



ABO Conference 2017 – Diversity in Composing session

As part of the Diversity focus at the ABO conference in January 2017, BASCA's CEO Vick Bain ran a session on diversity in composing. The session was introduced by Controller of BBC Radio 3 Alan Davey who has championed the cause of equality & diversity at the station and has also been very supportive of BASCA's work in the area. Bain gave a short presentation focussing on research by BASCA's Classical Co-ordinator, Natalie Bleicher, which analysed numbers of commissioned works submitted to the British Composer Awards and compared them with data on student numbers at universities and conservatoires.

The research shows that recipients of commissions for new orchestral music are overwhelmingly male and white, despite a plentiful supply of female and BAME composers. While 36% of composition students and 29% of commissioned composers across all categories are female (according to submissions for the 2016 British Composer Awards), just six out of 40 commissions submitted to the Orchestral category that year – 15% - were by women. Just 5% were by BAME composers compared to 14% in the UK population.

The focus of the conference session was a set of round table discussions led by composers Sally Beamish, Yumi Hara-Cawkwell, Hannah Kendall, Colin Riley, Helen Roe and Raymond Yiu. Each composer led a group of orchestra managers, festival directors and other ABO delegates with the task of answering questions aimed at uncovering how inequalities occur and what can be done about it.

Question 1: How does your orchestra choose which composers to commission?

We know from previous BASCA research that very few commissions are decided by any kind of application or tender process; composers can't simply apply for commissions in the way that people apply for jobs. Most commissions are decided by an artistic director, or as one delegate put it, the "HIPPO" – Highest Paid Person in the Organisation. Within some orchestras, a committee fulfils the same purpose and in some, the players and Board members get involved too.

The delegates pointed out that there are good reasons that most commissions can't be decided by an open application process. Open calls are incredibly time-consuming and artistic directors won't often have the time to sift through a hundred scores in the name of fairness.

The factors which orchestras take into consideration when seeking out a composer to commission include the occasion for which the piece is to be written, existing contacts including composers the organisation has commissioned before, ideas from conductors and soloists, previous accolades, pitches from publishers and managers and suggestions from other orchestras – particularly now that co-commissioning is commonplace.

Question 2: Are there ways in which this process favours some demographics over others?

We knew already that relying on previous knowledge to choose composers has a danger of always throwing up the same well-known names. However, some of the delegates pointed out another factor which exacerbates this effect. Orchestras with an eye on ticket sales have to be cautious when it comes to programming any new music for fear of alienating the audience, and this aversion to risk causes them to choose the already tried and tested names.

In instances where decisions are made by committee, the make-up of panels was mentioned, with some panels being male and white dominated.

While application processes can open the field up to newcomers and have a positive impact on diversity, the way that they are set up, advertised and even worded can make a big difference. When BASCA opened up the British Composer Awards to allow composers to nominate their own works, the proportion of works by female composers increased from 21% to 29%, although the proportion of BAME composers remained the same. Delegates pointed out that potentially less successful was an open call by Ricordi last year for composers to apply for a publishing contract. Applications had to be accompanied by scores of two existing commissioned orchestral works. As some composers pointed out, this discounted many female composers due to the low proportion of orchestral commissions. In Ricordi's defence it's worth noting that of the three composers eventually chosen, two were female and one was BAME.

Gender and ethnicity weren't the only demographics discussed at the session. Age can also be a factor, with a lot of opportunities being open only to young composers, often due to constraints set by funders. Additionally, older composers could be less likely to understand newer methods of promotion. Age can intersect with other factors such as class, gender and ethnicity by reducing opportunities for composers to forge careers later in life, having missed opportunities earlier in life.

Question 3: What change can your orchestra make to its commissioning procedure to make the system fairer?

A number of ideas came out of the round table discussions, many of which focussed on the idea of training, helping more composers to break through into orchestral writing and bridge the gap between study and the profession. Training schemes, apprenticeships, competitions with mentoring and opportunities for younger composers to shadow older composers were all mentioned. The LSO Panufnik Scheme is an example of this, as are the Embedded and Portfolio schemes run by Sound and Music.

Delegates suggested involving more people in the decision-making process, particularly players. Creating more works for well-known soloists or new works for rare instruments might create a useful hook to help overcome the challenge of marketing concerts containing new work. Taking performances out of concert halls and exploring new venues was also mentioned, although others pointed out that this can have an adverse effect on diversity: the well-known (white, male) composers get the commissions in the main concert hall and the female and BAME composers' works are relegated to the smaller or alternative venue.

Other strategies in common with other fields included introducing anonymous submission processes, exploring what funding is available for increasing diversity, and increased monitoring of equality & diversity. In 2016 BASCA introduced anonymous judging for most categories for the British Composer

Awards to reduce the possibility of unconscious bias. PRS Foundation and Ambache Charitable Trust have funding schemes specifically for female composers.

Earlier in the day, Chief Executive of CBSO Stephen Maddock had addressed the session on Diversity in Conducting, explaining the search and recruitment process which led to the appointment of its first female Music Director, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla. The process included an extensive worldwide search and a system of collecting detailed feedback from players, and at no point had gender been a consideration. The fact that the orchestra's management was really pro-active in seeking out the very best, rather than waiting for the obvious names to present themselves, may have been a key factor in a female appointment being possible.

In the final discussion, all the delegates agreed that no individual orchestra can solve the issue alone. Some orchestras might just commission just one composer a year, and one composer simply can't have a 50/50 gender split and be 15% BAME! So the idea of a number of orchestras working together each year, perhaps via the ABO, to co-commission a number of composers would help orchestras to pool resources in the time-consuming job of seeking out talent. It would create the additional advantage of further performances beyond the premiere (another big issue for composers).

Recommendations

Based on its own research and on ideas taken from the group discussions, BASCA would like to recommend the following to orchestras in order to improve diversity of orchestral commissions:

- **Monitor diversity**

Data is a powerful tool for solving issues of equality & diversity. At BASCA the introduction of online submissions for the British Composer Awards allowed us to start collecting more detailed information than ever before and enabled us to produce detailed research into where inequalities were – and weren't – arising and helped us to work out what needed to change.

- **Be more pro-active**

Do some research to find interesting composers so that you're not simply going with whoever shouts the loudest. Publishers are very good at their job of promoting their composers with the result that commissions often go to the same limited pool of individuals. And it is still less socially acceptable for women to promote their own work than for men to do so. The directory on the BASCA website and the British Music Collection are useful places to start researching talent.

- **Increase the number and diversity of decision-makers**

Where commissioning decisions are usually made by one person, open it up to a committee including players and other stakeholders. Aim for a committee with equal gender balance and diversity of ethnicity.

- **Avoid age restrictions**

While the term 'young composer' can be a useful marketing hook and attract certain types of funding, upper age limits can have an adverse effect on diversity.

- **Work together**

One of the main themes brought up by all of the sessions on Equality & Diversity at the ABO conference was that no one organisation can solve the problem alone. Instead, organisations need to share data and projects to increase diversity across the sector.

- **Keep in touch**

We don't pretend to have all the answers. Please keep the dialogue going and email Natalie Bleicher at natalie@basca.org.uk with your answers to the three questions above, or with any other thoughts and ideas, and to publicise the work your orchestra is doing in the field of equality & diversity.

Natalie Bleicher

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