

Disruption and Diversity

Normalising Diversity: transforming orchestras and meeting 21st century challenges

The Need for Change? Lessons from the ABO 2017 conference:

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One of the key messages from the 2017 ABO conference on DISRUPTION (25-27th January) – is that the ABO has the sector’s authority and permission to lead by convening on the topic of Diversity. Despite the lead that the ABO took some 14 years ago and the subsequent calls to action, the classical music sector (or specifically orchestras and their membership) must be responsible for changing the way that Britain connects classical music with people. Without taking up the baton to positively lead and embrace the benefits of a more inclusive, equal and diverse marketplace, to manage changes and adapt to benefit from disruption, orchestras simply will not become resilient enough to thrive in the long-term. Can orchestras survive without Diversity?

Of course, the answer is yes, no doubt, despite the uncertainty of where the talent pool may come from post-Brexit, but the sector will look very different, possibly in scale. Diversity is only one small but tough part of orchestras’ future equation. The important success of Chineke! must not mislead people into thinking that the work around Diversity Inclusion and Equity is narrowed into a Black-led orchestra, but rather that it’s on a large scale (big and heavy); that it’s not a sprint, but a marathon; and the responsibility of the entire sector.

When this year’s ABO conference kicked off with the session, “The need for change” – the resounding message was that ‘diversity’ has *now* (finally) become a major priority in 2017. There is a sense of urgency to change the status quo within orchestras, articulated by various external forces, chiefly funding directives, but also for that change to be pointed towards the desire to seek new audiences, to secure a healthier future and a broader portfolio of financial support. It cannot be ignored that, at the conference, the fact that the former funding carrot has transformed itself into a stick, adding urgency and necessity for all funded organisations, coloured the conversations. As the conference revealed, many ensembles and orchestras ‘do diversity’ quite well. However, the fear or message from Arts Council England’s was that this was not done quite well enough.

Hearing the narratives, discourses and themes that emerged over the course of three days, this paper collates some of the highlights and repackages these by asking the questions, Where, What and How can the ABO support its membership and the classical music sector in taking on the case for diversity? Six ideas stood out:

1. **Collect, Curate and Connect the Conversations**

Pipeline and the Pool: Getting to know what the problem is?

Arts Council England was clear in reiterating that all funded organisations are expected to show how they will contribute to the Creative Case for Diversity through the work they produce, present and distribute. We heard that with Creative Case for Diversity in place, orchestras are ‘better placed’ to address other challenges and opportunities in relation to audience development, widening public engagement, diversifying the workforce, and refreshing leadership and governance to reflect the diversity of contemporary England across all aspects of their work.

So is the challenge of embedding diversity one of society, place and opportunity?

Over the three days, one clear message shone through: that Diversity is about empowering people; about empowering orchestras to step forward; to look around for ways of making the difference in their own conversations and the people they speak to outside of our own natural circle or tribe and “make an impact in our own back yard”.

Listening to the experiences of some of the key contributors eg. Jessica Schmidt (Boston Symphony Orchestra), Jesse Rosen (League of American Orchestras), Deborah Williams (Creative Diversity Network), Abid Hussain (Arts Council England), what became apparent was the *triple and winning combination* of looking at three facets of Diversity + Inclusion + Equality (DIE) in tandem is crucial. Even though it sounds obvious on paper, the reality of making successful transformative organisational change is to understand how those practices must be considered as being *interdependent*, backed with strong individual strands of policy and work behind them.

However, ensuring that diversity practice becomes normalised and therefore embedded within orchestral culture, behaviour and indeed practice, requires planning, investment and a reasonable amount of time to take forward. In the past quick fixes have proven to be impossible to implement, distasteful and wasteful.

No amount of drumming the demographic, economic, legal, moral and political reasons into play is going to ensure that DIE practice will sustain, unless orchestras pay special attention to those differences that create disadvantages for some social groups such as gender, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, age and economic disadvantage. Orchestras are not social experiments but are part of society. It is difficult to achieve diversity without developing new ways of doing things that attract, retain, and sustain those who are different.

Building the pipeline. The orchestra that learns to be freely inclusive of all its stakeholders and seeks to build connections with new audiences and communities will gain much from its diversity for the long haul. Certainly, achieving total inclusivity as a long-term goal, even when it can seem impossible to achieve, it is possible to have an inclusive environment to encourage diversity in practice.

Building a sustainable inclusive environment in which its leaders can ensure that the organisation enjoys an inclusive, diverse culture where diversity is not an add on, is the challenge. Leaders *have to* bring their whole organisation and stakeholders with them. They *have to* put measures in place that actively seek to ensure that DIE is evaluated, reviewed and most all made relevant to the mission and aims of the 21st century orchestra.

The conference heard that inclusive cultural change does take an investment in people, systems – but most of all the willpower of the leadership, building local partnerships and a coalition of funds (public and private) to be able to fully capitalise and understand the true opportunity of building a strategy and business plan with diversity, inclusion and equality throughout all aspects of the organisation (art form (product), audience (market) and accounts (financial business case)).

Diversity and Role Models (is what you see, what you get?)

If, as some say, building the talent pool takes time: What happens in the interim? Alex Laing (Phoenix Symphony Orchestra) asked us to think about what the audience sees on the stage – that there is a connection with the way that people will choose to spend their time. But what about the loneliness of the single role model? We need to pay attention not to overburden one individual and offer real support for the *visible* role models: they usually hide the challenges, and barriers they face, are often in quiet crisis – embattled and under unforeseen pressures.

Poster syndrome – putting a Black face on marketing materials without having a true sense of purpose to hire Black people across the organisation, behind the front desk, in leadership positions, on stage, at Board level can be damaging in the long run. The synthetic nature of this kind of marketing has a negative impact on diversity because the promise does not live up to the reality. The conference heard from Chi Chi Nwanoku that so many BAME musicians end up giving up, not only because of the lack of work, but because they cannot see role models or pathways into orchestras.

2. Supporting the Leaders and Networks

Embracing Diversity

The ABO can lend tactical support and offer a strategic overview of how organisations are embracing diversity. The importance of being crystal clear about why orchestras are making diversity a priority and why “Embracing Diversity” poses challenges on several fronts needs more work. The impression that Diversity and Inclusivity has been or will be truly high on the agenda for all orchestras is misguided. How are orchestras going to get there? Surely orchestras can share and support each other’s networks? There needs to be several ways to support (or connect) a range of different networks. Some by their nature may not be that inclusive as they may need to address protected characteristics and deal with redressing inequality, but there may be ways to share awareness of the work that is being done.

Such is the scope and scale for the challenges of running an orchestra that, to keep a focus on the values and benefits associated with DIE, the tendency could be to wander away from its complexity. Collaborative ways of working across leadership, management and governance will help to delve into the very important areas of programming and audience development. The fact is that aligning leadership, management and governance with diversity is a ‘grand and glorious’ opportunity, one that orchestras must handle for themselves.

ABO supports leaders – suggest informal networks

Leading Diversity and Leading Diverse organisation can be isolating; there is a high level of vulnerability when stepping into new or perceived difficult areas. The ABO may be able to broker informal networks in several ways: to help leaders who are not connected with diverse leaders; to highlight attention on how not to overburden the role models; and offer real support to visible role models of all backgrounds. ABO may not have the current resources but owns the relationships to be able to invite people on the same journey to help champion and challenge one another. The value of peer-to-peer mentoring and coaching was expressed as an option that could be explored.

The need to professionalise the leadership – making sure that the talent that exists in orchestras is fresh, resilient and keeping abreast of changes in the sector and the creative industries beyond – was expressed as a topic that was not often brought to the forefront, due to lack of confidence or fear of potential fallout. This area of thought extends to orchestras’ boards.

Darren Henley was clear in stating that boards have to look to increase diversity. Orchestras, if not already doing so, are encouraged to become more creative and use board members to tackle key areas of focus and expertise – finance, fundraising, digital, communication. Boards and Orchestral leaders are charged with thinking more about people with different experiences and backgrounds but possessing highly desirable, transferable skills. Work around – cultivation – with new groups and communities outside of traditional networks. The ABO may be able to act as partner or conduit to connect with other initiatives that build relationships with networks.

Supporting Confidence in managing change and disruption

Talking to people who are ‘different’ stirs things up. Younger generations can be fearless in giving opinion and will ask for something that orchestras cannot or even do not wish to provide today. But maybe young people and DIE can help

orchestras provide it tomorrow. With that kind of openness and input orchestras may be able to provide new ways into innovation more quickly than they imagine.

Internal and External Diversity

The voices within - the voice of the players: how much of the musicians' creative ideas and suggestions are used to drive innovation - outside of music making are musicians given the space to be shared and valued? For BAME musicians, who are often more likely to be in non-contracted positions, deal with and face the challenges of working in a freelance economy – they can offer innovations and the cross fertilisation of their experiences, gained from working in different settings.

The voices outside - John Fulljames (Royal Opera House) shared his learning from the work produced by TONIC in the theatre and dance sectors. Understanding the root causes behind gender imbalances within an organisation and artform, requires a focused approach to achieve meaningful change. Making the important point that it takes institutions time to put diversity 'on the agenda' – moving from a "groan" to being on point. One of the outcomes for ROH was to strengthen the pool of available female conducting talent.

3. Keeping Diversity on the ABO agenda

Forward planning for the many strands and themes around diversity to be included on the agenda of orchestras' development programmes is the only way forward. ABO could revisit some of the themes across 2018 and 2019 conferences:

Raise the Game on Disability

Disability – Focus on the ways in which orchestras can develop deeper engagement with disability and neurodiversity. The lack of confidence in working with disability is compounded when conversations are complex and often unspoken as people are afraid of making mistakes and rather keep quiet than risk embarrassment.

ABO can continue to take the lead by inviting more inspirational contributors like James Rose (Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra) and Deborah Williams (Creative Diversity Network) who are doing excellent work in these areas and who have built significant partnerships and projects. ABO should be encouraged to revisit the topic of disability within the sector and to hear other from cultural sectors (including, performing arts but also outside of these) who could add offer pathways and additional conversations to help develop strategies for change.

Support Changing the Face of Orchestral Leadership-

We heard from James Murphy (Southbank Sinfonietta), about the financial benefits of woman conductors in attracting additional donations – in the case of the CBSO, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla. However, that is not a model example in the sector at all, but one of aspiration. Direct ideas about increasing diversity with women conductors are examples that will increase through projects like the Advance programme (Tonic Theatre). We heard about Alice Farnham's programme to increase confidence and development opportunities with young women. One example, that Alice suggested gained good feedback: whenever the orchestras have a female guest conductor giving a concert, that they also offer a Q&A clinic either for women interested in becoming conductors or who are already in training. The role of the agent was emphasised as they can also help with this by encouraging orchestras to plan this into the contracts. Of course, Alice was keen to say that female conductors want to be seen just as conductors, however, the time and place is important to open up where they can talk honestly about this.

Avoid Institutional Drift

Orchestras, of course, behave like and look like institutions, but the orchestral product relies on its distinctive constituent parts. As institutions, they are very fortunate in this regard - the individual creative voices rallying under a musical leader that have to cooperate and coalesce to make great art: that's the norm. Taking aside the issues of opinion and perspectives, structurally DIE for orchestras is not such a challenge if one considers that the business looks like they create order out of what might look chaotic is a long-learned discipline. However, institutions can drift back to a place of safety if the DIE is not led by strategy or organisation-wide.

What is apparent for Orchestras – the work of Diversity is the responsibility of the whole organisation, and cannot be left to the *official* leadership alone. The whole organisation as well as special projects and outreach departments can bring forward, share in the challenges, benefits and the learning. There was the distinct feedback that there was no need to be lectured at, but that a sensible discussion of the harsh reality of resources, access to funds, juggling priorities, and the sheer lack of bandwidth for an individual orchestra or ensemble, was important to acknowledge.

New and different is not easy...inviting in the new and unfamiliar sets of circumstances (people bring their cultural baggage with them) which in turn assumes that understanding, appreciating and using differences in the workplace to achieve better results and processes may come naturally. It does not. People like people like themselves.

4. Measuring difference, understanding change?

Identify and measure existing good practice.

Without duplicating existing studies, a call to identify where orchestras are in terms of the diversity agenda by developing a *narrative-based diversity* audit is recommended. This must be based on organisational strategy and the business plan, so taking an *off the shelf* audit will not work because owning narrative comes from setting out an understanding of the change that the orchestras wishes to make. On the other hand, one of the panels outlined that the sector needs to find ways to learn more about their audiences and their needs, and whilst accepting that to collect better information and data is not easy, the use of creative programming and engagement can possibly help.

Jesse Rosen pointed to his organisation which has been systematic in its approach to collecting data for over a generation, and reviewing the impact of establishing Fellowships, both from the perspectives of the orchestras and the musicians. Knowing what happened to Fellows after their fellowships were completed feeds back into the richness of the study. The number of African American orchestral players, after 40 years of fellowships had remained at a largely consistent level of 2%.

5. Offer specialist support outside of conference

Orchestras should pick up and convene on the idea of supporting leaders to address unconscious bias.

Dealing with roots of lack of diversity: harbouring unconscious bias

Taking up diversity and talking up diversity will not erase biases. Indeed, even the best development programmes will not erase most of these deeply rooted beliefs. Development can only help us to become aware of them so that we can make a conscious effort to change.

We cannot move forward unless we have ensured that we deal with some fundamentals. Our biases and prejudices are deeply rooted within us. Is this because there is a state of mind about winning or losing? Dealing with unconscious bias, being able to find the safe space to examine one's own biases and become aware of those, to name them, allows people

to deal with difference in a more realistic way. All this will not go very far or deep until people can address the reality of unconscious bias. Our background, personal experiences, societal stereotypes and cultural context impact on our decisions and actions without us realising.

The main outcome will be to be able to wipe away the fear of those kinds of conversations and to not feel quietly embarrassed. ABO is in the position to convene bespoke workshops and one-on-ones.

6. Connecting diversity with young musicians/ensembles

Diversity – Smoothing the Pathways into the Orchestra

The ABO may continue to ask about where the diversity initiatives sit within an organisation and the responsibilities of education teams. Does that need to change?

Active engagement with diversity at Youth Orchestras/Ensembles

Embracing diversity and difference is more than tolerating people who are different. It means actively welcoming and involving them by. As Sarah Alexander said, the NYO has transformed the profile of the young players over the past 20 years – creating a more collegiate, welcoming experience. However, we must ask, for example, the Black and Asian young people what their own experience has been. What they may say in the orchestra, is not the same as what they may reveal in the community or home environment. There can be a sense of isolation. Conversations about identity and cultural difference are important in all young musicians’ journeys and are often overlooked in youth orchestras, however, potentially, the lack is magnified in the experience of BAME young people.

Recommendations for the sector

ABO can create resolutions and but it’s up to orchestras who must hold themselves accountable.
Establish DIE goals, prepare to understand the expected outcomes and develop deeper plans for longer-term engagement.
Access to networks – leaders to attend culturally specific functions/events and conferences. A process of cultivation.
Keep experimenting and be ready to allow time/space for taking risks. Plan for disruption. Everything can and will change.
Crafting the good stories of where and how DIE works is a skill.
Models of good practice are better if animated and shared in creative ways, rather than stored on a website. From a strategic development perspective, getting the word out about what you are doing at the right time, in the right places is important to aim for from the outset.
Use the Funded schemes such as the ChangeMakers and Fellowship programmes -we learned that these are undersubscribed in classical music (and music in general).
The US fellowship example demonstrates that change may take generations, but that evolution is more sustainable.
Darren Henley suggested that some areas of diversity are more straightforward to move the dial more quickly than a whole organisational shift; however, the lessons, pitfalls and opportunities can be shared and can help leaders and management plan for making changes.
Go beyond classical music: look to other sectors in the and outside classical artforms mode and create DIE alliances. Classical music sector cannot diversify in a vacuum.
Now is the time to raise one’s head above the parapet, because there will be a safety in numbers now, which may not have existed at the turn of the millennium.

ABO can encourage its members to be brave, be daring and be bold. There are triple safety nets for the orchestra sector.

Accept that that DIE is here to stay – it will take a generation. But there are many known factors. Orchestras are institutions – rather like museums, they will be here in 25 years' time, so they can engage in long-range planning. However, it cannot be left to slowly evolve. We have seen how over 14 years not a great deal of change happened it's a progression and progressive approach, but one that must have an engine driving forward.

Other Conference Highlights

“Making Classical Music Relevant”: Jessica Schmidt (Boston Symphony Orchestra) concluded that the return on the time and investment is lifelong, propelling new opportunities – adding intricate ways to communicate the power of classical music and enhancing the relevance of the artistic product – because the audiences can become even more engaged, and opening up to new conversations.

Creative Competition for Audiences: Chris Gruits (Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts) like Ron Adediran (London Music Masters) reminded orchestras that the competition for bums on seats was increasing, but not from within the sector, the demands for people's leisure time eg. Netflix. Classical music is increasingly integrating with other art forms, such as dance, visual arts. Chris Gruits spoke of the highly successful Liquid Music events in Annapolis and that when looking for new audiences, younger more culturally diverse people can be seen populating visual arts, looking for experiences where they can interact directly with the artform, even if they lack the specific education.

Practice, Practice, Practice, Perform: Chi Chi Nwanoku admitted that the Chineke! Orchestra, an idea that was hatched just two years ago, without knowing it she has been training for this all her professional career. The fact that she could pull together an orchestra and a youth orchestra together with musicians from a range of diverse, multi-ethnic backgrounds was not a surprise, yet the wonderment, and sense of disbelief that she could have achieved this in record time symbolizes the problem of the lack of inclusive practice in the sector.