



Orchestra Capture: The Elephant in the Room

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It has been almost two years since the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture quietly introduced a new national symphony orchestra without proper consultation. The mandate of the Mzansi National Philharmonic Orchestra is to transform the orchestra landscape, but it is already clear that this landscape will soon become a desert.

The intention was to empower orchestra players from all communities and to create an orchestra that would represent the entire South Africa. The goal was for everyone to benefit from the orchestra's concerts, job opportunities, and training. Previously, the Department's budget had been divided among the three major centres but, since 2020, the full budget has been allocated to the new orchestra.

Just before the Covid pandemic, R1 million was granted by the former Minister of Sport, Arts and Culture, Nathi Mthethwa, to produce a business plan. A task force was initially formed but, due to Covid, the activities of the "task force" were curtailed. A half-baked plan was then presented to the Department by the convener of the group, without anyone having any input into it.

What has been achieved so far? Apart from two short concert tours that included performances in Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, and Gqeberha, the Mzansi Orchestra has not made a significant difference to orchestral music in South Africa. What it is busy doing, however, is financially suffocating the three excellent, professional orchestras in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban.

The three concerts in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Gqeberha in mid-August were received enthusiastically, and the players and audiences provided favourable comments on social media. But nobody is talking about the elephant in the room. One swallow does not make a summer: the professional orchestras in South Africa that have been the backbone of the South African orchestral tradition for decades will no longer be sustainable as orchestras. And who will work hard for fifteen years to master an orchestral instrument if one can only play in a show performance a few times a year?

In Cape Town, the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra performs up to 120 times a year. It is a multi-functional orchestra for symphony concerts, opera, ballet, and other genres. With the same budget, the Mzansi Orchestra serves a few cities, but only once a year.

Sporadic concerts with players randomly chosen without auditions will not maintain the quality of orchestral playing at an international standard. A year ago, the MNPO gave its first performance at Wits' Centenary Celebration. In December of last year, the first concert tour was offered –

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town with the renowned conductor Marin Alsop on the podium. In its first year of existence, almost R54 million was allocated to the new entity, and in the current fiscal year, the normal budget is about R34 million.

Now, eight months later, the MNPO embarked on its second tour of three concerts. This time, it was Mahler's well-known Fifth Symphony in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Gqeberha. The traveling orchestra, mostly comprised of professional musicians in Johannesburg, Durban and a group of South Africans living and working abroad, is supposed to usher in a new era in orchestral music, according to the excessive propaganda paid for with taxpayer money in newspapers and on social media.

The promised empowerment of young, local musicians has yielded few results so far. A few showcase concerts per year do not change the orchestral landscape. An orchestra that only plays together a few times cannot transfer skills to young players for the rest of the year. Established orchestras in all major centres have been training young players and providing opportunities to gain experience in orchestral playing for decades.

The Mzansi Orchestra sidesteps its educational task by disbursing funds to universities without transparency and allocating overseas study funds to a few students without specific criteria. The education of classical musicians is primarily the responsibility of tertiary institutions. However, universities already receive subsidies from the Department of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation for that purpose. Practical training through youth orchestras, workshops, and experience in orchestral playing – as well as job opportunities – are the domain of practising orchestras and ensembles, as well as non-profit organizations like the Miagi Orchestra, Buskaid, the South African Youth Orchestra, and many other smaller groups that have been doing good work for years to empower young musicians.

The CEO of the Mzansi Orchestra and his three selected committee members, who do not represent the orchestral sector, hold the future of the country's orchestras in their hands without subjecting a long-term operational plan or the actual costs of concerts and additional travel and accommodation to public scrutiny.

The Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra, the only remaining South African orchestra that performs throughout the year and does not consist of rotating freelance musicians, was approached for collaboration last year. Several requests since June 2022 for insight into the Mzansi Orchestra's business plan and budgets have been unsuccessful. As a partner, the CPO wanted to understand more about the operational budget than just the ideals and objectives that are widely spread in the media and glossy brochures. When taxpayer money is used, a transparent and realistic business plan should be shared with the entire industry. The CPO was not willing to be part of undemocratic manipulation and rejected on moral grounds the small donation offered.

The excessive advertising, travel, and accommodation within South Africa, the foreign players, and an expensive conductor to lend stature to the orchestra make each concert at least three times more expensive. Spending the greater part of a budget meant for music on infrastructure, promotion, travel, and accommodation makes the entire project unsustainable.

So far, the Mzansi NPO is stumbling aimlessly with state funds. The lack of national representation and realistic transformation is just one aspect of a national ensemble that doesn't make sense. The so-called "Springbok Team" of orchestras is a farce. I am happy for the players who do get a chance to perform in the concerts. They deserve every opportunity to earn an income. However, the system

is corrupt, unfair, and there is no accountability for mismanagement. This is orchestra hijacking in its most classical form!

And the hijacking undermines all the other orchestras. Taking away financial security from a region at a time when there are practically no corporate sponsorships available means only one thing: a desert in cities with good orchestras. A large, expensive orchestra that offers concerts once or twice a year with imported conductors and the same randomly chosen players will not sustain the orchestra culture in South Africa. If the same group of musicians, selected on merit, does not play together regularly enough to maintain the standard of orchestral music at an international level, mediocrity and permanent job losses will ensue. This ultimately leads to an apathetic audience, and the loyal group of music lovers who support the current orchestra culture will lose interest.

There are so many talented young musicians who dream of playing full-time in one of the excellent orchestras in South Africa someday. Their chances are becoming fewer and fewer. The Mzansi National Orchestra is destroying the orchestra culture in South Africa. All metropolitan areas will lose their functioning quality orchestras.

August 2023