



Orchestra and Opera outreach – three days with RESEO in Berlin

Last week I had the pleasure of moderating two days of debate and participation, organised by RESEO, which focussed on the strand of education work delivered by a range of opera houses and professional orchestras across Europe.

RESEO'S first such conference which brought together 100 delegates from 19 different countries clearly sparked the interest of orchestral and opera education providers alike. Representatives from 18 orchestras came together with 17 RESEO core members to debate the issue of education work across both genres. And it was especially positive to have the contribution from four national orchestral industry associations including the Association of British Orchestras (UK), L'Association Française des Orchestres (France), La Asociación Española de Orquestas Sinfónicas (Spain), and the Association of Finnish Orchestras (Finland).

Wanting to tackle the key issues head on, the first afternoon's debate examined the potential for greater collaboration on a European level between the education departments of professional orchestras. Taking the RESEO model for opera education as its template, the conclusion was that there was real interest and enthusiasm to take this further and it will be productive to assess progress on this in a year's time.

Two days of debate, presentation and participation followed, all focussing on the unique role that orchestras have in delivering inspirational learning experiences to communities of all ages and social backgrounds.

Dominic Alldis from Music and Management (UK) offered the orchestral model as a paradigm for effective team working, one that commercial businesses might do well to adopt. He talked of 21st century business 'metaphors', specifically a shift in business team culture from competition to collaboration. Traditionally militaristic and hierarchical business structures are, he claimed, now becoming more flexible, focussing on personal development within the context of a team. And underpinning all of this is a growing emphasis upon listening – something which goes to the heart of the orchestral team where individual players must cultivate what he referred to as an 'inner and outer ear', the former listening and evaluating their own personal performance while the latter, integrates that performance into the wider orchestral team. Alldis gave several similar analogies between the orchestral and the business 'team' which drives his professional approach to running orchestral workshops for large business around the world. While I'd have welcomed more evidence of what success looks like from the perspective of those businesses, we were left in no doubt of what the orchestra model can offer business teams to embed a culture of listening, collaboration and cohesion.

This was just one example of the role of the orchestra as a tool for creative learning but beyond that the challenge for both orchestras and opera houses to engage with a new younger audience remains critical. Anne Kathrin Ostrop, head of education at our host company, the Komische Oper, told participants that their analysis of their current audience informs them that 36% of them will have deceased within ten years. The necessity to engage a new audience is therefore urgent and research undertaken by Arts Council England (UK) shows that active engagement in culture from an early age leads to lifelong engagement, so the role of education and participation involving children and young people will be an important catalyst in cultivating a new audience. The Komische Oper is clearly a beacon of good practise in this regard since it claims to deliver two new operas written for young people as part of its main scale programme each year, one of which *Die Schneekönigin (The Snow Queen)* had its world premiere at the theatre the day after the conference.

An important resource in engaging a new audience is the work of the music animateur – this unique role that is plurally an ambassador between the music, the musicians, the young people, their teachers and the audience. The role of the music animateur or leader is now acknowledged in the UK to an extent that it isn't yet elsewhere, and probably should be. The conference gave a fascinating and compelling insight into the working practise of these animateurs through two participatory sessions led by Catherine Milliken from the Berliner Philharmoniker and Hannah Conway, a UK based freelance animateur. These sessions involved all the conference delegates and were an effective antidote to the sometimes tedious sense of 'conference overload' where delegates feel too much talked 'at' rather than 'with'. I was struck by one piece of delegate feedback which commented on how the sessions had made the participants into 'active listeners' rather than the passive, detached and occasionally unengaged patrons that sometimes attend our concerts and opera performances.

Over the course of two very stimulating round table presentations and discussions, RESEO offered the opportunity for orchestras and opera companies to showcase a range of different projects on the theme of opera and orchestra education in Europe and elsewhere (including Japan). I'm not going to summarise them all here but rather draw out what for me were the key themes. The first of these is time and commitment – nearly all education projects have a long gestation period, sometimes taking several years to reach fruition. This is something that needs to be acknowledged and also demands the commitment and support of senior management, in terms of financial, physical and human resource to ensure success. Collaboration also seems to me to be essential; those local, national and sometimes international artistic and financial partnerships that allow one organisation to deliver more than it could on its own through working together with their peers. Especially important for me is this aim for a creative engagement that places the participant (of whatever age) at the heart of the creative process; put simply, through work which is done by and with participants rather than to or for. And finally there is the critical practical issue of

training and working frameworks. Are conservatoires delivering new orchestral players that are 'fit for purpose' in their ability and commitment to creative learning work and as an elite orchestral player on the concert platform? Are the necessary contractual arrangements in place across our orchestras to enable a more plural commitment from players to education work and orchestral concerts? What are the demands expected of the 21st century professional orchestral musician? Progress on these critical questions has been slow but steady in the UK, underpinned by a now unthinkable level of Government investment to buy contractual and organisational change. I wonder if colleagues elsewhere are on a similar path, and if they are, how can it be resourced?

There is a further key question about measuring impact. What does success in these creative learning projects look like? Is it purely about measuring numbers? How do we evaluate a quality of experience or engagement? And we mustn't confuse evaluation with advocacy. All of these are key questions (and potential pitfalls to be avoided) which this conference unearthed.

What's also needed if there is to be an effective union of European orchestral education departments is a mapping exercise which shows the extent of activity across Europe. My own organisation Orchestras Live in the UK works to deliver world class professional orchestral projects and performances to the widest possible range of people, especially those who have little or no regular access to this work. We've worked with the Association of British Orchestras (UK) to deliver a mapping exercise to show where orchestral education work takes place in England. This could be a good place for a European orchestral education collaboration to start from since it would serve to advocate for your success in reaching communities across the continent and would also identify priority geographical areas for further development.

And if I could make one plea to all of you it would be to ban the word 'education' henceforth from your vocabulary. It's too reductive a term and implies too much of being done to rather than with. *Creative learning* seems to me to be a better term to describe what you do and many of the orchestras and opera houses in the UK have now adopted this term.

For me, conferences should be a forum for sharing best practise, for inspiring and challenging delegates to come away with new ways of working and new ways of thinking about what they do. Throughout the last 14 years, RESEO has worked very successfully to advance the cause of opera and creative learning throughout Europe. So surely in these challenging economic times, the importance of doing the same for orchestras and creative learning is now a timely priority.

Henry Little
Chief Executive
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