



## Better engage our community

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*Mark Fawcett outlines a method for connecting communities with an art form they may not know they like.....*

Audiences for traditional operatic performances in Mackay had been dwindling. The resource 'boom economy' that Mackay has experienced over the last decade saw many asset rich, cash poor older residents leave the city, and this audience in many ways was the traditional audience for performances such as opera and orchestral works. The younger demographic that has moved to Mackay is a more popular culture oriented audience and even very accessible light operettas did not resonate with that demographic.

Audience research showed opera was suffering from a perception problem in Mackay, the word 'opera' was a turn off, but interestingly many who claimed they did not like opera had never seen an operatic performance.

The [Mackay Entertainment & Convention Centre](#) is fairly sophisticated when it comes to undertaking audience research and has a very good relationship with the community. A random electronic survey is undertaken after each show to evaluate both the venue and performance experience, and we also ask what shows our community aspires to see. Furthermore, the house manager always sees the house in and out so we can obtain face to face anecdotal evidence. It was highly obvious that opera was not in high demand, in fact demand was low, and if something was not done the Mackay audience may not benefit from a major Queensland company such as Opera Queensland into the future.

Enter [Lindy Hume](#) and Russell Mitchell from [Opera Queensland](#). Lindy and Russell wanted to ensure Opera Queensland could continue bringing works to Mackay, and the only way that was going to be financially viable in the long run was to better engage our community, change perceptions of opera, and ultimately put more bums on seats. Lindy and Russell discussed the idea of adding a community chorus to a professional opera performance being La Boheme and the rest as they say is history.

Opera Queensland and I were incredibly passionate about Project Puccini, and it really was exciting. The opportunity to form a local chorus, who would be professionally mentored by Opera Queensland, was an exciting initiative, but no-one expected the incredible success we achieved. Originally I was nervous that we may not have enough interested community members to form a 48 member chorus, but come audition day we had over 90 people attend, and good healthy competition ensued which was well reported in the media which created further excitement and hype.

Watching 48 disparate members of our community work together over 12 weeks or so to form a quasi-professional company was extremely rewarding, and we gave our chorus additional performance opportunities at local festivals to build their confidence and abilities and promote the project and performance. The energy and enthusiasm of our chorus was infectious, so many people were talking about Project Puccini, and we realised we were on to something.

Project Puccini required funding, and a firm commitment to working in partnership was required. At a local level we were to source a Rehearsal Coordinator, Pianist, advertise for auditions, provide venue space, and nurture and train our choir. I was able to personally commit to the additional work required, and discussions with Arts Queensland indicated La Boheme could be funded at a local level through the [Regional Arts Development Fund](#).

This was a new idea to many [NARPACA venues](#) whose Councils fund programming costs but not necessarily project costs. Mackay Regional Council however was very receptive and our funding application to have La Boheme funded was successful setting a standard for many other venues. This funding effectively allowed us the finance to fully deliver on the partnership by employing the necessary resources we don't have on staff, and these resources, particularly the rehearsal coordinator then allowed us a dedicated person to fully engage with the community on the project.

While several Queensland venues took part in Project Puccini, Mackay was the first cab off the rank when it came to undertaking auditions. We and Opera Queensland quickly learnt that this project was going to be organic in nature. We learnt that the community was hungry to audition, and the audition process had to be bolstered with additional staffing. We had 90 people to be measured for costumes, and just one tape measure! Differing abilities and ages meant that rehearsals were a bit hit and miss in the early days, but the more experienced chorus members mentored the inexperienced and we were fortunate enough to have a fantastic team both locally and in Brisbane to guide and provide advice. The lasting legacies are a changed perception of opera, the best operatic attendance we have had in over a decade, community pride, skills development, cultural development, self-belief, community inclusion, and much, much more.

It is important to think outside the square when it comes to engagement. Workshops and meet and greets are always valued, but creating deeper and longer engagement can bring far greater benefits. Regional communities may suffer the tyranny of distance but we have passion and can access technology which allows us virtual access to capital cities to better understand and engage. And finally don't underestimate the talents in a regional community. We unearthed singing taxi drivers and electricians, a bunch of talented children, and created a chorus that bonded as a company that would not look out of place on a West End stage. All it takes is a want and desire and a bit of hard work to make great things happen.

## **Mark Fawcett**



*Mark Fawcett is Manager of the Mackay Convention Precinct and Events. His career in the arts spans over two decades in the United Kingdom and Australia. Mark is a member of the Queensland Local Government Arts & Culture Advisory Committee, QLD APACA Representative, Company Secretary for Mackay Artspace Foundation, Secretary NARPACA, and a Helpmann Awards panelist.*