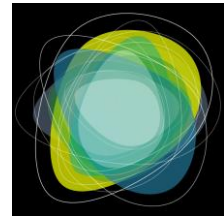




UNIVERSITY OF
WINCHESTER
CENTRE FOR ARTS AS WELLBEING



THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ORCHESTRAS IN PROMOTING WELLBEING A PILOT STUDY.

Kit Tapson, Norma Daykin and David Walters.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The evaluation sought to explore wellbeing impacts and sustainability issues surrounding delivery of inclusive, instrumentally based community music projects. A qualitative exploration of two adult community orchestras, both of which seek to engage disadvantaged and culturally diverse communities within their respective UK cities, was undertaken in 2016. Favourable ethical opinion for the study was received from the University of Winchester Ethics Committee.

Data are drawn from semi-structured interviews (10) with music directors, project managers and musicians. These were undertaken by a researcher and lasted between 30-60 minutes. In addition, the researcher observed one rehearsal and one performance by each ensemble, conducting informal conversations with audience members before and after each performance. To ensure confidentiality, the focus of observations was upon the orchestra as an entity rather than on the actions of any individual. Personal data and other identifiers were not recorded, and neither orchestra is identified by name in reports.

Thematic analysis identified several key themes, below.

1. Membership and recruitment.

Ensembles need to retain members while maintaining a flow of new members who reflect the project's target communities. The ensembles were observed to address these challenges in several ways, including:

- Providing regular educational workshops to develop the skills of existing members and attract new ones.

- Ensuring that people in leadership roles are well connected with local community organisations, such as schools, music organisations, charities and informal networks.
- Undertaking effective marketing, including use of social media and word of mouth information sharing.
- Involving local people in organisational development.
- Commissioning new musical works from local composers.
- Engendering a sense of membership and ownership among existing members.

2. Musical management challenges

Musical management challenges include maintaining a balance of instruments, involving musicians with a wide range of skills and experience (since neither ensemble uses auditions), ensuring that rehearsals are effective, and managing performance challenges. The ensembles were observed to respond by:

- Using waiting lists for certain instruments and offering alternative activities such as sub-groups and workshops.
- Fostering peer support during rehearsals and performances.
- Employing a flexible approach to orchestration, with parts scored for different levels of ability.
- Reminding members of the importance of listening – to each other and to the MD.
- Adapting to a variety of performance situations and venues, some of which are not able to fully accommodate the ensembles' technical requirements.

3. Organisation and funding.

These were on-going concerns, particularly given the commitment of both ensembles to low-cost membership policies. Key points are:

- Both orchestras need external funding to be fully sustainable.
- Funding is sought from a variety of sources, including grants and performance fees.

- Funding allows both ensembles to engage a small number of professional musicians as mentors and performers. This can contribute to development, boosting members' confidence and ensuring high quality performances.
- Charging a professional fee for ensemble performances. This can make a statement about the ensemble's worth and the value of live music generally; it also demonstrates sensitivity towards the local music economy, which is potentially undermined by the availability of free or subsidised music.

4. Equality and diversity issues

These were seen to be addressed by:

- Engaging musicians from different backgrounds, including those that do not read music.
- Providing activities that level potential hierarchies, for example, drawing on members' formal and informal knowledge.
- Involving a range of members in decision making.
- Information sharing using a variety of media, including word of mouth.
- Acknowledging the contribution and value of musical genres outside of those perceived to be mainstream.
- Engaging music mentors and workshop leaders from diverse backgrounds.
- Holding rehearsals and performances in areas of the city where there is a relative lack of investment in arts and culture.

Conclusions

Being a member of a community orchestra can provide positive social experiences as well as creative engagement, fun and a sense of achievement. Community ensembles can respond to local needs by creating music opportunities that are relevant to their communities and are not addressed in mainstream provision. They can also play a valuable role in supporting the local creative economy, providing opportunities, and nurturing both amateur and professional musicians through all stages of their development.

Ensembles also face many challenges, including organisational, financial and musical issues. Music directors in such groups need to demonstrate sensitivity, patience, good communication, understanding and commitment to the ensemble's values and purpose, as well as high level musical skills. MDs need to be supported by committed officers and members who understand the ensemble's aims, challenges and requirements. While ensembles may have a variety of organisational and management structures, a specific danger in relatively young organisations is an over-reliance on MDs or founders to fulfil a wide range of organisational and management roles. Sustainability requires a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities as well as a commitment by the group as a whole to organisational development.

As well as contributing to the musical development of members, well-run community ensembles can contribute to personal wellbeing and can enrich the culture of the localities and cities in which they are based.

University of Winchester, Centre for Arts as Wellbeing, 17/10/17