Sweden’s SVT1 posted a sharp rise in viewing in 2012, reaping the rewards of a broader audience profile and a rising reputation for drama. Gün Akyuz reports.

Swedish pubcaster SVT’s outgoing head of programmes Annie Wegelius leaves behind an organisation in rude health.

SVT posted one of its best annual audience results of recent times in 2012. In overall terms (three years-plus), flagship network SVT1 attracted a 24.3% share of viewing (up from 22.9% in 2011), factual-leaning SVT2 maintained its 6.7% share and children’s channel Barnkanalen took a 3.8% share (up from 3.4%). In the same overall audience group, its main competitor TV4 posted a 18.9% share, TV3 6.4% and Kanal 5 6.1%.

Driving SVT’s results is the fact it now attracts a broader audience, says Markus Sterky, the broadcaster’s head of content strategy and formats. But equally important, the broadcaster has become more relevant to Swedes, shedding the older-skewing and slightly elitist profile Wegelius came in to address.

“Just three or four years ago we were very much neck and neck with TV4,” says Sterky. “Now the difference is quite big in the three-plus demo, but we are also narrowing the gap in younger demos.”

Key contributing groups include so-called mid-life audiences, such as parents with preschool kids, where SVT1’s 15.7% share is snapping at TV4’s equivalent 16.5%. SVT1’s share rose to 19.7% among parents with school-age kids (up from 18% in 2011), while it has 14.7% of 20-44s without kids, against TV4’s 17%.

“It’s not the fact we want to beat TV4,” says Sterky. “It’s been an active choice to reach older groups in a better way than we’ve done in the past.”

Importantly, the pubcaster is reviewing its online and linear commissioning structure, with more focus on the growing overlap in consumption between the two, including an increased budget for web premieres and commissions.

The announcement of Wegelius’s departure this September has triggered a reshuffle. Her eventual successor is Martin Österdahl, the broadcaster’s commissioning editor for entertainment and sports. There’s also a new role commensurate with SVT’s rising drama reputation. SVT veteran Stefan Baron was appointed as coproduction executive, coordinating all SVT’s copro activities and helping the heads of its two drama departments, in Stockholm and Gothenburg, to find external partners and finance SVT’s growing roster of external coproductions.

In January, Baron was also named acting drama commissioner, a role overseen by Wegelius following the departure of Peter Gustafsson last year.

SVT1 has two main regular local production drama slots a week, on Mondays and Sundays at 21:00, home to both local and coproduced fiction.

SVT is continuing its main drama strategy, which concentrates on three areas: long-running series such as The Bridge, event drama like Death of a Pilgrim and primetime comedies.

Around half of SVT’s Swedish-language drama output has international partners on board, including its long-standing Nordic partners, prior to being greenlit, says Baron.

Sterky adds: “Over the past year or so, our main challenge has been coping with the growing interest in our drama output. This is a new situation for us and there’s a lot of interest from the US and Europe. It’s great, but it also means you have to rethink the way you do things, so as not to lose what they’re interested in the first place.”

A second season of The Bridge is now on the way, as well as two
foreign remakes: a US Fox version and a coproduction between the UK’s BSkyB and France’s Canal+.

One development has been the decision to accept 45-minute formats. “We could imagine a 10x60’ or 12x45’ series,” says Baron. “The 45-minute format opens up different partners, as the 60-minute slot is closed for some. The Germans, for instance, often edit two hours into 100 minutes when they come in as coproducers.” ZDF is a regular coproducer of SVT fiction, along with SVT’s long-standing Nordic partners.

New successes include *Death of a Pilgrim*, the fictionalised retelling of the murder of Sweden’s prime minister Olof Palme in 1986, which aired this January and which has ZDF Enterprises onboard as a pre-buy for international distribution rights; and *Real Humans*, which Baron was closely involved with and has been sold by Shine into a number of territories.

Baron says crime remains the driving genre. “There is always a real hunger for crime and suspense genres, although things are changing a little,” he says. “We have several projects now in development with international partners such as Canal+ and ZDF. I can sense a change and they’re more interested in looking into our ‘drama drama’ slate, compared with five to 10 years ago, when they were only interested in crime.”

The other big change, Baron notes, is the arrival of US drama agents. “They’re coming here and looking at different projects for remakes. They’re really big on remakes just now.”

Projects earmarked for spring 2014 include the recently greenlit drama *Thieves*, a 2x90’ crime suspense story directed by Johan ‘Stakkabo’ Renck (*Breaking Bad*). The show is one of a couple going to MipTV looking for international partnerships.

Meanwhile, a second two-part season of Tre Vänner’s *The Condemned* has been greenlit. The series is made with SVT and coproduced with ZDF.

SVT’s newer local dramas are also attracting new, younger viewers. One of them was the miniseries *Never Wipe Tears Without Gloves* (*Torka Aldrig Tårarna Utan Handskar*, 3x60’). The show, penned by Swedish author and comedian Jonas Gardell, follows a love story set during the Aids crisis of the 1980s and is based on a trilogy of books, the last of which publishes this August.

“It was a very high-end in-house production. I was surprised how well it was received by younger viewers,” says Sterky. The series, airing in September in SVT1’s local drama slot on Mondays at 21.00, generated an average rating of 15-17%, beaten only by one other SVT local drama, recurring crime series *Fjällbackamorden*.

Baron is interested in looking into dual-language dramas. “This increases the budget by 20-30%, which is a challenge, but it has a little to do with the greater audience tolerance to listening to different languages,” he says. “If you look at the remake of *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, there were a lot of Swedish actors in it speaking English.

“While our core business is to give our audience shows in Swedish, there’s big interest from a big international partner and they want to invest in a great script that we develop together, of course they would want it to be English-speaking.”

SVT has maintained its acquisition levels, with a slight budget increase in line with inflation, and has been given a little extra for web exclusives, says Stephen Mowbray, head of acquisitions.

On the drama front, SVT1 tends to airs its acquisitions at 22.00 across the week, although some high-profile shows also occupy the 21.00 slot off-season.

While All3Media’s *Midsomer Murders* remains a firm fixture, SVT1 is home to a raft of newer dramas sourced through its deals with NBCUniversal (NBCU) and HBO in the US, and key UK distributors. “Our ambition is to show all demographics that there is drama out there, and these are titles we know will give us a lot of credibility,” says Sterky.

“From my perspective, we’ve been extremely lucky to get the key titles that defined last year,” says Mowbray, reeling off shows such as *Homeland*, *Downton Abbey*, *Call The Midwife* and *Game Of Thrones*. “They’re all the titles everyone was talking about. When you have them all assembled on the one channel it starts to look pretty good.”

However enviable its position, SVT1’s biggest problem is now the sheer number of successful returning series, says Mowbray. “That should be your goal, to build on brand loyalty and programmes that people know, but we also have to innovate,” he says.

The above four series block out 40-50 weeks, making it “difficult to keep schedules innovative and fresh, while at the same time building on very strong and popular series,” Mowbray says. “That’s the challenge we have for 2013/14: building on that success without getting complacent.”

That said, SVT1 has launched several newcomers. The pre-bought *Mr Selfridge* has launched on Saturdays at 21.30, as lead-out to *Melodifestivalen*, SVT1’s hunt for a *Eurovision Song Contest* finalist. “It’s not only having the right... ”
programme but putting it in a good slot and treating it like a proper programme. Some of our competitors say acquisitions don’t work, but they do if you look after them,” says Mowbray. The BBC’s Call The Midwife, for instance, was given the prominent Sunday 21.00 slot.

Another BBC drama, Death in Paradise, launched last year on Saturdays at 21.30. Mowbray says the show did well, providing “just what people wanted to see” – specifically content that’s “not overly taxing.”

After Mr Selfridge ends its run, SVT plans to launch UK longform crime series on Saturdays from 21.00 to 23.00. The line-up includes ITV’s Morse prequel Endeavour, as well as DCI Banks, Whitechapel and the BBC’s Sherlock.

Meanwhile, SVT has picked up The Paradise, the rival BBC shopping drama to ITV’s Mr Selfridge. “We thought one would preclude the other, but we liked them both, so we’ll show them at different times of the year. They can both work for SVT,” says Mowbray. The Paradise is being lined up for SVT’s summer schedule.

Mowbray says 2012 turned out to be quite busy for SVT on the pre-buying front. Alongside Mr Selfridge, pre-buys included the BBC’s Hunted and A&E’s drama Bates Motel from its NBCU deal. The show, which launches this spring in the US, is set to air on SVT soon after in a slot yet to be decided.

“If we can, we’d rather see one or two episodes, because working on just scripts is risky,” says Mowbray. But he adds: “Part of the puzzle for innovating in the future is that we have to take more chances. It’s part of our life now that we react early, but it shouldn’t be the majority of what we do.”

Mowbray says SVT continues to look for the best acquired shows out there. “It’s important that we set the trends with the best new programming coming along. It’s about keeping your eyes open and being willing to react very quickly,” he says.

In particular, Mowbray notes a rising interest in the US in more cable-type shows, like Bates Motel, instead of 22-week series. “A&E hasn’t been doing much drama and I think it’s interesting to see that develop,” he says.

While SVT’s big fiction shows did well, Mowbray says factual programmes such as 24 Hours in A&E from Shine have also worked on the flagship channel. “We tested it in a late slot on Sundays [22.00] and it did really well. We’re now airing the second series. I would say that’s proper public service, instead of hiding these programmes.”

SVT’s long-standing content deal with NBCU has been renewed, but the HBO deal, which took SVT up to the end of 2012, has not. The licence covered all series that aired until the end of the year, including Girls and The Newsroom, plus the existing True Blood and Game of Thrones. “We haven’t taken anything that they launch in 2013, and at the moment there’s no free TV deal with anyone,” says Mowbray. “We didn’t want to pay for an output deal when the content was being over-exposed in other media.”

Commenting on the rapidly changing competitive landscape for rights and windows framing this decision, he adds: “You can’t take your eye off the ball for a minute anymore. We need to see all these new forms of competition and services. My sense is we have to accept short exclusive windows but work carefully within those so that the brand association is with SVT when the series comes around the next time, rather than a Netflix series or an HBO Nordic series.”

“I imagine we’re not very far from premiering a series on the web and airing all episodes before putting it out on linear TV a couple of months later.”

Stefan Baron, SVT

According to Sterky, 2013 will be about bringing SVT’s online activities into line with the rest of its commissioning strategy. It has found success with its web service SVT Play by commissioning online drama exclusives targeting teenagers, as well as acquired original content, which has helped it to reach young adults without kids in particular.

“We’re experimenting with buying things to play on SVT Player,” says Mowbray, citing French drama Les Revenants from Canal+, which launched in weekly episodes on the web player this year and will receive a TV window in the summer. “We probably wouldn’t have had a primetime space for it on the channel, as the taste here is very Anglo-Saxon.”

The drama has been getting 50,000 to 60,000 views per week – well above average and high even compared with Swedish commissions, he notes. “It’s getting a younger audience, which suits us very well. They are probably early adopters, because it’s getting a ton of media coverage without a huge marketing push. A lot of those figures are down to word of mouth.”

Moreover, Baron says SVT is now discussing launching more dramas with the web as the first platform, as well as making all episodes available there first. “It’s one of the interesting questions that we’re looking at right now for 2014 – what the cost would be and so on,” says Baron.

“It’s obvious that drama is very important when discussing these questions because drama drives a lot of viewing habits, along with genres like sport. If you have a series that is 10 to 20 episodes, it affects people. I imagine we’re not very far from premiering a series on the web, as we’ve done with Les Revenants, and airing all episodes before putting it out on linear TV a couple of months later.”