Future of Business podcast

‘Paying to Play: How to fund the Arts from a pianist's perspective’

Speaker 1:
The future of business is responsible.

Speaker 2:
[foreign language 00:00:05].

Speaker 3:
Conscious co-mingling of growth and impact.

Speaker 4:
[foreign language 00:00:10].

Speaker 5:
[foreign language 00:00:10].

Speaker 6:
[foreign language 00:00:10].
The future of business is intentional and transparent.

Speaker 7:
[foreign language 00:00:19].

Speaker 5:
From the Ravens. Welcome

Jordan Zele:
Welcome to Said Business School's Future of Business podcast, a student-run podcast here at the school. My name's Jordan. I'll be one of your co-hosts this year, and I'm really looking forward to sharing with you some of the conversations that we'll be having. Before we do dive in, just a quick note that the audio on this episode is a little bit rough, but I'm sure you'll still enjoy the conversation. Thanks so much for joining us.

Often when consumers of art think about the art world, we don't always think about the role that business plays in its production and distribution, but art is an extremely resource heavy industry, and understanding how art is funded necessarily involves business, for both good and bad. When thinking about how art is funded, I wanted to speak with a practitioner who has seen the role of business in art firsthand.

Fortunately, Oxford's community is a space where extremely talented artists from all around the world come together and meet. And a few of these talented artists even join us here at Said Business School. I'm excited to have Helen Kashap here with us on the show to explore how the arts are funded. Helen is an American Canadian classical pianist and actor whose career has led her for Montreal to New York and Paris, and all throughout Europe.

Alongside a professional career, she runs her own teaching studio in New York, which she maintains while pursuing the combined MBA as well as a master of music here at Oxford. Having a career that has spanned multiple geographies containing a variety of mechanisms to fund the arts, she's the perfect person to explore this issue today. Welcome, Helen.

Helen Kashap:

Thank you. It is so good to be here.

Jordan Zele:

Of course. It's great to have you. Look, I want to start by contextualizing the conversation. Why is it important to have a well-funded arts sector and what does it actually look like? What does it mean to fund the arts?

Helen Kashap:

Really, really interesting question. First of all, I've been an artist for my entire life. I grew up in a household of artists. Both my parents are professional violinists. They were symphonic musicians, and then my dad runs a music conservatory, so this issue of funding and the arts has been central to my own experience, both witnessing my family and then also my own pursuits as a concert pianist. To circle back to the question of why funding the arts is really integral. I mean, it kind of gets to the crux of the issue behind why the arts are important.

Jordan, a document came out by the English Arts Council about five years ago now that cited the arts as being really integral to building a healthy society and healthy lives. So, they cited three components that I just want to bring up. It seems tangential to your question, but I think it's really central, which are that the arts tend to increase people's capacity for life, enrich their fundamental experience, and provide a safe site to build skills. And so if we think about the importance of those three particular elements, we start to understand that it's really crucial and integral to fund something that's so seminal to the growth and the health of a society at large. It becomes this question of then who is responsible for funding the arts and how important really is that pursuit?

Jordan Zele:

Let's perhaps start with your career then. How have your artistic endeavors been funded?

Helen Kashap:

Yeah, that's a really great question. I would say I've sort of thought of my life in terms of three phases, so to speak. The first phase was really about developing as a concert pianist. And I grew up in Canada. Both of my parents immigrated from the US and in that state I had the capacity to be funded by state sponsors and by the government. So, a lot of my endeavors from an early age, and I was already performing from the age of nine, were government sponsored.

There was a Canadian foundation called the Canada Council for the Arts, which is heavily funded by taxpayers. And I think to date, they've contributed something like $150,000 towards my studies,

towards competitions, towards travel. The phase in which I was a concert pianist from a really young age was government funded. In the second phase of my experience where I was sort of a different level of performer on a new professional scale, I moved to the US when I was 14 to train at the Interlochen Center for the Arts, which is a sort of a feeder school for Julliard and a feeder school for some really intense pre-professional pursuits.

My systems of funding changed and they became privatized. I started to have sponsors, patrons, a lot of scholarships from specific schools and tapping into the various systems that the US has, mostly private, for arts sponsorship. And then just to speak really briefly about the third phase where I was mostly a pedagogue and an entrepreneur in New York City or in the arts, I've really had to tap into both patronage systems of support, so having private patrons that support the arts, but also using institutional sponsorship. Working with companies like Steinway, the 92nd Street Y, the New York Council for the Arts, these institutionalized bodies of sponsorship.

Jordan Zele:

Great. I want to hold us there for just a second and dive more deeply into these different aspects of your life and the way that the arts were funded. Returning to that early stage of your career, what were some of the benefits with a government funded art sector?

Helen Kashap:

That's a great, great question, Jordan. I think for one, it made it so that my studies could be continuous, my creativity could be kind of unbounded, and there was a lot of safety. There was a big safety net. My artistic pursuits from a really young age were tremendously expensive. If you think about Olympic athletes, for example, and this is really no different. This is the same terrain. You think about all that they need, the equipment. In my case, I needed an excellent piano. I needed a really great space. I needed training. I was training three to four times with my coach per week.

And then at a certain point in time, even as a young person, I needed also physio and coaches to travel with and these various things. And then of course, all the money that goes into the travel itself and the competition fees, et cetera. Just to know that I had that taken care of by a government body, and that was a fairly regular, really trustworthy, they had a lot of capital. It was a very large margin of taxpayer contribution towards that. There was a high level of faith in the fact that I could predict what I could do because I knew that the funding was going to be there.

Jordan Zele:

It's interesting you described that the safety. Part of my concern, perhaps with the government funding and the arts is, does that kind of stifle some of the more controversial and more challenging types of art that is really important for the development of our society, but harder for say, government taxpayer money to be going towards?

Helen Kashap:

Yeah, that's a really interesting question. My gut reaction was to say not at all, actually quite the opposite. I have to keep in mind that I'm coming from Canada where it's a fairly open-minded, the arts are very progressive, I would say on the spectrum, it's fairly liberal in terms of its artistic palate and temperament. And just from what I know personally, there's no sort of traditional convention that runs through, or I wouldn't say no, but there's little traditional convention that runs through the standards and guidelines for these government grants.

And so therefore, it does tend to promote both a career like mine, which was fairly traditional as a classical pianist, but also colleagues of mine who were pursuing things that were much more unconventional were also supported and substantially so. I think to your question of does it sort of put things into a narrower spectrum? Not at all. In fact, I felt it broadened it.

Jordan Zele:

Look, I think that's really good to hear because I was concerned that with, a government funded art sector will get plenty of Shakespeare and Mozart, but less art that might be more confronting to the general public or criticizing of those in power. I think it speaks to maybe a slightly adjacent critique of government funding, is that because the money is taxpayer funded and at a certain point the government is answerable to the taxpayers.

If a piece of art, which is planning to be anti-religious, for example in Canada, is there a chance that type of expression is going to be limited? Because at the end of the day, it's the government that are writing the paychecks. And so perhaps when you have a public that is more concerned with just putting food on the table compared to these creative expressions of art, because it is taxpayer funded, there may be pushback from the general community when they do have these different types of exhibits that they don't see as directly benefiting your everyday person's way of life.

Helen Kashap:

Yeah, I mean, that's a good point. I think, I don't know that we're entirely talking about the same thing. I think on one hand, the government body in Canada has a very rigorous application process wherein artists apply for certain kinds of sponsorship, and there are rigorous guidelines that sort of stipulate what that money can contribute towards. And if someone came with a very sort of flagrant, inflammatory, something that was going to be very politically controversial that might not get the kind of sponsorship that artists training to do some pretty high stakes things would.

But I think in my experience of seeing where the funding goes, they do tend and want to fund a broad array of things so that we have a kind of artistic diversity. It's certainly not very homogenous.

Jordan Zele:

All right, that's good. That's where we can start to talk about different ways that the arts can contract funding in just a moment. Moving forward, then your next step was to increase level of training in New York.

Helen Kashap:

Yeah.

Jordan Zele:

Why couldn't you find that sort of training in Canada? Is that a function of just the size of Canada, or is it the fact that the US does have this different mechanism for funding the arts? What was that transition like [inaudible 00:10:17].

Helen Kashap:

Yeah, that's a really great question too. So, just to clarify, actually, when I moved to the US I went to a conservatory called the Interlochen Center for the Arts, and that's not in New York, that's actually in Michigan. I made my way to New York, but I was there at this sort of small, very intense boarding school

that my mother actually, who's a concert violinist had gone to growing up. But to your question about was that kind of training not available in Canada, I think I want to be delicate here a little bit because I had an exceptional early training in Canada that was private. I had a very good team of private teaching. But I think in terms of the really sort of historic, well-developed, reputable institutions that train artists at a high, high level, a lot of them are in the US.

I would say, although I don't know 100%, but I would say that's the truth. And that's the same for training in Olympic sport or in, I know a lot of colleagues and friends who have started out in Canada and then let's say they go down to Florida to train as competitive tennis players or swimmers. I think there's the broad array of offerings and the level of intensity of training in competition is greater in the US broadly. And of course there are exceptions, and Canada is sort of coming up in terms of its systems, and actually it's generated some extraordinary artists in the last two decades in specific. I think there's a lot to be said there, but a lot of the training is still formally held in the US.

Jordan Zele:

Perfect. Let's explore this US model for a little bit. What are some of the differences in terms of the way that the arts funding happens in the US versus Canada, at least from your own experience?

Helen Kashap:

Yeah, super great question too. Oh my gosh, you're full of excellent questions. He's done his research. Basically, the US has two sort of broad funding streams that are, they're governmentally held, the NEH and the NEA, the National Endowment for the Arts. They are funded by taxpayer money, but a lot of the systems in the US are privatized. If you think about healthcare, education, et cetera. And this model operates under that same premise.

We do have these very small two government funded bodies that I just cited, but in general, the arts funding in the US is in line with its other fundings for education, as I just mentioned, in healthcare and is privatized. Sponsorship then comes really from urban elites, from business corporations, from institutional philanthropy, and that's very discretional, right? It's up to sort of the discretion of those bodies, and oftentimes it comes down to personal interest.

Is this person interested in that particular art? There's a lot less standardization in the US. There's a lot more capital to be had, so stakes are higher, discretion is higher. You can see here how this might start to become slightly complicated, a lot of personal politics at play. Whereas if we diverge and we go into the Canadian system where they have large bodies of government funding in the arts where there are processes in place to secure it, you can assume, or you can imagine that there's a more equitable process of access to arts funding. And so probably more people have access to it.

It's more broadly and fairly administered. And say one thing or the other about it, I think the fact that there's more money to be had in the US just generally, it makes for there to be some very elite artists coming out of the US, very elite training programs. Very, very, very high level. It's just a different game, really.

Jordan Zele:

I just want to quickly hold you there and try to add a little bit more detail as to who are the groups that we're talking about, who are the other people that surround the art world? I think the broad expectation is that arts, particularly under the ballet or classical music, is dominated by the wealthy. Is that fair to say?

Helen Kashap:

Yeah, for sure, for sure. I mean, now I'm talking in sort of broad and stereotypical strokes. I want to be also delicate in acknowledging that, but I'll just use a local example. I am flying back to New York in a few weeks and I'm going to go to the opera, and you look at the Metropolitan Opera ticket page, and I think the least expensive ticket for a reasonable seat starts at about $250, whereas you do the same for London as I was in last week, going to a concert, and you can get an excellent seat for 35 pounds.

I think just to understand, and I use that example, that very simple example, just to illustrate the fact that the amount of funds required obviously are going to funnel in a certain kind of person, a certain part of the population that has that disposable income, for example. And so the arts tend, in the US, to be funded, as I said previously by urban elites and those who have that kind of money or corporations, who it's chicken or the egg, it sort of attracts, they're one and the same, they attract each other.

And so what that says is then artists' lives are often dependent on that part of the population. I'll withhold to some extent judgment on that part of the population because they've largely been my own sponsors and a lot of my friends in my community come from that part of the population. But one does have to speculate that there is not an impartiality there. It's certainly what you do and what you produce as an artist is largely dependent on those who are supporting what it is that you're doing. Whereas in Canada, because that's not the dynamic, that would not be the case.

Jordan Zele:

Can we explore that dynamic a little bit further? What is that relationship like between, this is one of the things I came across in preparing for this interview about this [inaudible 00:15:55] patron, which to me was directly out of how Mozart got his start as opposed to how an artist in the 21st century should be getting their start. Can you explore that a little bit? What does that relationship look like today?

Helen Kashap:

Wow. And you're right to cite Mozart. And another is the prime example of Heiden and the Estherhousie family, and how Heiden produced most of his works under the patronage of the Estherhousies. The patronage system, it was the main system for centuries. You think about Bach and Mozart and Heiden and Beethoven and how they were always in the palm of somebody very, very wealthy, producing works for them and for their courts and things like this.

Modern patronage, that's sort of the question at hand. When you strip away all of the infrastructure that housed both literally and otherwise, Heiden and the Estherhousies, and you think about the support of patrons to modern artists, it's quite complex. I will say that. One could think that in a system, I'll just use a local example, one that I know well, like New York, an artist comes to train in New York at let's say Julliard, and after life in Julliard, they have to make a living in a very expensive city that is the financial center of the world or of the US, and it's tremendously expensive. Let's talk about today.

And the way to do it really is likely, or one of the ways to do it, is to have a patron. There are patrons that are very interested in the lives of artists, in art itself for myriad reasons. For personal reasons, for institutional reasons, for reasons of perception, for social reasons, myriad reasons. And I have heard of and I have experienced that patrons will either pick up or pitch an artist and support their careers, and that can be for the length of 2, 5, 10, 20 years, et cetera.

I've known artists who have gone on their entire careers, modern artists, to have these patrons, but, and I use the but instead of the and because as you sort of highlighted, I think the complexities of that kind of dynamic are so extreme. Those complexities largely depend both on who the patron is, what their

intentions are, and what the relationship between the patron and the person being patroned is really. I'll stop there and you can inquire further should you wish, but I think that's a very complicated dynamic.

Jordan Zele:

Yeah, for sure. I think as I imagine the patrons of today don't have the same political designs of Medici, right? It's a different dynamic today. As a consumer of art, like myself, I think then we can talk about the artists themselves. What do I perhaps lose knowing that... Or not knowing. What do I lose about art as it is produced because of this relationship between patrons and artists? Is there a certain type of art that isn't being produced or it is being produced that I'm just not aware of?

Helen Kashap:

Interesting. Is the question, what do you as a consumer of art lose or not lose as a result of this patronage system?

Jordan Zele:

Yeah, or just broadly, like the art industry. How is it impacted because of this patronage system?

Helen Kashap:

Yeah, okay, good. That makes sense. I think if you could imagine the art that is supported, therefore the art that the artist can pursue is largely dependent on the tastes of, or the preferences of their patron. You kind of are beholden to your patron, for better or worse. And if your patron is somebody whose tastes aligned with your own, excellent. Hopefully a patron would choose to be a patron to somebody with whom they felt a resonance. I can see that not being an issue. In fact, I can see that being a really fruitful collaboration.

However, if you think about those with deep pockets now, especially in an industry like New York that is really sort of finance laden, and finance is not always connected to the arts as it perhaps once was, or more so, you can get patrons who have very little understanding or knowledge of the arts being patrons to those who have really interesting artistic ideas and a lot of artistic integrity.

I think the division between that is really fascinating. And as I've witnessed both personally and otherwise, you have to be pretty careful about who you choose as a patron and whether you want to accept that kind of support. That's a very interesting thing because we need the support as artists, we need the support. There aren't a lot of strains of support, and yet you need to be careful.

Jordan Zele:

Given how essential this patronage is, the facilitation of the art actually being produced, how does that impact the artist on a personal level and does that kind of flow through to the work itself?

Helen Kashap:

That's a great question, and I'll try to think on a macro level. I mean, one of the things about being an artist that I don't know if you can tap into unless you've been one, is that you are, and this sounds a little meta, but you are your work. You are one and your work. And so what you create as it so intrinsically relates to who you fundamentally are, it is so deeply wound that I think the patron in being a patron to you and your work, has to be or should be deeply respectful of you and therefore of your work.

And so if that relationship is not respectful, and I would say both from personal experience and from observation, that relationship is often quite exploitative that, that's not just a comment on you personally, but also a comment on your work. I think we sometimes, as artists who are really, and I don't want to use this very cliche term, struggling artist, but I really think in a landscape like New York, which is no longer the '70s or the '80s where art could still live there, there's no home. There's no viable home for the arts anymore in New York because it's just, we've been priced out.

I think the tendency is to prioritize the support of whoever will give it over and above really being cautious about who it is that's supporting you and whether they respect you or whether they're prone to exploitation. A lot of these people hold really intense positions of power, and oftentimes they're not particularly respectful. I think you do have to be very careful about that relationship.

Jordan Zele:

I think it's interesting to note the necessity of these types of relationships, given the lack of public funding for the arts. Moving away then from the arts individually, and then the production of the art and zooming out perhaps, for lack of a better word, like the display of it or the supply. I'm thinking more about the philanthropy type, the Sackler families who are investing in wings in the Guggenheim. What does that look like in terms of its impact on the art that we consume?

Helen Kashap:

Yeah, that's a great question. And they're an interesting example, and I think you brought up earlier this sort of idea, whether it's formalized or not, but this idea of art washing and having this massive sums of money by these prominent families or organizations support or underwrite big artistic projects. Obviously we need those, right? We just opened the new Geffen Hall in New York City, which was underwritten by David Geffen, who actually himself interestingly was very, very close to the arts his whole life, and so that's a unique example. It's not the Sackler family who is trying for better or worse to rectify some of the ills by these contributions, which while they are greatly appreciated, they do come with some kind of tint. I think we're still sort of reconciling what that means.

But I think more broadly, to answer the question, the philanthropy, whether it's institutionalized or from individuals, is crucial to the arts. David Geffen, and I don't want to misquote, but I think it was something like $100 million contributed towards this new hall, which now the public can enjoy. They've done an extraordinary amount of programming that underwrites programs for the public, for free, for kids, for educational sectors, for outreach. We can't operate at this scale with the arts being as expensive as they are and not government funded without philanthropy, and whether that's institutional or whether it's individual basis, but it's crucial today.

Jordan Zele:

Yeah, it's just really fascinating to hear about these differences all between the Canadian US experience. Do you have any, I'm looking not looking for any kind of sociological study here, but why do you think the US has this kind of more individualistic way of funding the art?

Helen Kashap:

Yeah, that's a great question, and we'd have to get a political historian in here to really be specific, but we know, this goes back to the pillars of the US and as entrenched in their constitution, but it's a very individualistic society. Like other pillars of that society, education, and healthcare, these are all privatized in the US. It follows, the system follows in that vein. And so their funding for the arts, just as

their funding for healthcare and education is privatized. That's how that system functions. Anything that's proposed that is against the grain of that fundamental way of operating, there's often a large reaction to.

It was in 2017 where we tried, there were many, many voices who were trying to completely cut out the NEH and the NEA. The truth is that it occupies such a small sliver of taxpayer money that it was incredulous to cut it out because it's so insignificant. But it was just that it goes against the grain of the way that the American populace thinks and has been built. Whereas in Canada, we're a more socialistic country. We have socialized healthcare. It's increasingly becoming privatized, but it's built on this premise of global healthcare as education system is largely subsidized. So, the arts are too, and it follows in line then with the politics that sort of underpin the entire society.

Jordan Zele:

And it's interesting still to see the massive amounts of talent that is attractive to the US and what it produces [inaudible 00:25:52].

Helen Kashap:

True, true.

Jordan Zele:

I guess as we start to look forward then, what is an ideal way that you could start to see the arts funded in a more maybe equitable way, but also still ensuring that talent is being produced, and our communities are still being benefited from the arts?

Helen Kashap:

That's such a good question. I mean, if we had a crystal ball, I think it'd be interesting to see. I think as we've been talking about, there are obviously national differences of how this plays out. I can be realistic or I can be idealistic. I think one thing to think about is just that we're going to need a hybrid system. The arts are increasingly expensive. They're increasingly resource laden. More and more people are drawn to them, thank goodness. But in order for the arts to thrive, it needs funding.

Obviously, the systems we've talked about already. Enhancing government funding, enhancing institutional and individual philanthropy, enhancing corporate funding campaigns by all the public, not just the urban elite. But then something we haven't talked about that I think is really interesting, sort of this grassroots funding. It's this sort of the Kickstarter, the Patreon, the platforms for the world to support the arts. I think when you avail those platforms to people around the world and make that accessible, I think both the art becomes more accessible, but it also becomes more fundamentally woven into the cultures and the communities. Art is nothing if not for the community. I think that's a really exciting space to explore.

Jordan Zele:

I think that's the bit that really excites me. It's almost a democratization of the way that the arts are funded and hopefully that will kind of create a more diverse and inclusive type of art being produced. But perhaps for those listeners who aren't as aware of all these sorts of platforms like Patreon offer, can you give a bit of insight as to how they work?

Helen Kashap:

Yeah. Different platforms do different things. Again, this is a space that's being heavily innovated right now, and so probably something pops up every day. But let's take a particular platform, like Patreon for example. An artist can build a profile on Patreon and can develop a list of basically patrons or supporters, and they don't have to be people you know. It's really broadly and globally accessible.

People can tap into your body of work, whether it's visual art or music, and you develop this fan base or this base of supporters, and every time you put out a new track or you produce new artwork or something, your patrons have the capacity to support you financially. And so you generate this fan base through a technological platform that enables you to build this global fan base while also sustaining your artistic practice in a really holistic way.

Jordan Zele:

Yeah, really interesting. Even something as basic as helping with cash flow, I imagine like artists, I presume when their income does come in, it's lumpy, it's after a big piece of work is finished. And because you've got so many potential [inaudible 00:28:42] so many different contributors contributing at different parts, it evens out that cash flow issue I imagine, right?

Helen Kashap:

Great. Jordan, that's actually the point of it, and that's something that didn't come up earlier, but this is actually crucial. It's that the arts, and I can talk really locally as a former concert pianist and pianist, I spent eight to 10 hours some years practicing in a small cubicle of a practice room. I wasn't actually doing, I wasn't giving or sharing anything. It took me three to four months to build a program. But during those three to four months, I still needed to pay rent and eat and travel and train. The expenses are innumerable and they're tremendous. But the truth of the matter is that for four months, I was effectively in hibernation.

You need someone, whether it's the government or a patron or a group of patrons or whatever, you need someone to support the livelihood of artists while they're not actually in the moment of sharing. Because a lot goes into the painter in the studio or the pianist in her studio. You're absolutely right. It's like a job, and this is where we have this disconnect as a society. We think, well, the job is when the pianist is on the stage in front of 10,000 people. No, actually, the job is every day when she or he wakes up at seven in the morning, is in the practice room until 10:00 PM and goes to see the physio. That's the job. That's what we have to support.

Jordan Zele:

That's why we need some form of intervention, right? Because there is a market failure.

Helen Kashap:

They just failed to recognize that there's a point of disconnect. Yeah.

Jordan Zele:

There's a really interesting place to leave it, as we start to talk about the digital way and how we can get more of a grassroots involvement into supporting artists. I think that's a really exciting place. We do have a question that we finish with for with every Future of Business podcast episode.

Helen Kashap:

Amazing.

Jordan Zele:

Which in 100 years, how do you think that art will be funded in 100 years, if you could get out that crystal ball?

Helen Kashap:

Wow. If I had that crystal ball. I'm not a techie. I'm actually kind of antiquated in that space, but I think probably the way that everything seems to be moving, be it everything with healthcare and education and in every industry we're moving so towards tech and AI and machine learning. I think so much of the funding for the arts and the way that we proliferate artistic content is going to be digitized. It's going to be all about technology.

We're going to be so globally interconnected that I would say that these funding systems are, and I hate to say this actually, but I think it's probably moving in this direction. It will have less of a human component. It will be less reliant on individuals and individual choice and the choice of corporations, but it will be somehow more digitized.

Jordan Zele:

Well, that sounds like a whole other episode [inaudible 00:31:12]. Helen Kashap, thank you so much.

Helen Kashap:

Amazing. Thanks, Jordan.