-Celtic names are almost as strong compared with the performers, and Scottish names are proportionally much stronger, perhaps suggesting their philanthropic tendencies may outshine their musical ability. People with names of German and Jewish origin are similarly over-represented among the MSO patrons. As with MSO performers, people with names of SE Asian origin are virtually unrepresented.

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Patrons Cultural diversity compared with Melbourne Adults



The management list is much smaller and conclusions are correspondingly more tentative. However, it is noticeable that names of “CALD: NW Europe” origin – especially German, Polish and French – are almost three times as well represented among MSO management compared with the wider Melbourne population. People with “CALD: Rest of the World” names, while somewhat more strongly represented than in MSO performers and patrons, are still only half the expected representation given their presence in Melbourne.

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Management Cultural diversity compared with Melbourne Adults



On another aspect of diversity it is also interesting to observe a female gender bias among performers and management, and to a lesser extent among patrons.

Some might say that the results are pretty much as expected. While that may be largely true, the analysis provides an evidence-base for bias and quantifies the extent to which it exists. This evidence should contribute to a strategic consideration of the future positioning of the MSO brand, the product it offers, the source of future patronage, and the experience it delivers to customers.

Along with most employers these days, MSO management no doubt shares the desire to be more inclusive. Apart from anything else, it makes good business sense if their long-term appeal is to be sustained against the backdrop of Melbourne's population becoming even more culturally diverse. The challenge for the MSO is significant, given that most of the raw material for their classical repertoire originates in Europe and reflects 'highbrow' European values of culture and entertainment.

The MSO has made some effort to embrace diversity in the product it offers. For example, the "Arabian Nights" and "Chinese New Year" concerts are clearly designed to reflect particular themes. But, for whatever reason, it is clear from any visit to MSO events that a corresponding shift has yet to occur among its audiences, where people of apparent non-European origin are rare.

The strict protocols of performers' dress, the mixed diet of populist and demanding musical structures, the formality of the performance space, and the expected disciplines of audience appreciation are rituals of classical performance that do not always appeal to people of Vietnamese, Greek, South Asian or Islamic communities. Making the culture of classical performance accessible to under-represented cultural groups is a similar order of challenge to the nurturing of interest and engagement of musically-talented CALD students.

An analysis of subscribers and attendees at events would add another dimension to the challenge and provide a stake in the ground to reference how successful the MSO is in catering for an evolving market.

October 2014