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Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship 2017

The focus of my Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowship research was to investigate a range of Northern England and Scottish orchestras and music organisations to evaluate what strategies they were implementing to ensure their relevancy and meet the changing expectations and needs of their communities.

The organisations visited included:

Opera North, Leeds
Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Glasgow
Halle Orchestra, Manchester
Manchester Camerata, Manchester
City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Birmingham
Birmingham Opera, Birmingham
Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, Birmingham

Within each organisation interviews were conducted across a range of responsibilities including:

Chief Executive/Executive Director/General Manager
Artistic Manager/Artistic Planning
Development/Philanthropic/Sponsorship Manager
Education/Community Engagement Manager
Education/Community Engagement Programme Deliverers
Musicians
Community Stakeholders – School Principals/Health Carers

These organisations were selected on the basis that they had a stated vision that extended beyond a traditional concert only focus. They also each receive a combination of local and central government funding, with the remainder of their revenue secured through a combination of box office, philanthropic donations, corporate sponsorship and charitable trusts. This financial model is like the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra (CSO) and the other professional orchestras within New Zealand.

Changing Roles for Orchestra

Each of the organisations I visited were evolving and broadening their programme in response to the changing expectations from their immediate communities. Most have had a primary focus on concert performances, over time adding education and community engagement components.

These same groups are now offering substantial community engagement programmes and in many cases looking to expand these further. Interestingly, a number were also considering reducing their subscription concert offerings to free up time for the musicians to undertake education activity.

The range and type of community engagement activity being offered was wide and very diverse. Participants were all ages, abilities and backgrounds. Typically, each organisation offered activities that took place in different locations and not just within their own rehearsal and performance facilities.

The community engagement projects were usually created for specific communities after a period of consultation and co-development. Each organisation had their own specialty areas of focus which included working with the homeless, disadvantaged youths, people experiencing and living with mental illness, disabled or impaired communities, recently bereaved, gifted and grass roots musicians.

In most instances these programmes are not considered pathways to develop new audiences and ultimately subscribers, but a way of providing high quality music and arts experiences for all the people of their cities.

There was a strong emphasis on taking the music out of the traditional concert hall, often perceived as a barrier by many of the participants to experiencing the arts, and into the heart of communities.

This resulted in many more, and a far wider range, of people connecting with each organisation. Not only did this mean a greater number of people were directly experiencing the arts but also becoming enthusiastic advocates for the value of the arts to their lives and communities.

While every organisation I visited were delivering programmes of outstanding value and interest, there were several initiatives that particularly interested me:

1. In Harmony – Opera North

The In Harmony programme operates in several locations throughout the UK with Opera North offering it in three primary schools in the Leeds area.

It is offered in neighbourhoods of high social deprivation and is a fully in-house programme that teaches music, singing and string instruments to every student in participating schools, delivered by specialist musicians (Artist Leaders) engaged by Opera North.

Children initially receive weekly full class lessons teaching rhythm and singing. Choir and string instrument lessons are introduced after the initial introductory year, followed by orchestral group playing.

Classroom and support staff are encouraged to participate in the programme too, learning alongside the students.

The programme is delivered within the school during the daytime, embedding it within the school culture and timetable, utilising existing support structures. This differs to other programmes such as El Sistema that operate on a wider community approach, usually outside of the school hours.

I visited two different schools in the Leeds area that have opted for the In Harmony programme, observed classes and spoke with teachers. One school had been offering the programme for several years (Windmill Primary School) while the other (New Bewerley Community School) was in their first year.

The Principals of each school had similar reasons why their schools have adopted In Harmony. Each independently cited enhanced social development and discipline, which in turn has led to improved classroom learning.

Their principle reasons for supporting the programme however was in the value it provided their students through equality of access to the arts as well as encouraging them to aspire and dream beyond their own immediate lives. They believe strongly that their students deserve every opportunity to succeed, especially as they faced many social disadvantages within their communities, including low expectations of achievement.

The programme itself was very impressive but did require a high level of government subsidy (via the Arts Council) and a considerable contribution from the school due to its intensive nature and resulting high staffing costs. Some other arts organisations I visited felt it was not sustainable for this reason.

The other limitation to the programme was the lack of opportunity for students to continue with their instrumental studies at a secondary school level. Unlike New Zealand, free in-school instrumental lessons are not available in the UK so once students finish at an In Harmony primary school their only option is to undertake paid lessons. This is beyond the means of most of these families.

One other point I found interesting was the unintended gentrification of the immediate neighbourhoods surrounding schools that had adopted the In Harmony programme. Trends were starting to emerge of “middle-class” families moving in-zone so their children could attend these schools leading to the very people the programme was targeted at being forced to relocate.

2. Verve Club – Opera North

This was a weekly club for teenagers and young adults with autism or other communication challenges.

The sessions focused on different art forms each week with the session presented by a guest Artist Leader, a specialist in their respective fields.

Usually the three-hour class included shorter introductory activities where the participants worked in pairs or smaller groups, concluding with a devised work involving everyone. Each term ended with the development of a work for public presentation that was created over several weeks.

The session I participated in was led by a theatre director that specialised in devised multi-sensory work. It was interesting to observe how supportive the members of the club were towards each other and how developing trust between them and the guest Artist Leader was critical to a successful session.

It was also evident that the Artist Leader needed to be open to receiving direct and immediate feedback from the participants and can deviate from their programme plan if it wasn't hitting the mark.

3. Dementia Programme – Manchester Camerata

Manchester Camerata has been working in the field of dementia for several years and are currently involved in a multi-year research project in conjunction with a local university and medical company.

Each week two musicians lead improvised instrumental sessions with groups of residents at various retirement facilities throughout the Manchester region.

Camerata musicians establish a basic music structure which residents could join and contribute to utilising a range of different hand held percussion instruments. No prior music knowledge was required.

The session I participated in involved residents with varying stages of dementia. What particularly struck me about the value in this programme was the opportunity for residents to harness their own creativity, activating different parts of their brain and learning new skills. This differs from the more familiar programmes involving singing based around known songs which focus on triggering memory.

4. In school youth special needs programmes – City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra

Groups of several musicians from the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra work weekly with special needs classes based in local schools. The programme typically involves devising and improvising music using a range of different instruments.

This was of great interest to me given the partnership CSO has established with Jolt, an all abilities dance company. We have developed work together for the past three years now and would like to extend our creative residency programmes to special needs learning units within Christchurch schools.

CBSO's openness about their experiences in this field was valuable, especially gaining a greater understanding of the steps they have taken around musician training, ongoing support and safety practices for physical contact with students.

While some of these initiatives outlined above covered fields in which the CSO is currently operating, the opportunity to observe new approaches and different solutions to challenges was invaluable. Having a level of experience in this area enabled me to be much more directive with my questions and drill down more deeply.

While it was reassuring to discover that we each had similar experiences, and in some instances made similar mistakes, there was a wealth of new ideas discovered that in turn have sparked fresh concepts that we plan to implement through the CSO's own programme.

Another important discovery was the increasing emphasis on participant-led content development. While the CSO had instinctively adopted this approach, it has encouraged us to pursue this in a more conscious way.

Increasing the degree to which participants control and shape each project results in a greater sense of ownership and consequently improves the quality of the outcomes. It also means that the Artist Leaders need to be comfortable with relinquishing control, can improvise and respond quickly to new ideas and develop trust and rapport with a wide range of people quickly.

This is quite a different approach for many orchestral musicians and orchestral music programmes where the project is usually pre-planned, with limited flexibility to allow for participant initiated deviation.

Implications for Musicians

Those most directly and immediately affected by the changing role of orchestras are the musicians themselves. While the majority of players are embracing and enjoying the diversification to their job, some are not.

Of those who are resistant to this change, the two most frequent fears were; that it will result in a “dumbing down” of the orchestra and that they were appointed as orchestral musicians to perform concerts, not to educate or engage and interact with participants in a personal way.

These fears have largely been expressed by musicians that have had a long association with a specific organisation and whose experience of education and engagement work has mostly been limited to private instrumental tuition or traditional school and family concerts.

Increasingly, the most successful education programmes require a level of creative input from the musicians and/or programme leaders. This can often mean improvising or on the spot devising – skills that are not typically required from orchestral musicians.

Orchestras have sought to address these concerns in different ways including engaging high quality community engagement programme leaders, professional development for the musicians including improvising training, peer support and voluntary participation.

Interestingly most UK trained musicians are now experiencing some form of engagement training (as distinct from pedagogy focused courses) during their tertiary music performance study. These musicians are now beginning to secure positions within the orchestras and are the first wave of orchestral players expecting to be involved in community engagement programmes as a core part of their jobs.

There was no evidence of a lowering of artistic standards due to increasing community engagement activity at any of the organisations visited. Both Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Manchester Camerata commented on enhanced musician morale, improved artistic quality and ensemble cohesion as an unexpected benefit from expanding their community engagement activity and placing a greater emphasis on it.

Implications for Organisations

Every Senior Leadership role spoke of the need for their organisations to be maintaining and developing their relationships with their communities and stakeholders.

Expectations from funders to deliver to a broader set of outcomes was a key driver for this as well as a realisation that an orchestra has more to offer than what might just occur within a concert hall.

It was evident that Engagement and Education activity were significant platforms in which to connect with people that would otherwise consider an orchestra irrelevant in their daily lives. The opportunity to reach new audiences through a broader range of activities was considered crucial by each orchestra, especially in the face of shrinking subscriber numbers.

The changing nature of the traditional subscriber model has meant that these orchestras were seeing a major shift to single ticket buyers who consider concert attendance as a special one-off “experience”. Rather than relying on a smaller group of regular concert goers, these orchestras now need to appeal far more broadly to a much larger pool of people.

Despite this changing profile of concert attendees, the main strategic driver to deliver more impactful education and engagement programmes was not to convert these participants to future audience members. This has been largely discredited – much like introducing new audience through a “pops” programme with the expectation they will evolve to become masterworks subscribers.

The key strategic purpose of these education and engagement programmes was to deliver music experiences to a larger range of people through more creative means, provide enhanced social outcomes through a platform of music and to diversify revenue streams.

There were also operational implications that each organisation was grappling with because of this evolution of purpose. The most common challenges were:

- How to reflect the flexibility required to cover concert and education work within musicians’ contracts?
- Should education work be remunerated separately or considered part of a salaried position?
- How should education work be balanced with full concert work-loads?
- Who should deliver the work – outside “specialists” or company musicians?

Each organisation appeared to have developed their own solutions to these challenges although in most instances they considered more work was to be done and they had yet to reach a final resolution.

Every organisation visited also spoke of the importance of utilising their own artists to deliver most of the work. Opera North was the only operation that delivered most their programmes through external full time artists – largely due to scheduling and workload requirements relating to their mainstage opera productions. They are now looking to utilise company artists in a greater capacity and it appeared that there was a growing awareness at senior levels of the organisation of the benefits in doing so.

Sharing the Experience

Since completing my Fellowship research, I have been fortunate to have had many opportunities to share my experience with others through talks, presentations, briefings, reports and meetings. Audiences have included people within the orchestral sector, the wider arts community, funders, local government as well as the public.

The presentations that I have made have included:

Christchurch City Council (the full Council)

Christchurch City Council staff

Creative New Zealand Arts Council

Creative New Zealand Advisers

Christchurch Arts Forum

Association of Professional Orchestras Aotearoa (APOA)

Radio New Zealand Concert interview

Christchurch U3A organisations including Lincoln, Arts Centre, Avonhead and Mountford Trustees of CSO

Friends of the CSO

I have also met personally with individuals to discuss my experiences including Creative New Zealand's Practice Director for Orchestral Music and Opera, Chris Archer, Chief Executive of Auckland Philharmonia, Barbara Glaser, Director of Connecting for the Auckland Philharmonia, Tom Hamill, Director for Jolt Dance, Lyn Cotton and the Director of Pathway Trust, Carey Ewing.

I believe that the level of interest in my experience reflects a growing understanding of the contribution that the arts can make to the overall wellbeing of our society as well as a desire to understand how we might better implement this at a practical level.

Summary – impact for CSO

Prior to departing for the United Kingdom to undertake the Fellowship research, the CSO had outlined a draft vision for the future. It was based around an assumption that our role was evolving and extending beyond that of just a presenter of concerts. We had determined that a potential new path for us included an expansion of our existing community engagement programme with greater emphasis on social outcomes.

The opportunity to undertake research in the United Kingdom under the auspices of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust has provided an invaluable opportunity to evaluate first-hand how a range of renowned music organisations are adapting to their own changing communities. It has resulted in meaningful examples to underpin the future of the CSO.

We have a clear vision and path for the future that will enable the CSO to adapt to the changing nature of our society, better meeting the needs of our communities. This will be achieved through not limiting our role to that of an organisation with a primary purpose of concert performance but instead considering how music can be used as a platform to enrich people's lives – in all manner of different ways.

It is also important for us to recognise that we are the most substantial music infrastructure in the South Island and as such, we have a responsibility to find ways in which we can share our knowledge, expertise and resources with others, to ensure a flourishing music community now and for the future.

We have developed an ambitious but achievable strategy that will enable us to expand our community engagement delivery by three times our current levels. It will allow us to implement on-going programmes in addition to our existing mainly stand-alone projects.

These findings have the potential to fundamentally change the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, challenging the very nature of what we consider our role and purpose to be. I am excited by the months ahead as we begin to adopt our vision, cementing our place in the “new” Christchurch and making our contribution to the lives of increasing numbers of Cantabrians.

Personal Impacts

I believe that the health of our society can be measured in part through the qualities of inclusiveness and a sense of belonging by all. Music can be an excellent platform to help us achieve these goals and I remain passionately committed to reducing barriers that might prevent some New Zealanders experiencing this.

The opportunity presented to me through the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust has re-affirmed my commitment towards this aspiration, and I have been inspired by the many innovative and creative examples of work that I encountered that have been motivated by similar goals. The generosity of newly found colleagues has been especially humbling and their willingness to share their own experience and insights has been invaluable.

Perhaps one of the most significant impacts for me has been the realisation that ultimately any artist or arts organisation must develop their own response that is unique to their immediate community and audiences. While there is value in learning from others' examples, developing a programme together with our communities that reflects their own specific character, needs and aspirations, will ultimately result in something of long term impact that has relevancy and sincerity.

I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for their support in enabling me to undertake this research. I am certain that it will continue to provide me with inspiration for many years to come.