

# The power

David Vivian Russell talks to  
Sydney Symphony General Manager Libby Christie

**DVR: What are you doing working at Sydney Symphony? Do you wake up at 3am and ask yourself this question?**

LC: Well no, I think at three in the morning I'm very glad I work at Sydney Symphony. My career has been in a number of areas. I worked in adult education (born and bred in Sydney and went to Sydney University) and learning. Something I learned from adult education is that I do like working with people and I like working constructively. Throughout my career I've looked for roles where the ability to get the best out of people has been a constant theme.

Then I moved from adult education to an IT company as a result of work I'd done on commercialising some of our offerings to the business environment – education in the IT sector. I didn't work in IT because of technical competence more because I can communicate.

Now I've had a long career in that environment. My expertise was developing business relationships with people and in an IT environment you're doing that to benefit your shareholders. You tend to become very driven by share price listing and annual results. *That* becomes the barometer of success even though often what is happening on the stock exchange isn't what's happening in the company from a day to day basis. So I decided that for my next job I would look for one that wasn't driven by the share price but by more intangible benefits and reputation and one in which I could give back to the community I live in.

**DVR Where were you before taking the reins of the Sydney Symphony?**

LC: My previous job was with an American company and I knew I wanted to work in an Australian company where the stakeholders were Australian. So I started researching where I would fit in well and then this job appeared.

**DVR: Were you surprised you got the job?**

LC: I must say Sydney Symphony and its board went through a very rigorous search process and interviewing process. By the time I was told I got the job I was just delighted and incredibly honoured that I had got to the stage of winning the confidence of so many stakeholders. The board and musicians were involved, the Australia Council and the chief conductor. So by that



## behind the throne

stage there was no surprise but, boy, was I gratified.

**DVR: Obviously you've been chosen because of your ability to communicate and your experience in business**

LC: It was my ability to demonstrate that I know how to run a business of about this size which was very important and that I understood how to manage and satisfy a very complex set of stakeholders along with the management and financial aspect. And finally the organisation needs someone who can take a high profile and represent it in a comprehensive and articulate way. And so is a credible spokesperson for the organisation.

**DVR: Increasingly a person in authority, whether it's artistic or corporate, has to not just simply have a desire and ability for that position but has to communicate it and be a savvy communicator.**

LC: Yes credible, you have to be very credible.

**DVR: Given that corporate giving is so important do you think we'll ever get to where arts organisations don't have to go out and sell themselves?**

LC: Yes, again I think that was one of the important considerations the board

had. We all know government is our single largest source of funding yet there is a limit to which government can and should be funding an organisation such as this. I have met with members of the government and opposition both state and federal and they've confirmed their support of the Sydney Symphony and their confidence that the Symphony can represent Australia on the world stage in a very credible way. They've asked me how they can help us increase our income from private sources as they realise for us to achieve the reputation they want us to achieve on the world stage we do need more funds. I know what the corporate world looks for in relationships and I think the days of the corporate world just donating money to a worthy cause have gone.

**DVR: If it ever really existed – I'm not sure it did outside a couple of people who did it.**

LC: Yes. I think those corporates with a strong history of giving do so to charities. It would be the death of the organisation if we thought of ourselves that way. So when we talk to corporate partners we talk in terms of how we can enhance their advertising budget. We talk about who comes to our concerts, how many, what age they are, demographics, how much they earn and



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we target corporates with the brands that match our organisation in terms of quality, in terms of focus on our core markets. We look at it in terms of a collaborative marketing exercise that helps them expand their reputation and reach.

**DVR: Though the Symphony, and the arts in general, are still seen as being arm's length from the general community. Is the orchestra too 'high-end' for corporations to instinctively think 'Sydney Symphony' in the way that they think 'Sport' when it comes to sponsorship?**

LC: We know we'd be a more attractive sponsorship target if our reputation and emotional connection we have with our community were better recognised. Sponsors would want to share some of that emotional bond that Sydney Symphony has with the community so it is important that while we don't compromise the reputation we have for artistic excellence that we do increase our reach to more and more people in the community.

**DVR: How will you sell it?**

LC: It's up to us to make ourselves more accessible as individuals and as an orchestra. So let's talk about the orchestra first: The orchestra is very interested in moving out of the Opera House as much as possible. We've talked about superdome concerts, regional touring, we played at the opening of the Rugby World Cup we're very keen on taking those commercial opportunities to broaden our audience and the type of repertoire we play. The artistic committee of the orchestra is very supportive of that so long as we don't compromise on quality. That's part of how we move away from that exclusive image; the other way is to make all our musicians, chief conductor and all of us in general more accessible.

**DVR: We know Sydney Symphony exists yet it doesn't seem to be as visual as ACO or Brandenburg I wonder how you overcome that.**

LC: Ah, but we have to be out on the streets as well. We have the plans for how to do it which you will see [this] year. What I find a wonderful opportunity is that Sydney Symphony belongs to the people of Sydney and NSW and that's what I want to work on so that everyone in this city feels they own the orchestra



**DVR: Like the New York 'Met'?**

LC: Yes, exactly - it's ours. If something big is happening in Sydney I want Sydney Symphony to be part of it. So the Opera House is a wonderful asset for us - it's our home, it's our concert hall, but it's also somewhere we have to make sure we move away from regularly. Gelmetti is keen to build a unique Sydney sound and he's working on rearranging the seating of the orchestra to best send the sound out. It's a combination of working with the acoustics in the hall and the musicians. He's very committed to working constructively and realistically and the Opera House will always be our home. Two great icons together.

**DVR: One thing that surprises me is that there are lesser orchestras with a much bigger recording catalogue than the Sydney Symphony.**

LC: Yes, as everyone knows the recording industry collapsed which decreased producers' appetites for commercial recordings. We are now looking at producing recordings to support marketing activities, not for commercial gain, so we have been having discussions about that. Watch this space.

**DVR: I wonder also about the intangible passionate commitment that you get in an arts organisation that maybe isn't there in say IT.**

LC: There is that because I think everyone who works here has that passionate commitment to the product - that's what's really different. The product isn't an inanimate thing but a set of talented, dedicated musicians who are each at the top of their field and we are lucky enough that they've come together. When I was being interviewed for the job I went to a concert and a wave of almost terror came over me as I was looking at the musicians and enjoying the concert and looked at how much the audience was enjoying the concert and I thought what if I was lucky enough to get this job would there be something that I might inadvertently do to damage this fabulous organisation and the relationship it has with the people of Sydney. Luckily I think there are enough fabulous people minding the organisation that what one person does couldn't damage it but you know there's an incredible sense of responsibility when you realise how many talented important well-loved people there are in the orchestra.

**DVR: There's a different type of communicator in a wordless language**

LC: Yes they do communicate in their own special way.

