

## The Association of British Orchestras

Conference 25-27 February

Cardiff

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Session: "Leading by Example: Towards a sustainable Chamber Orchestra Strategy for Wales"

27 February 2009 11:30 Victor Salvi Room, Wales Millennium Centre

Panel:

Antony Lewis-Crosby	Managing Director	London Mozart Players
Elizabeth Andrews	CEO	Scottish Ensemble
David Butcher	CEO	Britten Sinfonia
Sophie Lewis	CEO	Sinfonia Cymru
Peryn Clement-Evans	Sole Executive & Artistic Dir	Ensemble Cymru
Einion Dafydd (chair)	Senior Music Officer	Arts Council of Wales

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The chair opened the session by outlining current (chamber) orchestral provision in Wales which sees two internationally recognised orchestras in Cardiff – the BBC National Orchestra of Wales (NOW) and the Orchestra of Welsh National Opera (WNO) both now based at the Wales Millennium Centre – with other parts of the country served sporadically by these and smaller, and often ad-hoc groups. Sinfonia Cymru and Ensemble Cymru represent the sterling work carried out by two such ensembles in an attempt to establish continuity and regular contact with audiences and young players in especially in areas away from Cardiff. Provision is at best patchy and organisers are faced by many challenges such as geography, human resources and funding.

The line-up of panelists and the ensembles they represent appear at first glance unbalanced. LMP is about to celebrate its 60th anniversary and the Scottish Ensemble and Britten Sinfonia having established their reputation widely. But the chair drew attention to the fact that all ensembles gathered here were at a different stage of their evolution. That is the justification for the make-up of the panel and indeed to have the session as part of this conference.

The chair invited each panelist, in chronological order, to summarise to circumstances that led to the formation of their group, how do they fulfill their role today and whether that role has changed. Detailed information is available on their respective websites and literature. For the purpose of this discussion, the main points were

- Previous gaps in provision was the reason for setting up all groups. The LMP set up in 1949 attempted to reach audiences not able to reach the symphony orchestras.
- All groups attested to their ability to connect with the audience and and to set up education projects.
- Ensembles operate on a project basis then need to grow and become unmissable.
- Funding should be sought for on a project by project with the aim of securing revenue which allows better planning and lower overheads.
- Partnership was deemed especially important as a means to remain sustainable despite intermitency of public funding (arts councils’).
- Flexibility in terms of numbers of players allows the ensemble to adapt to any venue or programme or the withdrawal of any tranche of funding.
- Player power is more evident in smaller groups in which musicians can influence decisions on repertoire, venue etc. This is seen to lead to greater commitment on behalf of each performer in the environment of collectiveness.
- This emphasis on the player is highlighted by the Scottish Ensemble who always play in a semi-circle and without conductor.
- The Britten Sinfonia are seen as ambassadors for Norwich. Their existence sends out a strong message about the culture of the area.
- Touring to all parts of the country is important to the Scottish Ensemble.
- Sinfonia Cymru highlighted some of the difficulties resulting from inadequate funding but described how they are forming strong partnerships around Wales in the face of few existing networks.
- The emphasis in Wales appears to be on vocal music but there is need for an artistic vision which should include promoting the work of 20th century composers from Wales.
- Ensemble Cymru described how much of its work is tied in with living Welsh composers and how this pays an important part in their establishing their own niche.

The chair then invited questions and comments from the floor, asking people to give their name and the organisation they represent.

Henry Little (Orchestras Live) commented on the importance of having a sense of what the market looks like. He also noted a lack of suitable network in Wales for collaboration. Antony Lewis-Crosby added that there needs to be a strategic direction from the Arts Council of Wales. Peryn Clement-Evans noted that there is a greater constituency in England which is very different to Wales but that Ensemble Cymru is excited about the possibility of developing a such a network.

Hilary Boulding (Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama) suggested that that Orchestras Live was key in strengthen the previously fragile promoter network which, afterall, is not orchestras’ responsibility. She longs for cross-border discussion as we [in Wales] cannot do it on our own. However, in the Scottish Ensemble’s experience, there is still little in terms of networks and

that they rely on self-promotion (often working with small groups of supportive individuals around Scotland. Ensemble Cymru echoes this method because being mobile means relying on partnerships with many local communities and concert halls interested in classical music at the same time as developing the promotion which part of what they do. Peryn Clement-Evans didn't feel the need for a background external system. David Butcher added that the approach of the Britten Sinfonia is not "selling classical music" but that they think of themselves as operating very much as a 'theatre company'.

Henry Little reflected on the importance of negating risk as it inhibits artistic flexibility adding the need for local partnership and ownership and championing to make things work.

The chair turned the discussion to focus on the musicians in light of the importance attached to the 'chamber orchestra experience'.

Peryn Clement-Evans spoke about the democratic process which is the antithesis of the hierarchical symphonic structure. It allowed for greater enthusiasm and passion from the players. In the case of Sinfonia Cymru, Sophie Lewis said 'youth' was their greatest asset and Antony Lewis-Crosby suggested that musicians could reach greater heights if challenged in a better method of delivery. David Butcher agreed that, from a business perspective, needed to be inspired and to see the whole area strategically moving from regional to international. Sharon Zhu (B&H) took a different angle stating how Boosey & Hawkes promotion team communicated an experience of open-mindedness and adventure in chamber orchestras. Repertoire is also an important part of an ensemble's identity.

Hilary Boulding asked what did the Britten Sinfonia do with a 3-year funded plan. David Butcher referred to better planning, greater ambition, no compromise on rehearsals and a commitment to excellence. It allowed them to turn down certain projects which were thought not beneficial to their long-term aims. Peryn Clement Evans thought that small ensembles could take greater risks with promoting the work of new generation composers – risk that big symphony orchestras couldn't take. Furthermore, he believed smaller ensembles could influence music educational policy.

Compiled by E Dafydd

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