

“Are our orchestral musicians 'Violin Operators' or 'Evangelists for our Art’?” Questions for our Orchestras.

I write in support of our orchestras. In the UK we boast many world class orchestras that regularly punch well above their weight internationally. Our orchestras are held up as examples of good practice around the world, principal conductor positions are fiercely contested, and critics regularly affirm the true qualities we are lucky enough to have in abundance. However simply discussing our qualities is tantamount to only practising the pieces we can already play, ignoring those trickier passages and not raising the bar to challenge ourselves further.

In recent years there has been much evidence and talk of orchestras in economic crisis, much discussion of the inherent structural deficit within our sector, the 'cost disease' that produces the conundrum that it can often be cheaper to pay an orchestra to stay at home than to actually perform!

With declining public investment in the arts, the fund raising departments in our great orchestras are now running flat out, in order that our institutions have even a hope of standing still.

This of course begs the question, do we need orchestras? And possibly even more uncomfortably, do we need full time, full size, 'employed' orchestras?

Why not use musicians as and when we need them? As and when we can find work for them? As and when we can find an audience that is interested in listening? There is, after all, no shortage of fabulous musical talent. This way of working would be financially less of a burden and possibly ensure that these flagship institutions live to fight another day.

I suggest however that this is misguided thinking.

The primary function of an orchestra is to be an evangelist for the art of music. We have the wealth of our huge international heritage behind us and an even more exciting potential wealth of new music to look forward to. We may need to call our orchestras 'businesses', to call the art form a 'sector', to have business plans and strategic visioning **but** we must never lose sight of our primary functions - to excite, to challenge, to entertain, to illuminate, to provoke.

No musician ends up in an orchestra by accident, our players are there because they have excelled throughout a hugely demanding training and they continue to excel night after night, with immense drive, dedication and a healthy dose of self doubt. I know that on top of what our musicians already do, within our orchestras there is a huge pool of untapped talent. Our musicians have the potential to be passionate advocates, potential to develop in public speaking, in educational roles, in artistic visioning, in arranging and composing, in progressing the art form - in essence they have the potential to **lead from within**. At present there is a lid on that talent. What would happen if we gently lifted that lid? Could we not include them more, challenge them more, support them more?

Maintaining a stable 'player body' is essential to an orchestra's identity, their sound, their style, their individual qualities. At the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, in the past 3 years we have had 5 musicians who have passed their 40 year anniversary of 'membership' of the CBSO. 59% of our players have been with the CBSO for over 10

years. And we are not alone, this is not untypical. Orchestras must surely have the most stable workforce of any 'business model', a powerful reason to invest in that workforce. Like great conductors and soloists, if **our** musicians are supported and challenged well, we could have a resource of excellence, where true distinction could be handed down from generation to generation.

As orchestras diversify in styles of music they play, in audiences they play to, in how they use digital technology, in cross arts collaborations, in increased work off the concert platform, in connecting to new audiences and funders, we are asking ever more of our players.

So are our musicians truly 'members' of their orchestras, do they share the vision of their employers and managements, who are asking more and more of them? And do their employers/managers articulate that vision powerfully enough? In many instances would it not be more accurate to say our musicians are instrument operating employees, (in the case of contract orchestras) or instrument operating freelancers with one main income stream (in the case of self governed orchestras)? Provocative I know!

I suggest that in many instances our players, boards and managements are not **truly** united behind the idea that we *all* need to be evangelists for our art.

I have studied with fascination the literature discussing the pros and cons of governed and self governed orchestras. I have experienced both structures in operation from the inside and out. And there are great examples of both models at work, where the balance between musicians, music director, management team, board, audiences and investors are finely tuned yet flexible.

However could there be a third way, a '**John Lewis**' vision of our UK orchestras, where players and staff are employed **and** are members? There may not be profits to share, but there would be a vision to share and a collective sense of ownership. If we could combine the best qualities of both orchestral governance models we could create a structure that serves our art better.

Looking to the future, one key factor of sustained solvency for our orchestras will be 'invest-ability'. Creating a workforce of evangelists is surely the most effective way to inspire investment. Imagine our UK orchestras as 90+ individual cultural entrepreneurs, unique musicians who, with their own distinctive voice, challenge each other to find an ever more compelling vision for their art!

In a 'John Lewis' model, our governed orchestras could benefit from empowering the players to take more responsibility and artistic ownership. The self governed could benefit from contracts that deliver reliable salaries, pensions and sick pay, whilst still retaining the leading voice in artistic matters. An offer that delivers all these things, would also allow us to recruit and retain some of the best UK and international talent.

To ensure our orchestras are evangelists throughout their structures, 'employers' may need to relax the desire for control, properly including and empowering musicians at all levels, really hearing them not just listening, and making their individual artistic 'well being' essential to the success of every orchestra. For players it will mean increased responsibility, greater 'buy in' to the company vision, greater flexibility, all hand in hand with maintaining the highest standards of playing on the platform. It is a big ask.

And it may be tricky but in that change process, for every negative there is a positive:

More and more is being demanded of our orchestral players vs there are more and more opportunities for them.

'I didn't join an orchestra to play in schools' vs engaging with new audiences is often a far more rewarding and meaningful musical encounter than performing on a lauded concert platform.

'Our players aren't interested in the biggest picture' vs 'How could we be more inclusive and persuasive with our vision?'

'There is no money to support this kind of vision' vs 'How can we use the creativity of our players to generate income and make us more 'investable'?

So if we are to change, for me that change is not about prolonged negotiation to change contracts, 'working credits', reduced contracts or flexible working. The change is about governance and ownership as well as a more ideological change, what does it mean to be an orchestral musician?

If we can all embrace the vision of being true evangelists for our art then I firmly believe that as a 'sector' we will be invincible. Classical music has endured for 400+ years because it has something to say that is worth listening to. We need simply to ensure all our orchestras are telling its story in the best possible way.

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