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Putting tickets on themselves

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Australian arts institutions are abandoning Ticketmaster and Ticketek for a software program that tracks their patrons' habits. Robin Usher reports.

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TESSITURA is hardly the word on everyone's lips but it is at the heart of a revolution sweeping the way arts organisations sell tickets. The latest to introduce the software, the Arts Centre, has spent \$3 million on the system but chief executive Tim Jacobs hopes its arrival has gone unnoticed.

"Ticketing is at the core of our business but if you get people's noses out of joint you are going to be in trouble big time," he says.

He expects people will see changes over the next year or so but in the meantime he is cautious about how the centre uses the software to track customer habits and preferences. "It has gone particularly smoothly, and we are talking about the largest arts ticketing inventory in the country," he says of the system's introduction last May to deal with annual sales of more than 1.3 million seats. "Tessitura is vastly more user-friendly, which is why it has swept through all the international markets."

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Tessitura was developed by New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1998 and operates as a not-for-profit company where preferred developments are controlled by the votes of about 260 organisations that use it worldwide.

Arts organisations love Tessitura because it gives them detailed information about their customers that can be accessed by all departments, from subscriptions and philanthropy, to catering.

The Sydney Symphony was the first Australian company to introduce it in 2005, a few months before the Opera House, which runs a consortium of users including Opera Australia, the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Bell Shakespeare and the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra.

Its take-up in Melbourne will be a blow to the Arts Centre's traditional ticketing partner, Ticketmaster. When Tessitura is fully operational, it will mean a loss of about \$7 million a year on transaction fees at the Arts Centre alone. "It means the big stadium sellers like Ticketmaster are losing a big chunk of market share in not-for-profit areas," Jacobs says.

Ticketmaster will remain the primary seller at the Arts Centre for shows prepared before Tessitura's May introduction, and can be used as a back-up until May 2011. Even when Tessitura is fully operational, Ticketmaster will still sell big-volume acts such as Bon Jovi at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl, a concert that sold 25,000 tickets in hours.

Transaction fees will stay the same - \$7.15 - for online and telephone booking, but not at the box office. The Arts Centre's marketing director, Heather Walker, says it is in everyone's interest to keep charges low. "The most important part of revenue-raising is selling tickets, not imposing fees."

The Melbourne Theatre Company introduced Tessitura in 2007. General manager Ann Tonks says: "We are developing historical information about our customers that we just didn't have previously. You can use it in all sorts of wonderful ways. When the air-conditioning collapsed during the February bushfires, we sent out an SMS to 500 people at the push of a button to tell them a

performance had been cancelled."

The Australian Ballet introduced the system 18 months ago and estimated it would take until 2013 to break even. "But it paid for itself within a year, which was just extraordinary," says Philippe Magid, who was in charge of its implementation.

The company's online subscription sales increased more than three times to 38 per cent within that time, while online single-ticket sales increased from zero to 55 per cent, bringing total returns through the system to \$5 million.

Despite the focus on ticket sales, it is described as a customer relationship management system. Jacobs says it will allow the Arts Centre to see connections between an individual customer's preferred art form and seating, and organisational memberships and donor programs.

Ticketmaster will continue to be used by the Melbourne Symphony for the next 2½ years, and by the Comedy Festival, whose director, Susan Provan, tested alternative systems last year after customers complained about \$7 booking fees for \$15 shows.

"We're looking at the potential to sell more than 500,000 tickets across more than 50 different venues over a relatively short selling period," she says.

Ticketmaster's director of operations, Chris Forbes, acknowledges a trend in Australia and New Zealand for arts centres to go inhouse. "However, they often rely on major ticketing companies to provide reach to consumers to maximise the sale of tickets," he says.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2009/09/20/1253384900511.html>