

Freelancing

Although she's shocked to realise that it's 20 years since she started her own arts consultancy and cultural tours business, **Sharon Kivity** still loves almost every moment...

Messaien's angel

I've always cherished independence and variety, both prerequisites for freelancers. My work has two complementary strands: first, management, fundraising, marketing, co-productions, strategic planning and board recruitment for arts organisations and, second, taking small groups on cultural tours in Europe.

An early highlight was working for the Bath Festival, where I unexpectedly crammed on both 'hats'. A performance of Messaien's 'Turangalila' Symphony under the baton of Simon Rattle was to be broadcast live by the BBC at Wells Cathedral in the presence of the great French composer. My job was to oversee things – which, effectively, meant putting out chairs.

Long before mobile phones, we somehow got a message from Paris that the flight was delayed and Messaien wouldn't get to us until well into the first half. The festival suddenly realised I was the only person who spoke French; I was therefore ordered to bar Messaien entry until the interval! The magnificent doors of the Cathedral closed as the concert started, leaving me outside. Eventually, a frail old man in a beret turned up with his wife. "Bonjour maitre", says I nervously. "I'm afraid you can't come in until later so I, er, thought we'd go for a little stroll..."

To my amazement, the composer happily leaned on my arm and listened attentively whilst we walked round Wells and I recounted its history. After that, he wanted me to accompany him everywhere as interpreter; this included receptions and dinners with Simon Rattle, the late Michael Tippett (who spoke fluent French, but Messaien insisted I come) and other luminaries of the classical music world. Years later, I bumped into him at the Royal Festival Hall – he flung his arms round me and said, "Our angel flew in again!"

But there are also moments when I feel isolated and overwhelmed. I undertook a consultancy for the wonderful children's theatre company, Theatre-Rites, a few years ago, to fundraise and to secure future co-productions. It started swimmingly – but almost imperceptibly, a particular time arose when 'definite' future commissions from major arts organisations unravelled, and simultaneously many 'promising' funders I'd approached were changing their guidelines, or simply lost interest.

Theatre-Rites were so immersed in problems concerning their forthcoming production that it was hard for them to review strategy for possible projects that were two or three years in the future. I began to feel alone in my home office. Challenging times – but, thankfully, we recognised that now, more than ever, strong communication between freelancer and organisation was imperative.

Largely because of this, our luck began to turn. Seemingly insurmountable problems with the production were ironed out by Theatre-Rites, and the show turned out to be one of their biggest successes. Meanwhile, potential co-producers and funders whom I had been 'wooing' for ages took the bait and I was submerged day, night and weekends in shooting out ambitious proposals. The result? A string of exciting projects for two years down the line, with the British Library, the Southbank, and jointly with Barbicanbite05 and the Young Vic. These commissions coincided with Theatre-Rites' tenth birthday, so I worked throughout 2005 with the marketing and media departments of these much larger organisations to raise Theatre-Rites' profile in a way they could never have done independently.

Tips? You must enjoy working on your own and to thrive on unpredictability. Be very focused – and passionate – about the most effective process of delivery for your client, yet never get involved in their day-to-day issues. Spend time on expectations at the outset and review these constantly. And, especially at difficult moments, keep those communication channels open. If I really hit a low, the wonderful thing about freelancing is that I can drop everything for an hour and jog round the park reflecting on being Messaien's angel... ■

Sharon Kivity is Director of Sharonarts, an arts consultancy and management service. It also offers cultural tours focusing on opera, chamber music and/or wine tasting.

w: www.sharonarts.eu

e: sharonarts@binternet.com

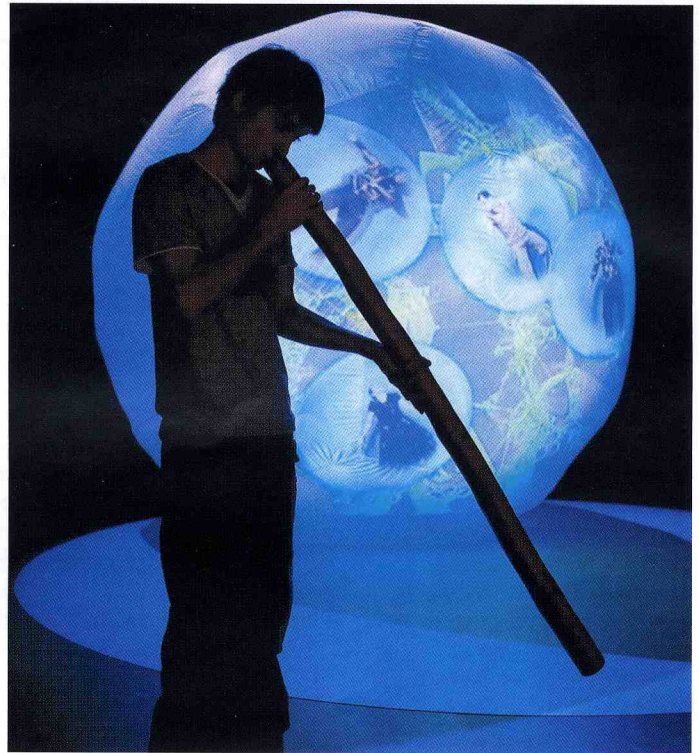


Photo: Robert Workman

'The Thought That Counts': Theatre-Rites' co-production with barbicanbite05 and the Young Vic