

Let's DREAM! What is the potential of our orchestras?

I pass two major career landmarks this week - 30 years as a violinist with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the end of my 6 year tenure as a board member of the Association of British Orchestras.

Fresh out of college and starry eyed, November 5th, 1990 was my first contracted day working for the CBSO. That night I celebrated landing my dream job with mulled wine and Catherine Wheels - the explosive ones, not the liquorice kind. I joined the ABO Board much more recently, in 2014, and that role has been full of fireworks too. So, this moment in time gives me a unique vantage point.



Today, our orchestras face possibly their worst ever crisis. We are struggling to ensure the financial security of our major institutions, to guarantee Covid compliance for performers and audiences, to support our freelance musicians and to get our youth orchestras back to rehearsing together again. We face an emergency and although it might not feel like it as we approach a second lockdown, Covid will pass. When it does what should the future of orchestras be?

We face 5 aspirational challenges. They neatly spell out the acronym **DREAM** - Diversity, Relevance, Education, Assessment and Musicians. What should we be asking ourselves to help shape our future?

Diversity

How can we be truly equitable and inclusive in the art that we make and the audiences we share it with?

Black Lives Matter and the MeToo movement have changed the way we think about equality. In considering race our language has moved symbolically up a level from “inclusive and equitable” to “anti-racist”. To better represent the society we live in and to embrace *all* protected characteristics, we need to re-examine and reform everything we do - our structures and hierarchies, staff and audiences, recruitment processes, governance, funding sources, role models, progression routes and the music and art we create and share. There is real work to be done - if footballers can take the knee, then so should we.

Relevance

If we truly believe in the power of orchestral music to connect, unite, transform - how can we make this a reality for more people?

Orchestral music is a far bigger idiom than classical music itself - think film, TV, recordings, play lists, videos and festivals - however in reality orchestral music is far from the universal language we like to believe that it is. At the heart of this challenge is relevance and connection. It is said that building connection and being persuasive takes 70% listening and 30% talking - are we listening well enough to our new potential audiences? And then do we know how to speak different “languages” appropriate to different audiences? This is our challenge, it is nobody else’s job to understand *our* language - we need to make, develop, evolve, nurture and cement these connections ourselves.

Education

The potential in people is infinite - how can we play a key role in fulfilling that potential?

As artists we want our audiences to be curious, empowered, fulfilled and happy. We have the power to support them. Let's not be modest here, in many of our educational activities UK orchestras are well ahead of the curve internationally. We must continue to place education, in its broadest sense, at the core of our work. We are here to hold the door open for people or to help them to push it themselves. And let's remember, children are people too - they are the future, not an afterthought.

Assessment

We believe and experience that music changes lives, but can we prove it?

We know that music changes lives, not just through our own experiences but through the stories others tell us every day. We need better ways to assess the impact of what we do to help us make the case for investment. Evaluation methodologies are advancing all the time. Let's tap into these new metrics, collect the evidence and share it with passion.

Musicians

Are our orchestral musicians really empowered to be *far more* than "violin operators"?

Five years ago, in an article for Classical Music Magazine, I asked: "*Are our orchestral musicians 'violin operators' or 'evangelists for our art'?*" I had hoped it would be a clarion call for reform. Was it? Alas no. Our employment contracts do not prize creativity, evolution and growth but tend to consist of clause after clause detailing the disciplinary measures we would face should we slip up. I am not untypical in choosing to seek remarkable creative work *outside* of my orchestra. It is to our detriment that, as musicians, managements and union, we cannot create enough comfortable space to develop our artists *inside* our orchestras, to harness their innovative individuality.

So, there we have it - 5 ideas with lots of overlap - this is the **DREAM**. The orchestras of the future are **D**iverse and widely **R**elevant, with **E**ducation in its broadest sense sitting at the core of our activities. **A**ssessment of our impact is persuasive, and our **M**usicians are creative, fulfilled and individually remarkable.

Let's not sit around hoping for someone else to make this **DREAM** a reality - let's do it ourselves, starting now.



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