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Kinnara Ensemble: A Project-Based Choir



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Kinnara Ensemble: A Project-Based Choir

While choral singing represents one of the most popular art forms, professional choirs account for a small segment of these organizations. Kinnara Ensemble, directed by J.D. Burnett, is a medium-size choir that began in 2009 with graduates of Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey. The group blossomed from a volunteer arrangement into a professional one and now draws singers from around the country for its programs. This case study outlines the project-based choral model and introduces issues with hiring local and national talent. The financials of Kinnara Ensemble are reviewed, with attention to fluctuations in the organization's revenue streams. With a new managing director, there is hope to stabilize revenue for the long-term health of Kinnara.



This case study was prepared by Kyle Nielsen (Southern Virginia University) and Michael Alan Anderson (Eastman School of Music). *The Eastman Case Studies* are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.

Establishing Professional Choral Art

Choral singing remains the most popular form of participation in the performing arts for both adults and children. In 2009, a study showed that some 270,000 choruses operated in the United States and that 42.6 million Americans (or nearly 1 in 7) regularly sing in choruses. Professional choruses represent a very small and selective subset of choruses (less than a tenth of a percent), but they offer some of the highest quality singing and programming one can find around the country. Kinnara Ensemble, directed by J.D. Burnett, is one such professional chorus, comprising some of the country's finest ensemble and solo singers. Launched in 2009 in Princeton, New Jersey, the *a cappella* choir performs a wide range of choral repertoire unconstrained from any historical period. In 2017, Kinnara Ensemble released its first commercial recording, *Provenance*, on the Affetto label, which includes an international distribution agreement with Naxos. The recording features works by Johannes Brahms, Francis Poulenc, and Alberto Ginastera.

The organizational mission of Kinnara Ensemble is "to engage the public in exemplary choral experiences that speak to the modern soul."

Kinnara Ensemble is a mid-size group most often made up of around 32 voices, larger than most professional chamber choirs, but smaller than typical symphonic choruses and oratorio societies. The organizational mission of Kinnara Ensemble is "to engage the public in exemplary choral experiences that speak to the modern soul." The generalized nature of this statement is intentional. "We wanted to keep as many limits off us as we could," said J.D.

Burnett, co-founder and artistic director of Kinnara Ensemble. He relates the organizational mission to the demands of the competitive choral arts environment in the Princeton area. The Princeton Pro Musica is a

100-voice choral organization, which auditions singers and performs larger canonic works. It has the air of a semi-professional chorus. On the other hand, the Princeton Singers is a 16-voice choral ensemble in which all performers are paid. Directed by composer Steven Sametz, that group's programming more or less reflects his specialization in contemporary choral music. Kinnara needed to be different.

The group had humble beginnings in Princeton and in fact was "founded twice." In the fall of 2008, current assistant conductor Reid Masters pulled together eight or nine fellow graduates of Westminster Choir College for a Christmas program in December, performing it a few times and recording a CD inexpensively for local distribution. Meanwhile, J.D. Burnett, another recent graduate of the choir college, had just returned to New Jersey from a year teaching in San Jose, CA. Masters asked him to conduct the ensemble, and Burnett was interested but only if the group were larger. He assumed the reins of Kinnara Ensemble immediately in January 2009 with an expanded roster of 18 singers. The operation grew from there.

A Friendly and Mission-Centered Board

After a year of concerts under its belt, Kinnara Ensemble felt the wind at its back. It would not be long before the volunteers who started with the group could transform into professional status. Given his experience working with nonprofit choral organizations in Texas and New Jersey, J.D. Burnett knew a board of directors needed to be formed. A board would force Kinnara Ensemble not only to govern itself independently but also to incorporate and obtain nonprofit status, allowing it to access the advantages and protections of a formal business structure. Not atypical of small startup arts organizations, Burnett started with close contacts who had keen interest in the business's prospects.

A friend of Burnett's, John Ruffley, was a retired marketing executive for candy maker Mars Incorporated in New Jersey. Ruffley and Burnett's relationship dated

Burnett developed a board of directors with close contacts who had keen interest in the Kinnara's prospects.

back to their time with the Masterwork Chorus of New Jersey, and Ruffley's experience as a child with the American Boychoir uniquely qualified him as an initial board member. As fate would have it, he was looking for a volunteer project and agreed to serve as Kinnara Ensemble's inaugural

president. Cory Reeves, the organization's current president, had worked with Burnett at the education publishing company McGraw-Hill Inc., and also agreed to join the board of directors. Burnett further enlisted two local singers who were also in support of the idea of Kinnara Ensemble and were committed to seeing its success. A member specializing in finance was also necessary in Burnett's mind to complete the inaugural board. Another recent retiree, Jim Ferguson, came to the rescue as treasurer; his career at Prudential and AIG was more than sufficient for overseeing Kinnara Ensemble's finances. Ferguson lived locally in Mountain Lakes, New Jersey, and had sung in a church choir that Burnett once directed.

Having no executive managing team, the governing directors of Kinnara Ensemble constituted a "working board," each taking on management-type tasks to ensure the health of the organization in its infancy. Within this structure, the artistic advocacy and administrative savvy of current Board President Cory Reeves bore particular notice. According to Burnett, "He [Cory] understands that the board exists to support the artistic mission, so he's been really good about never wanting it to be the other way around... he's made believers out of the rest of the board." Burnett was encouraged that board members of Kinnara Ensemble were not overly focused on turning a profit at the outset. They understood that the choral art of the group could not be compromised in search of profits. Instead, directors were invested in letting

Burnett's polished and rare artistic product persuade customers and grow audiences over time.

Those audiences have been notoriously hard to gather. Paid attendance has been consistently low at concerts of Kinnara Ensemble. In Burnett's view, the market for quality choral music in the region is saturated. Not only are there options in Princeton, but the major markets of New York City and Philadelphia are dauntingly close for even more possibilities of high caliber choral music. A model needed to be developed to separate the choir from its local and regional competition.

The Project-based Model

In its early stages, Kinnara Ensemble rehearsed on Sunday evenings, once per week, using talented local singers, many with connections to Westminster Choir College, but situated from central New Jersey outward to New York City and Philadelphia. Within a year, Burnett was headed to the University of North Texas for graduate studies, and the impossibility of weekly contact with the artists prompted an attempt at a "project-based" model for its concert series. In this scenario, the choir would not meet regularly in the run-up to a concert but rather would schedule all of its rehearsals in a compressed time frame (less than a week), thus increasing the intensity of preparation. Burnett tested this model with Kinnara Ensemble for the program titled "Light" in the spring of 2011. This arrangement worked reasonably well, which allowed the director to envision himself operating and directing the group long term during or even after his studies. Burnett could fly back to New Jersey to conduct programs and was assured of little or no drop in artistic quality with the ramped-up rehearsals.

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Burnett saw other advantages to the project-based model for his ensemble. The artistic director could develop programs independent of the regular-sized ensemble roster. When the program was set, he could then consider what voices would work best from Kinnara's roster for the parts available. It is a dream scenario among music directors who find outstanding repertoire and are "stuck" with certain voices they contracted with or are overbalanced in sections that do not play a major role in a program. "In that way it sort of mirrors large arts organizations like the big opera houses, where they can hire the certain voice from a certain country for a certain role. It's very specific."

The compressed schedule could also build closer relationships among the artists. "There's something about the project model that feels sort of like choir retreat," Burnett remarked. "It's an intense week of rehearsals, where you don't have the distractions of your normal routine. It feels more special when people intentionally leave where they are every day and focus for a week in retreat together. I wanted that." In contrast, Burnett saw weekly rehearsals with the singers as part of a less-than-inspiring "grind," another obligation of the week for these artists with other commitments (notably, full-time jobs). Despite dutiful attendance by his singers, Burnett was convinced that a more focused project-based model would bring more dedication and focus to the preparations. The model could even build a heightened sense of community among the singers.

Using roughly the same regional roster it enjoyed from its inception, Burnett was challenged to find a rehearsal structure that worked for the group under the new model. With some members already committed to day jobs, the artistic director had to be sensitive to how preparatory rehearsals would be scheduled. Burnett remembers not going "headlong" into intensive daytime rehearsals, as some peer groups do. Rather than rehearsing during the day for a week or part of a week, the artistic director compromised in his test run. Kinnara Ensemble would rehearse heavily

on the weekend preceding its concert series, and then schedule Tuesday and Wednesday evening rehearsals. The group would not meet on Monday or Thursday, the latter being a near-universal "church choir night" in the area. Local singers could not give up these long-term commitments for the one-off programs of the relatively new Kinnara Ensemble. Concerts would then take place on the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Compressing the concerts as much as the rehearsals is a pillar of the project-based arrangement. Previously, concerts of the same program could be spread out by weeks or even a month.

Concert locations were crucial for developing a following. Princeton remained a home base for one of the concerts. Burnett further targeted Morristown, New Jersey (some 40 miles northeast) for a second self-produced concert. For the third offering of each series, the ensemble would focus on securing an appearance at an existing series, avoiding the ticketing operation altogether. There were also some opportunities to present concerts in New York City. Kinnara Ensemble's board president, Cory Reeves, lived in New York and was able to locate appropriate venues for performances. Burnett was open to that market as a satellite for his group: "There are simply more listeners in New York." Finding professional singers would be no trouble in New York and higher incomes in the city could bode well for ticket sales and remuneration of singers.

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Local vs. National Talent

Kinnara Ensemble was by no means the first chamber music ensemble to adopt the project-based model. It had caught on with other professional choral organizations, and not just in large markets. (The South Dakota Chorale from Sioux Falls is an example.) In these professional choral organizations,

the “project-based” description implies not only paid singers and a compressed preparatory schedule, but also an operation that imports its talent from around the country and requires substantial funding beyond what local organizations can normally handle. With a densely packed rehearsal plan, project-based choral organizations usually contract with choral specialists “from the outside” to work intensely toward a one-time program series or perhaps a limited touring program. Burnett was intrigued by this possibility. The artistic director welcomed the geographic diversity and backgrounds that could come from talented outside hires. “I like the aggregate musical wisdom that is forged when the singers in the choir come from a variety of locales, whether they’re cities or small towns.” Although the homegrown regional talent of Kinnara Ensemble was not entirely from the Westminster ranks, Burnett felt that even this local core could represent a “philosophical hegemony” of the ensemble from a particular “school” of singing.

Beyond the expected geographic and philosophical diversity expected from the outside help, Burnett was equally drawn to the idea of bolstering the choral profession more broadly by allowing singers who

specialize in this music to make a living through his ensemble and similar vocal chamber groups. “There are enough of these organizations in different parts of the country that allow professional singers to sort of hop from one engagement to the other. I like that idea philosophically. I never did that as a full-time singer, but I have spent enough of my professional life having recurring engagements with certain groups that feel important to me.”

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– J.D. Burnett

Burnett was excited to think that he too could provide this kind of service to nourish the professional choral community through the activities of Kinnara Ensemble.

Burnett was torn about how many on his regular roster should come from outside the regional area in a project-based model. While still barely making ends meet financially with Kinnara Ensemble, the artistic director was hesitant to overload the choir with imports. Burnett figured that he would begin by “peppering” the group with some professional colleagues from outside of the tri-state region. Keeping the hybrid ensemble tipped heavily toward the locals, Burnett felt a sense of loyalty to those who had begun the choir with him and were performing at a high level. He also thought a strong local contingent would reflect well in the Princeton community and other venues in New Jersey. How close was local though? New Jersey was already by far the most densely populated state in the country and should statistically offer a lot of possibilities for talent in the surrounding area. With New York and Philadelphia nearby, the pool of potential talent was expanded even further. Burnett recognized these geographic riches. “There are lots of singers within an immediate radius of us that would like to perform with us. I feel that I’d like to make the best use of it that I can.”

Eager to work from the inside out, Burnett decided to offer small travel stipends (between \$25 and \$50) to his invitees from New York and Philadelphia for a week’s fuel expenses. The still-volunteer arrangement grew to include modest performing fees (a few hundred dollars) for all singers in addition to the travel support. Although the choir members were not yet compensated at a veritable professional wage, they welcomed these gestures, and there were even some tax deductions available with the specification of the travel stipend for the local singers. Travel stipends are now calibrated for distance; those travelling from farther than New York and Philadelphia are provided a higher travel stipend. Although those singers who travel from afar are not given a per diem, Kinnara

arranges homestays for them and provides some meals for them throughout the length of the contract, a comparatively generous move.

With the singers compensated at some level, Burnett

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then considered how quickly the proportion of locals to outsiders might change. There was a case for mixing right away with singers from farther reaches of the country. If the project-based model of a professional choral organization involved drawing from the nation's top singers, Kinnara Ensemble might enjoy a high artistic quality it could not

have achieved on its own. Burnett's Princeton-based group could also be mentioned in the same breath as peer organizations, who tap the same well for artistic talent. "Our connection into the broader nationwide landscape of these types of organizations could raise awareness among my colleagues of our existence," Burnett hoped. There were practical reasons to hire nationally as well. Burnett recalled that sometimes his local singers would withdraw from a series for various reasons, and he was left without local options, many having day jobs as mentioned. Choral specialists from the outside could fill these more immediate needs and were "more available" in Burnett's assessment. "Singing was their day job."

On the other hand, there was a question about the local talent that founded Kinnara Ensemble. The original group was of course dominated by alumni from Westminster Choir College, an academic stalwart in the choral arts. How much better could Kinnara Ensemble expect to be with the addition of some professionals from different corners of the country? Could outside choral specialists boost the artistic level or might they alter the culture within the roster at large? Could these specialists commit far in advance? At what cost

could the project-based model be given a chance to succeed? Burnett was game to try: "I think it elevates the possibilities for artistic excellence."

Growing the Artistic Product

Just as with many of its peer organizations, maintaining financial stability while elevating the artistic product is a particular challenge for Kinnara. This trend can be seen in its year-over-year statements of financial activities, shown in **Appendix 1**. Between fiscal years (FY) 2010 and 2015 (the threshold for greater commitment to artistic growth), expenses grew at an average annual rate of 39% compared to nearly 33% of annual growth in revenues. These averages convey a sense of stability on which to predicate artistic risk. Direct public support—which consists of individual giving and grants—accounted for a little more than half (53%) of the organization's revenue during the same period, but is trending toward two-thirds of revenue in FY14 and FY15 (**Appendix 2**). Individual giving has dominated this category of direct public support, accounting for about 85% of non-program related revenue over the six-year period (**Appendix 3**).

In terms of revenue diversification for stable growth of assets, arts organization norms suggest that no single stream of revenue (program proceeds, individual giving, and grants) should exceed much beyond one-third of all revenue. As such, FY16 served as a sort of reckoning between these ideals and the previously growing revenue. While expenses grew 13% from FY15 to FY16, total revenue dropped a staggering 33% (**Appendix 1**). This unanticipated swing was driven equally by drops in direct public support and program revenue. FY16 did include a variety of irregular financial variables that could explain the shortfall, most notably a shortened reporting period due to transition of fiscal year to July 1. But the results of FY16 seem to imply that the increase in individual giving from FY13 to FY15 created a false sense of security on which to place greater risk on artistic growth. With individual donations accounting for 76% of revenue over the three-year period (**Appendix 3**), Kinnara was

consistently out of range of the diversification ideal to consider permanently increasing expenses.

However, Kinnara Ensemble's organizational commitment to growing artistic excellence is confirmed through steady total expense increases averaging about 20% per year between FY14 and FY16. Conversely, program revenue remained flat during the

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same three-year period, despite a large spike of 52% from FY14 to FY15 (**Appendix 1**). While it can be tempting to focus on raising ticket revenue as a way to make up the revenue difference and close the gap, it is the industry standard to budget program revenue to a loss. Moreover, convention among small-to-midsize arts organizations dictates keeping ticket

prices intentionally low in order to both keep demand high and entice private giving from patrons. Kinnara's revenue diversification over the same period confirms this principle, with just over 30% of revenue coming from program-related funds from FY14 to FY16 (**Appendix 2**). Though standards suggest that direct public support should occupy closer to one-third rather than two-thirds of total revenue, as is the case with Kinnara, this anomaly is not uncommon and even sustainable for many young arts organizations. Unfortunately, the erratic behavior of the direct public support category, which declined 33% from FY15 to FY16, would make the continued financial commitment to growing artistic expenses an inherent risk.

Artistically, Burnett identified increased pay and national sourcing for singers as the main factors in the quick artistic improvement, which audiences have witnessed. Stabilizing public support was a priority to

counter the steady increase in expenditures for the vocal talent. Developing a regimen for attending to individual giving in particular could put the organization back on track. Burnett and the Kinnara Ensemble board knew the answer to their concerns would emerge organically from within. Tenor Cory Klose, a veteran of the ensemble, had been doing light contract work for Kinnara, designing programs, maintaining the group's website, and branding materials for some time. Additionally, his experience contracting singers and collaborating with the board as an artist liaison with the Santa Fe Desert Chorale gave him valuable insight to the artistic, production, and managerial aspects of running a nonprofit professional choir. Burnett identified the value of Klose's experiences and skills: "We—me, Cory, and the board—all recognized that we needed a prism through which all activity could be focused, sort of concentrated. Cory sort of devised his own job description as it were. His thinking was, 'I'm willing to do these things, and I really think it's time for us to take this step.'"

Cory Klose was hired as managing director of Kinnara in 2017, which coincided with the year of highest revenue for the enterprise, driven by a surge in direct public support and in spite of a dip in program revenue of 16% (**Appendix 1**). Total revenue more than doubled from FY16 to FY17, with almost all of it coming from the category of public support, as a result of patronage for the commercial recording *Provenance*, according to Burnett. This rise in public support for the album came amid lower ticket sales and smaller audiences. Meanwhile, the organization saw increases in program expenses by 25% for the same period. Kinnara presented the same number of concerts, making good on Burnett's commitment to continue to heighten artistic quality by spending more on the choral product.

Burnett sees the value of Klose's work in the major revenue increase to offset new expenses: "Cory can take guidance from the board and execute, but he can also identify problems and guide the board. So that

has really been a plus for us in that way to organize the structure of the board with subcommittees and that sort of thing to make our work more efficient.” It would appear that Kinnara’s calculated risk in hiring a managing director to increase public funding while offsetting increased program spending paid off, with its highest change in net assets to date for a single year (\$10,785 for FY17; **Appendix 1**). That being said, one fiscal year is certainly too early to determine a reliable trend.

For the moment, Kinnara Ensemble appears to have found some organizational stability with the hiring of Klose; the artistic level of the ensemble is rising in conjunction with program-related expenses, which are balanced by an increase in public support. The scenario going forward, however, only magnifies their organizational challenges identified at the beginning of FY 17: how can Kinnara stabilize the growth of public funding while also accounting for the revenue diversification imbalance between program revenue, grants, and individual giving?

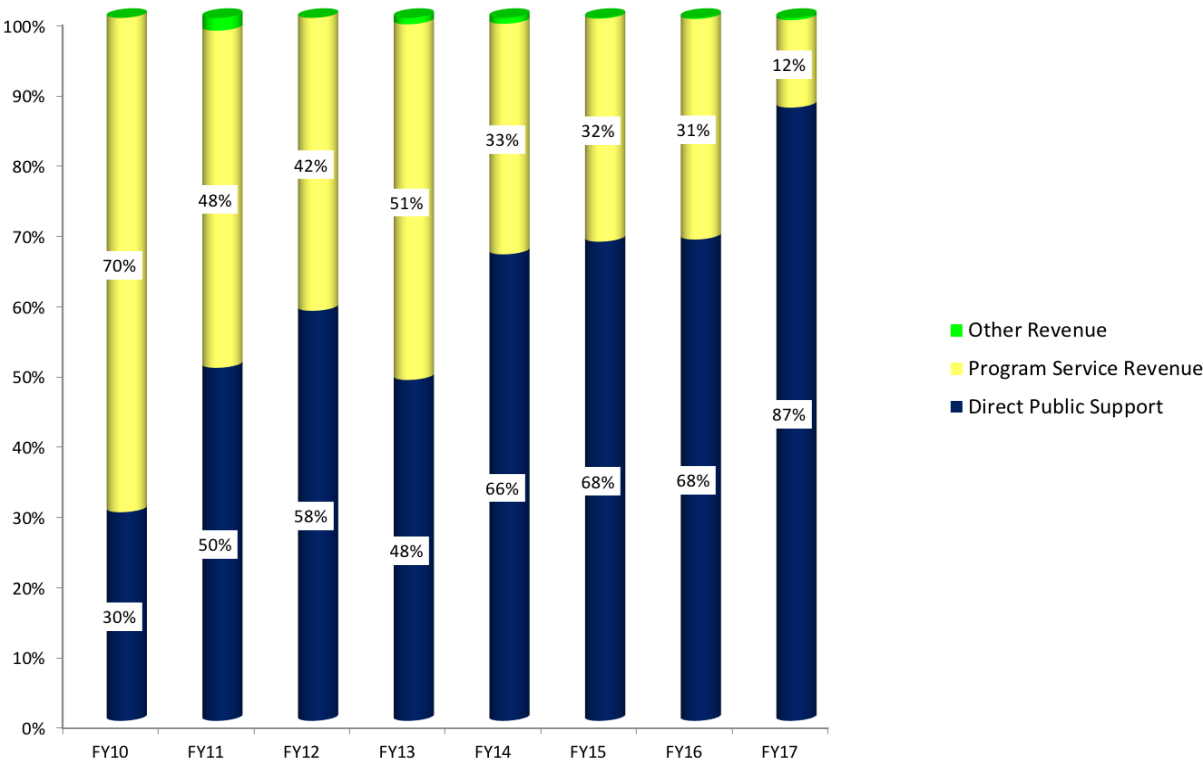
APPENDIX I

Kinnara Ensemble Statement of Activities FY10 to FY17

Category	FY10	YoY % Change	FY11	YoY % Change	FY12	YoY % Change	FY13	YoY % Change	FY14	YoY % Change	FY15	YoY % Change	FY16	YoY % Change	FY17
Direct Public Support	\$2,750	81%	\$4,974	51%	\$7,502	19%	\$8,955	74%	\$15,550	62%	\$25,125	-33%	\$16,847	170%	\$45,438
Program Service Revenue	\$6,517	-27%	\$4,750	13%	\$5,360	74%	\$9,342	-18%	\$7,685	52%	\$11,695	-34%	\$7,718	-16%	\$6,478
Other Revenue	\$0	--	\$180	-100%	\$0	--	\$168	17%	\$197	-81%	\$38	5%	\$40	325%	\$170
TOTAL REVENUE	\$9,267	7%	\$9,904	30%	\$12,862	44%	\$18,465	27%	\$23,432	57%	\$36,858	-33%	\$24,605	112%	\$52,086
Program Expenses	\$4,345	-18%	\$3,562	99%	\$7,085	64%	\$11,643	103%	\$23,606	23%	\$28,929	-4%	\$27,695	25%	\$34,628
Management and General	\$4,341	-74%	\$1,149	69%	\$1,938	126%	\$4,381	-86%	\$610	28%	\$779	298%	\$3,098	9%	\$3,363
Fundraising	\$0	--	\$279	26%	\$351	-27%	\$255	-90%	\$25	5844%	\$1,486	159%	\$3,847	-14%	\$3,310
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$8,686	-43%	\$4,990	88%	\$9,374	74%	\$16,279	49%	\$24,241	27%	\$30,750	13%	\$34,640	19%	\$41,301
CHANGE IN NET ASSETS	\$581	746%	\$4,914	-29%	\$3,488	-37%	\$2,186	-137%	-\$809	855%	\$6,108	-264%	-\$10,035	-207%	\$10,785

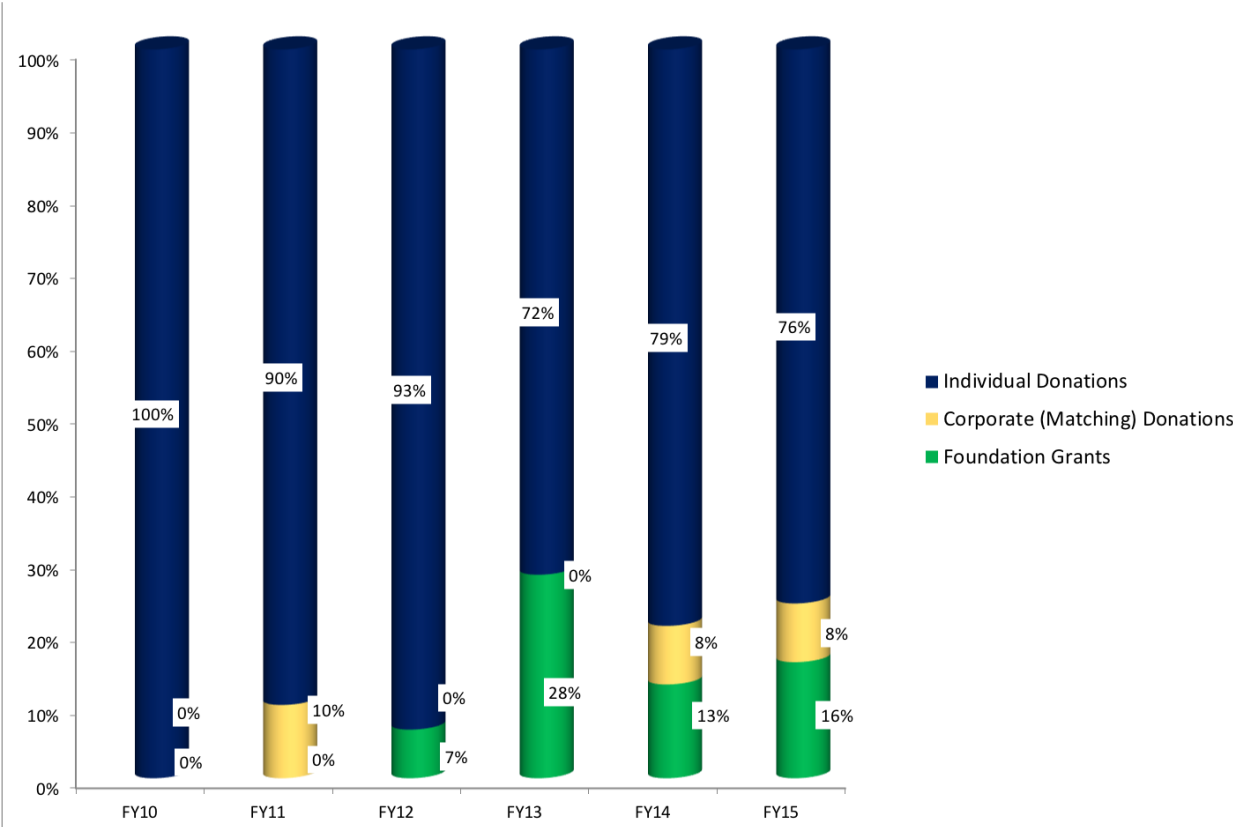
APPENDIX 2

Kinnara Ensemble
Statement of Activites FY10 to FY17



APPENDIX 3

Kinnara Ensemble - Sources of Direct Public Support FY10 to FY15





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