

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH CLASSICAL MUSIC

Gillian Howell

Australian National Academy of Music
Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Responding to:

What are the most effective strategies by which professional music organisations such as orchestras can contribute to community engagement with classical music? How can orchestras encourage greater ownership of classical music within the community?

Somehow, music - and classical music in particular - has landed itself in a hole. In an age where audiences across all media are eager for experiences that offer real opportunities to participate and contribute in some way, western classical music for the most part remains locked in a highly presentational style of performance¹. At a time when education institutions favour more constructivist, collaborative models for learning and teaching that focus on the learner as explorer and discoverer, and offer opportunities to apply new knowledge to real-life situations, music frequently continues to be taught in a reductive rather than integrative way.

This paper considers some characteristics of participatory creative workshops that offer multiple pathways into classical music, and powerful experiences in music and music-making. It draws upon my experiences as a creative music practitioner working with orchestras, schools and community groups to facilitate rich experiences with and within classical music. I have an association with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra that now spans over a decade, and for some years I worked within that orchestra's management team as the Creative Director of its Community Outreach Program. Many of the ideas within this paper have been developed with orchestras in mind; however, much can be applied to arts and education settings more broadly.

In this paper I propose four main contentions, supported by two case studies. I believe that if we want to increase engagement with classical music for

communities beyond the current concert-going community, the opportunities we develop need to

- Offer active engagement, rather than passive engagement;
- Be embedded in creative contexts, connecting with imagination, invention and a sense of ownership;
- Focus on ensemble experiences and skills; and
- Be part of a progression of experiences, with multiple entry points.

Active engagement, rather than passive engagement

Active engagement with music demands that we bring our minds, imaginations and physical beings to it. It means we have a practical, real-life experience of what it means to make music, and often, to be part of an ensemble. These experiences are immeasurably powerful. They can involve us making discoveries and decisions, and the more active a role we play in these, the more memorable they will be. When we engage actively, we bring ourselves to the experience, and so are given a new experience of ourselves. In contrast, passive participation requires audiences to engage with their minds alone.

For too long, entry-point experiences with classical music offered by orchestras have involved audiences as listeners only. The music may be presented in innovative or exploratory ways, but the role of the audience has essentially been a passive one. I am not contending that such approaches are wrong, or don't work - on the contrary, they are often highly enjoyable and popular. But they could be offered as part of a suite of experiences, alongside opportunities for active, hands-on engagement with making music and with having a direct, practical experience of the nuts and bolts of the music.

Creative engagement - imagination, invention and sense of ownership

By offering people creative and imaginative approaches to exploring new music (i.e. music that is new to them), we invite participants to take this material and connect it directly with their prior knowledge, which we implicitly endorse. We encourage them to play with the material and experiment with it, validating their efforts and their curiosity, rather than suggesting that only 'one way' is correct. We create environments that encourage exploration and thus discovery and

invention, that value self-reflection, and immediately share ownership of the resulting musical outcomes amongst the participants. In the process, we create powerful engagement with the music under investigation and provide tools for each individual's own explorations to continue independently, long after the initial interaction has passed.

On a practical level, when a creative or compositional approach to group music-making is taken, it is possible to cater for all levels of ability within the one broad experience. Suitable musical challenges can be created within a piece to suit a vast range of experiences and abilities (from those on open strings, to amateur enthusiasts, to virtuoso players), particularly when the participants themselves are invited to create their own part to play. When these parts are created aurally and practically, through the shared and immediate creative process, they can be far more complex and varied in their rhythmic and structural language than if they were notated and participants were required to read.

So often, the implicit message that people new to music receive is that one must be 'knowledgeable' first. Yet we are all knowledgeable to some degree about music, by virtue of the fact that we are surrounded by music so much of the time. Composing their own music as part of a process of exploring pre-existing repertoire also offers participants a sense of ownership over the musical ideas, a kind of kinship or connection with the repertoire source, and insights into compositional decisions - their own, and those of others. They are encouraged to explore, discover, and own their playing - rather than feel it is only 'real' music if an 'expert' is doing it, or that 'real music' is that which is taught to them, rather than what they themselves invent.

Through these explorations, participants start to change the way they listen to music - *all* music. They notice compositional decisions about structure; they notice tools and devices (such as the 'break-down' in techno music) and the effect that this gives them as a listener. Their practical experiences give them a sophisticated musical literacy that they can apply across all music genres. It can be life-changing.

Ensemble experiences and skills

Playing as part of an ensemble introduces people to the power that music has to connect us with others in deep, sustaining ways. The exhilaration of the shared intention and motivation to honour the music can be transformative. It offers opportunity for individuals to shine, as well as to play an essential supporting or accompanying role.

Many ensemble skills are achievable by large groups of people of a wide range of ages, without any prior experience. The skill of simultaneity, for example, can be achieved by a group of kindergarten children. They can tell you if a sound was “together” or if it was “not quite together”. Once they understand what they are aiming for, and given clear leadership, they can play a sound simultaneously, with great accuracy. The tangible nature of rhythmic ensemble skills and the fact that experiences of success are so recognisable and exhilarating, are the reason I often focus on this initially in group music-making projects, ahead of ensemble skills focused on pitch.

Music is a temporal artform, and it offers participants the experience of being fully present in the moment. Locking into a rhythm or groove as one of a group can be joyous experience, one that is often initially accompanied by considerable focus and constant attention. I believe that ensemble experiences are key to powerful engagement with music, both for the understanding they give of the artform, and of the structure and layers of the music, and for the sheer delight and unity that comes from being one voice within an ensemble experience.

A progression of accessible experiences

All of these experiences of active participation in music-making need to exist within a progression of experiences that invite people towards opportunities to hear classical music being performed in the hands of highly-specialised professional musicians. Ideally too, these performance opportunities are focused on repertoire with which the participants have some connection, for which they have a number of ‘listening pathways’ already established. These listening pathways may well have come from an active workshop experience, and can include aspects of the composition itself - such as key themes and structural characteristics - as well as

personal connections with the performers, and thus a particular interest in watching and engaging with that person's work on stage.

I find it useful to consider the progression of experiences offered through the AFL, where young players in Auskick programs can make the link between what they are doing, and what the AFL professionals are doing in their stadium games. The links from Auskick to local clubs, from schools to district and state level experiences through to the professional players, are clear and well-established, and offer multiple possible entry points for engagement.

Similarly, the progression of experiences offered by El Sistema in Venezuela are explicit and intrinsic to the program, and offer young players powerful motivations, as well as a sense of the importance of their own efforts as part of a continuum of music-making across the country. In Australia, there is also an excellent model provided by the brass band 'system', which links local bands to district and national opportunities to perform.

Earlier, I presented an argument for more 'active engagement' experiences in music. However, this presents challenges in terms of accessibility, as the opportunity to learn an instrument is not something that the majority of our population currently enjoys, as detailed in the National Review of Schools Music. One response has been in the huge growth of community choirs, which have created many glorious music-making experiences for many people, and in opportunities to 'sing the opera' with the support of professional conductors, soloists and musicians.

What are the entry-points for people who wish to participate in music-making but have had no prior access to instrumental learning? Again, I return to the important role the composition-focused music-making experiences can provide here. Composition projects by necessity and nature must work with the 'raw materials' within the group as they are on the day. If someone has a cello with just one string, then that will be the string they write for. If someone only knows one chord on the guitar, then that chord will be the chord that is used. New skills (e.g. chords, notes) are frequently learned through the course of the project, but always in the context of the piece, so that the new skills have an immediate practical application.

Regardless of where these music-making experiences take place - whether at the 'beginner' end of the spectrum or the more experienced community music end, the experiences need to be embedded in real-life, real-world contexts, through which the participants can identify their participation and inclusion in a wider context of musicians and music-making.

Two Case Studies

How might these ideas play out in projects where classical music is right in the foreground? I'd like to offer two case studies of projects with which I have a very direct involvement, as deviser and director. Both involve musicians from the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra [MSO] working with communities and both link directly to orchestral repertoire, performed in concerts within the project timeframe.

MSO ArtPlay Ensemble

The MSO ArtPlay Ensemble is an annual program that teams 28 young people aged 8-13 years with four members of the MSO every school holidays. Under my direction, they work together for two consecutive days to compose and perform a piece of original music. We work from ideas inspired by or extracted from a piece of MSO repertoire, with the repertoire source acting as inspiration and a compositional starting point, rather than a model to be imitated.

I give an overview of the set piece to the Ensemble members and MSO musicians, highlighting distinctive features, structural elements, particular themes, and often a brief historical context for the piece. The Ensemble then breaks into four working groups, each led by an MSO musician, each of which is given a specific composition brief. The brief contains a piece of quoted material from the source music - a melody, a harmonic progression, a mode or pitch set, a rhythm, for example.

In these working groups, they create a group composition (usually 4-5 minutes in length) that incorporates the provided material in some way. Later, the four groups come together again, and we work collaboratively, to explore ways to

integrate or further arrange the four small-group compositions. The aim is to create one large work that has numerous 'whole ensemble' moments, and sections that feature individual groups and solo musicians, rather than being a series of four short small-group movements. The music is created and performed from memory in every project.

It's important to note that the MSO musicians take part as equal collaborators in the projects - they too are responding to the composition brief, and may be just as excited (or puzzled!) as to how to set about it as some of the young people. The group must work collaboratively to realise the task, and in the process, will need to make a detailed, authentic consideration of how best to serve their musical ideas, with the forces they have available to them.

When the young people hear the original set repertoire piece performed in concert, shortly after the conclusion of the workshop project, they have multiple listening pathways to follow - material from the score that they may have quoted in their own composition, structural and historical information about the piece, and their personal connections with the musicians on the stage with whom they worked to compose their music. Their parents and family members are included in the concert invitations (often via subsidised ticket prices) and in many cases, building familiarity with the concert repertoire at home becomes a shared family activity.

The MSO ArtPlay Ensemble has an annual intake and the young people's responses develop enormously throughout the year. They become highly adept at composing in a group, improvising, and exploring new ideas on the spot. They develop sophisticated mental 'maps' for memorising and retaining musical material over time. They and their parents are highly engaged by the MSO performances and rehearsals they attend. The material that is explored by the Ensemble is diverse and sophisticated, and not limited to composers who might be considered to be 'child-friendly'. To date, "starting-point" composers have included Stravinsky, John Cage, Shostakovich, Rachmaninov, Unsuk Chin, Debussy, Kats-Chernin, Britten, and Beethoven.

The young players frequently go on to play in youth orchestras (the oldest 'graduate' of the MSO ArtPlay Ensemble program is now 18) but many have also broadened their musical worlds to include jazz and other bands.

Family Jams with MSO

I developed the 'Family Jam' concept in response to the 2001 research finding that musical experiences shared within family contexts, or supported by family, led to a much longer, more sustained engagement with music and concert-going in later life, than school music experiences alone². I wanted to create an event in which people of all ages could participate, that offered suitable challenges to those with specific music knowledge and skills, but also invited participation from total beginners, or those who might often be reluctant to participate. Rather than parents dropping off the instrument-learning child and taking the younger siblings away for an hour, the Jam was to enable shared family music experiences.

Each Jam lasts for an hour (the maximum likely length of engagement for some of the youngest participants). On arrival, participants can collect a single page of notated ideas for their instrument, or if they prefer, can join the massed percussion section/choir seated to the back of the performance space. Percussion instruments are often available for loan, but participants frequently turn up with their own instrument³. The notated music usually contains a riff, or a mode from which they can create their own riff or improvise a melody or harmony.

I direct the group through a number of musical ideas with the participants inventing or developing their parts, assisted by the team of MSO musicians (between 5 and 8 players spread across a range of instruments). A recent Jam focused on *The Rite of Spring*, and we developed improvisations on the opening bassoon solo (accompanied by percussion 'rumbles' and lower string 'groans', with conducted dynamic changes), the rhythmic drive of *The Augurs of Spring* (reduced to 20 quavers, with numbers 10, 12 and 18 accented strongly), and the dark, graceful melodies of *Spring Rounds*, in which individuals were invited to improvise solos over accompanying syncopated chords. The role of the MSO musicians is to scaffold the musical efforts of the participants - to play alongside them and assist them to invent their own riffs and harmonies, identifying those in the group that can work independently, and those that need additional support, and to play solo

lines if requested. At the end of the hour, the entire piece is performed, usually to a duration of ten minutes.

The Family Jams take place in The Edge performance space at Federation Square, a high-profile public space, open to casual passers-by. Jams can involve a large number of participants - the format can easily accommodate 200 people, with musician numbers increased accordingly. As described above, orchestral repertoire is often an enjoyable and unusual way to build creative responses and improvisations within a group, and can offer participants direct links to hearing the source music in concert, played by musicians they have had the pleasure of working alongside.

The Jams also function as one of a range of opportunities for families to engage with an orchestra's concert presentations, offering an active engagement with music that sits alongside family-oriented programming. Indeed, the repertoire focus of each Jam can be selected to act as a kind of preparation to family attendance at a concert.

Conclusion

I question whether classical music itself is the reason for its perceived decline in support from the general public. US research in the year 2000 into non-concert-going members of the public, revealed that 60% of the sample interviewed acknowledged some connection with or appreciation of classical music⁴. We should have confidence in this, and trust that classical music continues to bring comfort, inspiration, meaning, social connection, and many other things to a great number of people who may have very little current motivation to attend a concert. It is this connection that we need to build upon. Before we look at education, musical understanding, concert programming or marketing, we need to consider the question of engagement and the ways in which we invite people to engage with classical music.

About the author

Gillian Howell directs composition workshops and professional development training for orchestras, arts and education settings across Australia, including the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Australia Chamber Orchestra, the Australian Art Orchestra, The Song Room and

Musica Viva. She is the Program Director of the Outreach and Community program at the Australian National Academy of Music, and teaches within the Artistic and Creative Education team at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne.

E: howellgm@yahoo.com.au

Blog: <http://musicwork.wordpress.com>

Notes

¹ The contrast between presentational and participatory styles of music performance is discussed in Marsh, K. (2010). *"That's the way I like it": A children's guide to musical meaning, transmission and performance*. Paper presented at the 10th International Cultural Diversity in Music Education, Sydney, Australia.

² Costantoura, P. (2001). *Australians and the arts*. Annandale: The Federation Press.

³ A memorable instrument was one that a five year old boy had invented with a set of metal measuring cups attached with string to a hand mixer, accompanied by a wooden spoon. He demonstrated its possibilities to me with pride and excitement. I found an appropriate moment in the Jam to offer him a solo so that all could celebrate his creation.

⁴ Wolf, T. (2006). *The search for shining eyes: Audiences, leadership and change in the symphony orchestra field*. The Knight Foundation.