



BETTER TOGETHER

A new initiative in Barcelona is encouraging unprecedented cooperation between the city's main classical music organisations. Could this be a model worth imitating in British cities, asks **Kimon Daltas**?

Barcelona isn't sure how it feels about tourists. Like any major city which happens to be a tourist destination, one section of the population makes a living off visitors and another would like to go about its daily business without stumbling over hordes of them.

The city is not about to turn its back on the 12% of its economy which relies on tourism, however. At the same time as the local government wages war on Airbnb for squeezing locals out of popular areas, it is also trucking in thousands of tonnes of sand to extend its beaches – a project begun for the transformative 1992 Olympics – and signing off on another cruise ship dock. If there is a consensus it is about encouraging

the right sort of tourism; the sort that behaves itself and spends plenty of money. Traders in the Boqueria market who put up signs saying 'We are not a tourist attraction' have noticed that having large groups of people traipsing through and taking photos all the time may increase world renown but ends up discouraging actual shoppers.

Along with a sprinkle of Catalan nationalism, these are all things on the collective mind of Barcelona Global, a private organisation of influential individuals and businesses dedicated to promoting the city internationally not as a boozy weekend destination for stags and hens, but as an ideal place to headquarter a tech startup or accept an academic post.

Part of the mission is to emphasise cultural riches and its latest project, Barcelona Obertura ('Barcelona overture'), focuses on classical music.

The city is home to three major classical music producers – the Liceu opera house, the Palau de la Música Catalana, and L'Auditori, the concert hall complex built in 1999, home of the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra. The initial phase of Barcelona Obertura – the proof of concept – was simply to line up the calendars of the three institutions and pick out a few weeks during the year in which a visitor would be able to see a concert every day. Building these mini festivals of things that were happening anyway, creating a promotional hook for effectively zero cost, is what got the bosses on board.

'We knew that we have a very high quality of offer in opera and classical music in Barcelona but we haven't used it internationally,' says Agusti Filomeno, marketing director of the Liceu. 'We didn't want a new concept, a new event – this is a project of cooperation to focus on what we are doing already.'

'These three institutions have different histories but they are complementary in their offer,' says Víctor Medem, coordinator of Barcelona Obertura. 'The Liceu is devoted to opera and ballet, the Auditori has modern symphonic and chamber music halls and rehearsal spaces, while the Palau of course is the jewel, an architectural masterpiece, the only concert hall which is a Unesco world heritage site.'

The organisations have differing remits but to a certain extent vie for a slice of the same audience. A collaboration of this sort instigated by one or other of them would have never worked, but the independent umbrella of Barcelona Global removed any concerns about ceding control to competitors.

What started as a promotional exercise is now ready to take a technical and organisational step forward, as a commercial platform in its own right. As well as diaries, the three institutions have been harmonising their ticketing systems and, launching in the autumn, Barcelona Obertura will be able to sell ticket packages to the mini festivals from its one-stop online shop.

Joan Oller, director of the Palau, notes that 25% of their tickets were already going

► Jewel in the crown: Palau de la Música



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▲ Built in 1999: L'Auditori, home to the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra

to international audiences – something they could build on – and the collaboration proposal came at the right time: ‘We wanted to promote the Palau internationally but we decided, instead of doing it alone, to work together with our colleagues.’

‘It was difficult at the beginning but easy at the same time – once we started to talk, it was clear the potential was there, and we have to make it work.’


Ramón Agenjo, an executive of the Damm brewery group and prominent member of Barcelona Global, agrees: ‘In Spain we say if you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far away, go with company. It’s a win-win joint venture.’

He is clear about where the Obertura initiative fits into Barcelona Global’s plan: ‘International talent recognises that culture is a major element when deciding where to be based, where to invest and where to raise your family. As a citizen’s platform aiming to attract talent and develop economic activity in Barcelona, we are sure that attaching classical music to its reputation will contribute to making it a global city.’

Filomeno also points out how Barcelona Obertura is projecting a positive image to residents, by nurturing civic pride in the international acclaim of its institutions. ‘If the world recognises what you’re doing, then the locals are also happy with us, which is very important.’

Whether the Barcelona Obertura model could be replicated in other cities around the world is another question. The factors that make it work in Barcelona are quite specific. It is a city with a global reputation already, and a cultural cache at that, so the project did not have to start at square one on that front. Then, it has just three major classical music institutions: enough to provide a substantial number of concerts but also few enough to get around the table and bash out an agreement – the more potential partners, the less chance of a unified approach emerging.

In some ways, the closest parallels and examples for imitation are the Unesco cities of music, part of the larger Creative Cities Network – Barcelona was inducted as a ‘city of literature’ in 2015, so it is quite likely that that focus is what the Obertura project seeks to replicate, but for its classical music offering.

The success of the project will ultimately rest on its ticketing platform – it is that which really sets it apart as a beacon of collaboration. Bosses of musical institutions in medium-sized cities, watch this space. 

▼ Marbled splendour: The Liceu, devoted to opera and ballet



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