

ABO Conference, Bristol Beacon, Thursday 25 January 2024

DEEP DIVE: Building the narrative for classical music

Session overview:

How can we build the narrative we need for classical music to thrive?

It's time to speak out like never before. Classical music is experiencing existential cutbacks that others feel are justified. How do we turn the tide? Advocacy isn't just about lobbying. It's how we all talk about and account for classical music in everything we do. As the ABO embarks on its new advocacy campaign, this deep dive invites you to discuss what's working in the current classical narrative and what's not. Several guest speakers will pose initial provocations, laying bare the complexities and pitfalls of advocating for classical music today. Then it's over to you: together we will reflect on our current collective approach, define the values of music we need to emphasise better, and devise essential next steps to build the best possible case for the music we love.

James Murphy introductory presentation:

Let's be frank: we are losing ground in the case for classical music. We are seeing cutbacks that others think are justified given general perceptions of what we do. In the last 18 months, we've been rocked by headlines about Arts Council England and Wales, Creative Scotland, and the BBC, and more recently seen regional councils' funding thumped and beloved institutions – like Dartington Summer School and Cheltenham Music Festival – stripped back to an alarming extent. As the new year dawns, we must all be wondering: what on earth next?

Throughout all this, there's been constant call for greater advocacy. But what do we mean by advocacy? Whose responsibility is it? This isn't just the duty of a few committed lobbying organisations, comms teams, or PR agencies. It's about how we all talk about and account classical music in everything we do, every day of our lives. Those making funding decisions are looking at the whole landscape, at all our collective outputs, and drawing resolutions from what they see.

Right now, we're a potent mob. As we saw with the Arts Council and BBC, when shock news lands, we go wild, we make a lot of noise, and eventually, when we've almost lost our voice, some concession has been made; doom is at least postponed. While there's some effect in that, it's diminishing us each time. Each new bombshell casts us into all sorts of antagonism online, often amongst ourselves, and we lob all sorts of expectations at one another – to sign this, to retweet that, to prod others, to even call out and condemn friends and allies if their actions don't seem sufficient – all of which is hectic and exhausting and bewildering, depleting our strength. And whatever reprieves this yields, few are watertight or permanent. We cannot go on like this.

What's more, all this is reactive. In the tidal wave of indignance that met the news last March that the BBC Singers would fold, one dark question persistently niggled me: except those who run it and a few staunch devotees, who among us before March actually said out loud that we need a choir at the BBC? I certainly didn't. It's easy to cast those making cuts as philistines: some likely are, yet others are people faced with impossible financial constraints who set out to make tough decisions on the basis of what they see in front of them at the time. Had we shown our collective passion for the BBC Singers *before* March, I reckon we might have stopped the axe before it was even raised.

Every day, in everything we do, consciously or otherwise, we are making the case for classical music. In all our copy, of course, but more than that: in literally every conversation and email, and moreover in what we don't communicate. Most of my career, communications have been my responsibility – and my passion. But even I have to confess that for all the ardour I've invested in certain outputs, much else – for all its loveliness, eloquence and accuracy – has been merely adequate, given what we're facing now. Hand on heart, I wonder how many of you might be willing to say the same. Few of us have the time or brain space to ensure every little thing resonates as powerfully as it might. But we have to draw up from within ourselves ways to be bolder, more forthright and imaginative in what we communicate, because key people are reading our current collective outputs and concluding that classical music is ornamental, inconsequential, and therefore disposable.

Of course, for literally everyone in this room – the veritable army that we are – it's so much more than that. And here my faith remains. The daily grind seldom grants us a chance to do this, but think for a moment about what classical music has done for you. Think of your earliest encounters, all the discoveries it's given you, the places it's taken you, the people it's introduced to you, the occasions and memories and emotions it's made for you. I can't speak for all of you, but here's what it's done for me: beyond the countless comforting and enlivening times I've spent in its company, classical music has given me my calling, my voice, my confidence, my civility, and my tribe. Let me go further, and this surprisingly is something you don't hear often: I am sure that classical music has saved me. More times than I can count, I have turned to it when I might well have turned to darker resorts or recreations. Take just one piece: Mahler's Sixth Symphony – in its fits and bursts of ardour, overconfidence, contradiction and uncertainty – *knows me* better than anything I've yet found in any other form in this whole wide world. This is what we should be talkin' about. This is our truth. Classical music does this: it reaches out from its maker, sometimes over centuries, and – owing to its physical intangibility – it plants itself right inside us and says hello you, I know you, I've got you, it's okay. Without it, who can say how much I'd be hounding my GP for equivalent panacea.

On which note, every orchestra represented here today is discovering how focused, informed engagement in its community can have positive impact on multiple aspects of healthcare. This is thrilling stuff, speaking to the convictions we've all long held inside ourselves about classical music. That said, in the grander narrative, such work yet remains rather ancillary to our traditional endeavours, often buried several clicks deep in an orchestra's website or on the latter pages of its concert brochures. We need to turn that around, but moreover dare we be a bit bolder about what's happening in our concert halls themselves? There are many trend-setting initiatives freshly planting classical music in

unexpected community spaces, and all power to them, but let's not abandon faith in our concert halls. In truth, are these not right now mass wellbeing centres? Why ultimately do all of us go? ...because we're quaint defenders of a bygone ritual? No! Because we find release there, we find escape, solace and enchantment there, we find what 21st century citizens need there. We re-find *ourselves* there. Isn't it time to up the message and re-proclaim our nation's concert halls as what they genuinely are: living cathedrals where you can find light in troubled times?

So many of our existing audience know this already of course. They know everything I've said today. They are our army too. On that point: as today's session is not just about navel-gazing but getting down to action, let me present a notion: what if everyone here, what if everyone in classical music – not just the ensembles, but the venues, festivals, colleges, managers, publishers, and the individual musicians themselves – agreed to do one thing together? What if all of us who have a website pledged to put *on our homepage* some kind of simple testimony from a member of our audience expressing how what we do – how classical music – has *changed their life*? For individual musicians or small organisations with limited technical means, this needn't be much: just a visible sentence of text from one of their followers that speaks from the heart. For those of you with greater means, it could be a filmed montage of voices who've found vital worth in what you do. If we all believe classical music has worth to society – which we do – then a simple, united gesture like that, collectively putting a little evidence front and centre in what we all say to the world, might make some small difference next time a funder casts their eye across the landscape to contemplate what classical music really does, and before they reach for the axe.

For lots of us, evangelism doesn't come easy. Blame the British temperament or a certain sensitivity among us delicate souls disposed to the arts, that we get a little reticent about shouting from the rooftops. Considering this, let's play a quick game: I'd like all of you now to take half a second to think of a piece of classical music you personally love. Cast your mind into the endless vault of classical music's treasures, and pick just one piece you couldn't live without. Okay, I'll give you ten seconds to think of one, but that's all you'll need...

Now, let's pair off. Buddy up with someone next to you. If you end up in a three, enjoy yourselves! In a moment, decide who's going first, and in just thirty seconds, tell your neighbour what piece you've thought of and why it matters to you. You have just thirty seconds to convince them that it's something they likewise need in their lives. I'll tell you when thirty seconds are up, then we'll swap over, and your neighbour will do the same. Those of you in threesomes will just have to improvise. All good? Let's go!

[exercise]

That was fun, right? That felt good? There's a palpable buzz from your collective effort. And in the end, my friends, that's the assignment. We are the lucky ones: the universe put classical music in our lives and it's made us who we are. Whatever steps we must take to strengthen the classical narrative, however tough and onerous this may seem, let that buzz and that passion drive it. Hold tight to that authentic conviction you just shared with each other: never lose sight of that zeal and make sure it radiates in literally everything we collectively do to communicate classical music to the wider world.

And ultimately, remember what we're the custodians of. For centuries, composers have found ways to speak more abundantly and more magnificently than the rest of us through music. We owe it to every composer, living and dead whom we're here to support, to measure up to their imagination, their confidence, their brilliance and bravery. It's a challenge, yes. But my gosh, as you just saw amongst yourselves then, it's a thrill, it's an opportunity, it's a privilege, and a calling. That's why we're here. Let's get to work.

James Murphy