

Management of Romanian Opera Theaters During the Pandemic Crisis – the Opera Consumer's Perspective

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Abstract

The paper investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the management of opera houses in Romania, from the perspective of the opera consumer. It focuses on two important aspects related to the management of opera houses during the COVID-19 pandemic: the replacement of live performance with digital opera and the response of cultural institutions to the needs of the opera consumer community. These aspects were measured by consumer satisfaction regarding the replacement of live performance with digital opera and by the way in which opera houses responded to the needs of the community, during the lockdown period. The study analyzed how variables such as age and education level of consumers are associated, on the one hand, with consumer satisfaction regarding the replacement of live performance with digital opera (ÎC1), and on the other hand, with the assessment of the way in which cultural institutions responded, during the lockdown period, to the needs of the community (ÎC2). The results highlight significant differences between various audience groups, outlining distinct profiles of perception and cultural adaptation. The article highlights the role of demographic factors in shaping attitudes towards the digitalization of the lyrical theater experience and the importance of a flexible managerial strategy, oriented towards the diversified needs of post-pandemic opera consumers.

Keywords: crisis management, opera theater, public, consumer behavior.

JEL classification: H12; L32; L82.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated one of the deepest crises in the recent history of the cultural sector. Starting with March 2020, performing arts institutions around the world have been forced to suspend their activity, to drastically reduce contact with the public and to quickly identify solutions to maintain their social relevance. In Romania, opera houses, institutions with a long tradition, financed mainly from public funds, have faced unprecedented managerial challenges.

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This paper aims to analyze how opera houses have managed the pandemic period, from the perspective of the opera consumer. The analysis considers managerial adaptations, technological transformations and changes in audience behavior, with a focus on spectators' perception of new forms of cultural consumption.

The aim of the research is to identify how the pandemic crisis has accelerated digitalization processes, reshaped institutional strategies and redefined the relationship between the public and the opera institution. The paper is based on public data and observations from the period 2020–2024, as well as on theoretical sources from the fields of cultural management, artistic marketing, sociology of art consumption, and a quantitative analysis.

2. Literature Review

The literature on cultural management and the adaptation of artistic institutions in times of crisis provides a solid theoretical framework for analyzing how opera houses have responded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past two decades, studies have emphasized the need for professionalization of artistic management (Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Colbert, 2003) and for adaptation of cultural institutions to technological and social changes (Bonet & Donato, 2011). In the context of the pandemic, international research has focused on the effects of the crisis on the cultural sector and resilience strategies. Organizations such as UNESCO (2021) and OECD (2022) have published detailed reports on the impact of restrictions on the performing arts, highlighting both the economic vulnerability and the transformative potential of digitalization. According to Kotler and Scheff (1997), performing arts management involves balancing **artistic mission and market demands**. In times of crisis, this balance is threatened, and institutions are forced to find new models of sustainability. Recent research (Bonet & Donato, 2011; Colomb, 2020) shows that cultural resilience depends on **the capacity for managerial innovation and community collaboration**.

In Romania, studies on cultural management (Pop, 2019; Marinescu, 2018) highlight the predominantly administrative nature of state institutions and the need for strategic flexibility. The pandemic has exacerbated this problem, leading managers to shift from a bureaucratic approach to one oriented towards quick solutions and digital communication (Cultural Policy Review, 2021).

International literature highlights that digitalization is one of the main directions of modernization of the performing arts. According to Walmsley (2019), the digital environment offers opportunities for **expanding audiences and creating hybrid experiences**, combining physical presence and online participation. In Romania, the process of cultural digitization was modest before 2020 (INCFC, 2019). The pandemic generated a sudden acceleration, leading opera houses to adopt online platforms for broadcasting performances. Studies published in 2020–2022 (Dumbravă, 2021; Iacob, 2022) show that this transition was difficult due to the lack of technical infrastructure and digital skills. However, it opened up new possibilities for accessing culture, including for young audiences and the Romanian diaspora.

A consistent element in the literature is the idea that **digital experience does not replace direct experience**, but can complement it (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In

the case of opera, where emotional and acoustic interaction play an essential role, audiences perceive the online environment more as a form of temporary contact, not as a substitute for the performance hall (Walmsley, 2019). The review of the specialized literature indicates that the pandemic acted as a catalyst for the transformation of cultural management. The main themes identified are: **institutional resilience**, based on adaptation and collaboration (Bonet & Donato, 2011); the **acceleration of digitalization** as a form of survival and audience expansion (Walmsley, 2019; Dumbravă, 2021); the **reconfiguration of the relationship with the audience**, which becomes more participatory and more connected online (INCFC, 2021; Walmsley, 2022); the **need for managerial reform** in Romanian cultural institutions, for greater flexibility and for a strategic orientation (Pop, 2019; Cultural Policy Review, 2021).

To understand how the pandemic impacted the cultural world, several studies have been conducted. For example, Mak, Fluharty and Fancourt (2021) identified which demographic variables influenced cultural consumption during isolation. Worsley et al. (2022), analyzed how cultural institutions have resumed activities after lockdown and how they have responded to the needs of the vulnerable, through hybrid formats (live and online). Another concrete example of how artistic and leisure services have adapted, including for vulnerable communities (elderly, isolated) is identified in (Local Government Association, 2020). The report by Bradbury et al., (2021), include aspects related to how cultural sectors have responded to public/community needs in the United Kingdom. Rossello & Thomas (2020) studied how the cultural sector responded to isolation through digital content and cultural platforms in the context of the pandemic, in Latin America. Another study from China explores what factors influence the attitude and, implicitly, satisfaction in the case of virtual concerts (Deng & Pang, 2023)

With the introduction of health restrictions, opera houses in Romania, like theatres around the world, were forced to suspend their traditional live performances. The immediate managerial response was to migrate the activity to the online environment. Most of opera theaters started programs for the digital broadcasting of performances from their archive or of new productions, specially recorded for on-line transmission, such as Opera Națională București.

This process meant a significant transformation: opera houses became temporary digital content producers. Platforms such as YouTube or Facebook were used to maintain contact with the public and attract new viewers, including from abroad. Some institutions have also initiated digital educational projects – interviews with artists, virtual tours of buildings or online workshops for children, such as Opera Română Iași. These initiatives have contributed to strengthening the relationship with the local and national community and expanding the educational mission of the institutions.

Adapting to the digital environment was difficult for several reasons. First, the technological infrastructure of many Romanian opera houses was precarious. Online broadcasts required high-performance video and audio equipment, specialized staff, and additional investment – all difficult to achieve in the face of

budget cuts (Cultural Policy Review, 2021). Second, the public subsidy-dependent financial structure limited managerial flexibility. Although public funding ensured institutional stability, the lack of ticket revenues and direct interaction with the public affected the motivation of artists and the sense of belonging to the community (Bourdieu, 1984). Managers faced a strategic dilemma: how to maintain artistic relevance in an environment dominated by digital content and, at the same time, preserve the specificity of the opera experience – a collective act, based on presence and direct emotion.

The Romanian opera audience has generally a quite stable consumer profile: highly educated people, interested in culture, loyal through subscriptions and family tradition (Pop, 2019). The pandemic has significantly changed the behavior of this audience. Not having access to live performances, spectators have turned to the online environment. According to a survey conducted by the National Institute for Cultural Research in 2021, over 65% of culture consumers have watched at least one artistic event online, and opera was among the preferred genres due to the visual and sound quality of the broadcasts (INCFC, 2021). However, the digital experience could not fully replace face-to-face contact. Many viewers reported a diminution of aesthetic emotion and a feeling of “affective distance” from the artists. This perception confirms Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) theory that the value of the artistic experience derives from active participation and the collective atmosphere.

During the pandemic, viewer behavior has changed significantly. According to INCFC (2021), over 65% of cultural consumers have accessed online art events, but most said the experience did not offer the same emotional intensity as live performances. This finding supports theories about **the experiential nature of art** (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), according to which direct participation is essential for cultural satisfaction. Post-pandemic research (Walmsley, 2022; Colomb, 2023) also shows that audiences are showing a preference for hybrid models of cultural consumption – a desire to return to physical performances, but also to retain the digital option for accessibility and convenience. This trend has major implications for the future strategies of opera houses, which must maintain the balance between tradition and innovation.

During the pandemic, the public was driven by various **motivations and barriers**. The motivations were: the desire for live experience, cultural socialization, an escape from pandemic isolation, digital accessibility, and the opportunity to “try” the opera in a modified form. The barriers were the fear of crowds, health regulations, the perception that the live experience is compromised (e.g., social distancing rooms, wearing a mask), as well as changed cultural consumption habits from the comfort of one's own home. In an article from journal “Libertatea”, from February 14, 2021, Petre Barbu describes his fear of re-entering a theater, after many months of imposed absence: “I'm afraid that I won't be able to relive what I once loved: the emotion that crosses the ramp. I'm afraid that my heart will no longer beat with the actors' hearts and that I will witness some exchanges of lines on stage, something mechanical, tense, as if I and the actors will only be thinking about the virus, about infections, don't get close, don't hug, don't kiss, respect the distancing

rules, as the DSP said!... I will "process" every gesture and line in the key of current events: the pandemic" (Barbu, 2021).

With the return to live performance in opera theatres, the expectations of the audience changed: they expected flexibility, hybrid options (live + online) and a much wider repertoire. Also, the live experience will have to justify the cost and effort of traveling to the hall again: comfort, accessibility, digital communication pre-/post-show. For the traditional audience, it is important to restore "normal" – but also to clearly communicate safety measures, comfort and added value. For new spectators (those viewing opera during or after the pandemic), it was important to create an engaging experience that would lead to fostering their long-term loyalty and their transformation into recurring audience.

3. Research Methodology

The main objective of the study is to identify the opera consumer's perspective on the management of opera theaters in Romania, during the pandemic, in terms of two important dimensions: 1. the degree of consumer satisfaction regarding the replacement of live performance with digital opera performance; 2. the way in which the cultural sector responded to the needs of the community to which the respondents belong during the lockdown period

The research questions formulated were: ÎC1. How are socio-demographic variables (age, education) associated with consumer satisfaction with the replacement of live performance with digital opera?; ÎC2. How are socio-demographic variables (age, education) associated with the appreciation of how the cultural sector responded to the needs of the community to which the respondents belong during the lock-down period?

The research tools used was a questionnaire with 32 questions. The first questions (7) refer to the demographic characteristics of the respondents: 1. Gender, 2. Age, 3. Area of residence, 4. Studies, 5. Are you a lover of classical music?, 6. Are you a lover of opera music? And 7. Do you consider yourself part of the loyal audience of an artistic institution? The aim was to identify the opinion of the audience regarding the management of the opera during the COVID-19 period.

The questionnaire was completed by 214 respondents, of whom 142 (89.7%) were female and 72 (33.6%) were male. 192 (66.4%) respondents were from urban areas and 22 (10.3%) from rural areas. In terms of age, most respondents were in the 36 - 55 age group (61- 27.9%), followed by those in the 55 - 64 age group (64 - 29.9%) and those over 65 (42 - 19.6%). The least represented age group was 18 - 35 (27/12.6% respondents). In the research group, respondents with higher education (university, postgraduate) 192 (89.7%) were predominant compared to those with secondary education (high school, post-secondary education) 22 (10.3%),

Regarding the degree of satisfaction related to the replacement of live performance with digital opera, 11 respondents (5.1%) declared that they were fully

satisfied, 39 respondents (18.2%) were satisfied, but the majority 78 respondents (36.4%) declared themselves slightly satisfied and 86 (40.2%) declare themselves dissatisfied.

Regarding the way in which the cultural sector responded to the needs of the community to which the respondents belong during the lockdown period, 153 (71.5%) of the respondents rated it satisfactory, 51 respondents (23.8%) rated it as good and only 10 respondents (4.7%) as excellent. The way in which the cultural sector responded to the needs of the community to which the respondents belong, throughout the pandemic period is rated as unsatisfactory by 72 respondents (33.6%), as satisfactory by 81 respondents (37.9%) and as good by 50 respondents (23.4%). Only 11 respondents (5.1%) rated it as excellent.

The effect that online opera broadcasts, or live-streaming, had on the respondents' mood during the pandemic is assessed to be an average of 6.9 (SD=2.37), on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is extremely unfavorable and 10 is maximum favorable.

4. Results and Discussions

To answer the research questions: whether and how socio-demographic variables (age, education) are associated with consumer satisfaction with the replacement of live performance with digital opera and with the appreciation of how the cultural sector responded to the needs of the community to which respondents belong during the lockdown period, a series of analyses were run using the Pearson Chi-square test.

The results of the association analysis between the age variable and the indicators of respondents' perception of opera theater management during the COVID-19 period show that age was not statistically significantly associated with the indicators of respondents' perception of opera theater management in Romania during the Covid 19 period (see Table 1, below).

Association between the age of opera consumers and indicators of respondents' perception of the management of the Romanian opera house during Covid 19

Table 1

Age	The question	Coefficient	Meaning
	9 What is your degree of satisfaction with the replacement of live performance with digital opera?	$\chi^2 = 13.70$ (df=9, N=214), p= .13.	Statistically insignificant
	10 How did the cultural sector respond to the needs of the community you are part of during the lockdown period?	$\chi^2 = 1.49$ (df=6, N=214), p= .96.	Insignificant statistical

In contrast, the educational level (studies) of the respondents was

statistically significantly associated with indicators of perception of opera house management during the covid 19 period (see Table 2, below).

Association between the educational level of opera consumers and indicators of their perception of the management of the Romanian opera house during the Covid 19 period

Table 2

Educational level	The question	Coefficient	Meaning
	9 What is your degree of satisfaction with the replacement of live performance with digital opera?	$\chi^2 = 16.61$ (df=3, N=214), p= .001.	Statistically significant
	10 How did the cultural sector respond to the needs of the community you are part of during the lockdown period?	$\chi^2 = 8.16$ (df=2, N=214), p= .017.	Statistically significant

This result may suggest a recommendation for managers to consider the fact that depending on the educational level of the audience (studies), there are differences in the degree of satisfaction related to the replacement of live performance with digital performance and in the perception of how the cultural sector has responded to the needs of the community.

The detailed analysis of the results reveals a series of interesting aspects, as follows: respondents with higher education represent 93.0% of the dissatisfied respondents, 92.3% of the slightly satisfied ones and 87.2% of the satisfied ones. The fully satisfied respondents (5.1%) belong equally (5 and 6) to both levels of education: secondary (high school, post-secondary) and higher (university, postgraduate).

A study that found similar results is De Peuter et al. (2023), which refers to how the cultural industry sectors responded to the first wave of the crisis and how the artistic world fought to rehabilitate the status quo and reimagine it for the post-COVID-19 period. Also, Feder et al. (2022), analyzes, based on two national surveys, how cultural consumption changed in England, during the research period. We recommend that managers periodically conduct public surveys, to be aware of changes in their perceptions/attitudes and to be able to respond quickly and efficiently. The National Endowment for the Arts (2023) shows that people with a bachelor's degree or higher had significantly higher participation rates at live events (in-person-arts-events) than those with a lower level of education. And Mak et al. (2025) study how participation varies globally and what individual (age, education, income, etc.) and national factors (income inequality, migration, other indicators) are associated with these differences.

5. Conclusions

The management of Romanian opera houses during the pandemic has been characterized by rapid adaptation to new conditions and challenges, as well as by identifying and exploiting opportunities for innovation through digitalization and diversification of the ways in which opera performances are presented to the public. It has also been a period of reflection on the role that art plays in society and on how cultural institutions can become more resilient and flexible in the face of future crises.

Opera managers and employees have had to adapt quickly to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, which included physical distancing, bans on large gatherings, and the closure of cultural institutions for extended periods. This meant a sudden transition to online events and a radical change in the way operas were presented to the public.

After the shock of the crisis, managers were forced to engage in a process of updating. This is a leadership skill in which previous beliefs are reviewed in order to address and resolve emerging issues. Managers had to adapt, even though it is difficult to change direction once they have committed to a course of action. While many managers believed at the start of the pandemic that it was impossible to perform under the given conditions, it has been proven that operating during a pandemic is possible. Opera house managers were forced to significantly change their operating model, and the collective team (managers, administrative staff, musicians, etc.) discovered the power of flexibility.

Opera houses have been able to reach underserved communities and new geographic markets through online broadcasts, something that would not have been possible with live events alone. Some opera houses have charged tickets for virtual viewings. This has brought in additional revenue, new opera fans, and even media attention. Before the pandemic, when opera houses' schedules featured lesser-known works, filling theaters was a real challenge. But that pressure disappeared when the theater was reduced to less than 50% of its capacity. Therefore, staging titles with few characters, no chorus, and a small orchestra, such as GB Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*, has been the choice of many opera managers during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a period of crisis, but also of reinvention, for Romanian opera houses. Faced with severe restrictions and uncertainty, these institutions have demonstrated a surprising capacity for adaptation. From the perspective of the opera consumer, the pandemic period has brought both losses – the absence of collective emotion and live experience – and gains – increased accessibility, cultural democratization, and closeness to artists.

In the long term, the lessons of this period can serve as a foundation for a structural reform of cultural management in Romania: permanent digitalization, openness to the global public, and strengthening the educational role of opera institutions.

The first conclusion regarding the priorities of opera houses in the country and abroad in this situation is that they continued to offer the cultural product to the

public. The main way that all opera houses resorted to, was the broadcasting of performances from the archive. Most opera houses in the world, starting with the Metropolitan Opera NY, Wiener Staatsoper, Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Royal Opera House Covent Garden used the publication of previous recordings of performances on digital platforms to address the usual audience. They made them available to the audience for free, or for a modest suggested donation. This represented the only way in which artists managed to stay close to their audience during the lockdown / quarantine periods.

The online transmission of archived performances was the most widely used practice in the world of opera during the pandemic, used by all Romanian theatres included in this research. Next, they experimented with live online transmissions, which proved to be an important starting point for a new virtual offer. Managers favoured artistic experiments designed and produced specifically for transmission on screens. These productions had different aesthetic stakes than the live performance, targeted a different audience, and communicated with a different language. Some managers feared that they would disappoint their audience by trying to transform a live experience into a mediocre online one. The audience's response can be seen in the questionnaires addressed to them. Opera theatre's managers, musicians, and staff members discovered new, unknown capabilities regarding the use of innovative technologies, the playback of diverse types of music and coordination in new ways. This resulted in hybrid performances that, over time, remain to verify their viability.

The authors conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced opera houses to adopt a more flexible and digital approach to meet the challenges imposed by health restrictions. They identified the main transformations in the management of opera theatres during this period of crisis due to the need to quickly adapt to face the new challenges.

The first is the digitalization and online streaming of opera performances. To reach a wider audience during lockdowns, many opera houses have started to broadcast live or recorded performances on various online platforms. This has developed a new channel for accessing opera, which in many cases has continued even after the theatres have reopened. Many opera houses have also launched their own streaming platforms or collaborated with external platforms to broadcast opera productions, recitals, and concerts. These have become a way to stay connected with the public, even during periods when the theatres were closed.

The second direction of transformation consisted of changing the program and productions. First, performances were postponed and cancelled. Many institutions were forced to postpone or cancel productions due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. These changes had a significant impact on revenues and programming. Opera houses also adapted to social distancing restrictions to comply with safety regulations, and some performances were modified, with a reduced number of artists on stage or with new directing techniques to respect physical distancing.

The third direction of transformation occurred in the management of the financial resources of opera houses. The closure of the theatre halls and interdiction of live performances led to significant losses in ticket sales, which led to a decrease in the total income of the theatres. Public opera houses relied solely on government

subsidies. This led to the adoption of cost-effectiveness actions. Some institutions were forced to reduce expenses to survive financially, by reducing the number of temporary employees (collaborators), or by decreasing the number of new productions.

The fourth direction of transformation was the transition to hybrid work, telework, flexible regimes and adaptive planning. Administrative and technical staff were moved to telework regime where possible. Artists continued to study at home, and when allowed, they returned to rehearsals at the headquarters, respecting social distancing measures. Also, managers of opera institutions had to be extremely flexible, quickly adapting strategies and plans depending on the evolution of the health situation, which was unpredictable.

The fifth direction consisted of changes in marketing and promotion activities. Given the impossibility of organizing physical events, opera theaters began to place a much greater emphasis on digital marketing. Online campaigns, social networks, and streaming platforms became the main channels of promotion. To maintain the interest of the audience, many institutions began to create additional, innovative content such as interviews with artists.

The sixth direction identified is the increase in interest in virtual international collaborations, through international partnerships in digital format. Geographical distance has not prevented collaborations between artists from different corners of the world. They have begun to collaborate to create large-scale online events, which would bring together artists from several countries for virtual productions (the independent projects such as *Revedere*, or *Respirăm împreună*).

The last direction of transformation identified by the researchers refers to changes in the relationship with the audience and the cultural experience by identifying new forms of interaction with the audience. Since there were no more physical events, many institutions sought to maintain the relationship with the audience through online educational programs, question and answer sessions with artists and conductors, or by organizing virtual interactive events.

The crisis has shown that the Romanian opera audience remains faithful to traditional values but is willing to accept innovative forms of artistic expression. In an increasingly technological world, the survival of opera depends on the balance between the authenticity of the live experience and the transformative potential of the digital environment.

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