

Could the John Lewis model be applied to our orchestras?



In the July issue of *Classical Music*, my article “Are our orchestral musicians “violin operators” or “evangelists for our art”? challenges us to find a way to make our musicians both employees and owners of their orchestras. On June 25th the tweet ‘Could our orchestral musicians be doing more for their art?’ was retweeted multiple times by individuals and organisations including the Royal Philharmonic Society, the Association of British Orchestras and the Royal Academy of Music. It reached over 75,000 followers, and the Twitter reaction has been unanimously positive. Beyond social media, the most frequently expressed opinion by several miles has been “I will be very interested to hear what reaction you get!” So what have people been saying?

Simon Webb, General Manager BBC Philharmonic

“Cath has bravely challenged the status quo within orchestras and we should all welcome this blast of fresh air. Orchestras must be creative communities that allow their brilliant musicians to flourish; in order to do that we must question and challenge what we do and how we do it with confidence in the knowledge that we are the custodians of the most remarkable ensembles. I might not agree with every nuance of Cath’s article, but fundamentally she is right in my view and I welcome and applaud what she has written and relish the challenges she sets us.”

Chi-chi Nwanoku, MBE

“Many of these sentiments absolutely chime with mine and I would be fascinated to hear more about how this vision of governance and ownership could be implemented in reality. The distinct factors of commitment, ownership, responsibility, care, etc, are subject to human nature and how we behave in large groups. In chamber music there is naturally a different sense in the air, but I have seen struggles within orchestras trying to find a balance, the success of which depends on the strength of a conductor, leader or director who has the ability to really empower the players.”

Mark Pemberton, Director, Association of British Orchestras

“The reference to the John Lewis model is interesting, as the principle of employee ownership and mutuality has been very fashionable with politicians of all parties in recent years, yet was arguably pioneered by the LSO in 1904, well before the John Lewis Partnership was founded in 1920. But extending the model to employed musicians would be revolutionary.”

Stephen Maddock, Chief Executive CBSO

“I totally agree on the point of being evangelists for our art, but even more important I would say is that we are serving our audiences. And in the end we serve the audiences best by serving the music well, but I think it’s in that order of priority.”

Chris Loughran, Vice Chairman Deloitte LLP, Chair CBSO Development Trust

“The future of our orchestras rests upon being able to attract support and funding from a wide variety of sources, both public and private. In all cases, the active engagement of orchestral players, the musical evangelists, is an essential ingredient in both attracting and sustaining this funding.”

Simon Halsey, CBE

“I’d like to contribute my experience from the wonderful Berlin Radio Choir of which I was Chief Conductor 2001-15. Their situation is exactly parallel to an orchestra... We encouraged our singers, whose former life as an East German choir had been differently organised, to be as responsible as possible for our product. Our experience was that the collective responsibility led directly to higher motivation and new standards and the debate engendered, whilst not always comfortable, made us a much freer and better ensemble.”

So what next?

As each orchestra is unique, the solution for each organisation will be different and I would not presume to describe the best route for assimilating these ideas. However there are a few questions we might strive to answer to help us on our journeys:

1. **Celebrating the Individual** - Great conductors work by inspiring musicians to feel we are both uniquely essential and collectively bigger than the sum of our parts. Within our companies could we learn from this model of leadership?
2. **Learning Culture** - Musicians are innately self critical and are judged publicly most days on their musical activities. Continual Professional Development is built into concert giving activity by practice routines, rehearsals, conductors, audiences, managements and critics. However rarely is a similar view of CPD embraced elsewhere in our orchestras. Could we make an inspirational learning culture a priority?
3. **Recruitment** - Stephen Upshaw tweeted, ‘What if it were possible to involve these factors in hiring, rather than just 3 minutes of tired excerpts?’ Whilst always of course ensuring we select the best players for each orchestral position, has the time come to take a broader view of our musicians in the auditioning process? Or are we doing this already?
4. **Membership of our charities** - in our governed orchestras musicians are clearly ‘represented’ in their orchestral structures, however there is a world of difference between representation and ownership. What might the John Lewis model, which combines employment and membership look like for each organisational structure?
5. **Widening of remunerated activity** - remuneration for orchestral musicians is, in most instances, restricted to performing and educational roles. Many other roles are now essential and are expected ‘pro bono’. Is this ultimately sustainable for those giving their time?
6. **All company meetings and social gatherings** - it may seem trivial, however fun and effective all company gatherings are essential. The ‘us and them’ history of orchestras and indeed industrial relations generally, is an anachronism. Can we share the challenges ahead and have fun along the way?

The debate will continue at the ABO conference next January in Birmingham, taking us a step closer to finding an orchestral model where differently skilled evangelists are united as equals, by the common goal of sharing great music.