



IDENTITY CRISIS?

THE ARTS LANDSCAPE IS EVOLVING: TODAY, PERHAPS MORE THAN EVER BEFORE, WE NEED TO DEFINE AND ASSERT THE IDENTITY OF CLASSICAL MUSIC. [CLAIRE JACKSON](#) REPORTS FROM THE ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH ORCHESTRAS' 25TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The scene that welcomed delegates to the 2010 Association of British Orchestras (ABO) conference in Glasgow seemed determined to herald talk of financial doom and hatch-battening in the classical music industry. Rain, swiftly followed by sleet and snow, pelted down upon the Scottish city with relentless force, making it almost impossible to navigate the way to the Royal Concert Hall, the venue that hosted the three-day event in conjunction with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

'Identity' was the theme of this year's conference. It seemed fitting, then, that the ABO chose to meet in Glasgow, a metropolis that has fought tooth and nail to shake off its rough-and-

ready façade in the hope of persuading outsiders to embrace its creativity. The city emerged, swan-like, in 1990 as European City of Culture and, after subsequent development, took the title of Unesco Creative City in 2008. Its vibrant music scene can be observed in every nook and cranny. From the hand-written flyers advertising local bands to the arresting shadow of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, the city's soundscape ranges from indie-rock band Franz Ferdinand to the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

Glasgow is setting an example by integrating orchestral music into wider contemporary culture [its discussions on programming music during the Commonwealth Games 2014, which the city is

set to host, is a case in point) and this was pivotal to two of the key conference sessions. 'Creative Cities' saw Louise Mitchell, director of Glasgow Unesco City of Music, chair a panel that thrashed out ideas on the role orchestras can play in helping a city assert its cultural identity.

Later on, 'From Strings to Rings' narrowed this topic down to consider how we will place music at the heart of the London 2012 Olympic Games, a topic that this writer understands to be particularly challenging given that the event is mainly about sports.

One thing that became immediately apparent was that this was not going to be a three-day 'woe-is-me-let's-put-our-heads-in-the-sand-

BRITTEN SINFONIA'S PERFORMANCE AT LATITUDE



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ABO

ASSOCIATION OF **BRITISH ORCHESTRAS**

WHAT IS THE ABO?

The ABO is the national body representing the collective interests of professional orchestras throughout the UK.

The organisation states that its key objectives cover 'four main areas of

activity: advocacy, communication, information and learning'.

It ensures that the voice of British orchestras is heard and keeps its members updated on events that impact upon orchestral activity.

There are various levels of membership: full, associate, corporate and individual (by invitation only).

As well as the annual conference, the ABO offers regular meetings and seminars relating to areas of current interest to orchestras and the classical music industry. Past events have included a day for music students and graduates on orchestral management. (Email info@abo.org.uk for more information.)

and-sit-this-darn-recession-out' shindig. As the impact of the country's debt is revealed, the implication is that there will be less in the pot for the arts world. The closer we drift toward a general election, the clearer it is becoming that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is set to take a battering, no matter who is in power.

Happily, all speakers and delegates refused to agonise about public sector cuts and instead focused their energies on the central theme: understanding what the concept of identity means, and figuring out how best to use it. Rather than pondering the reduction of support to the nation's arts infrastructure, we debated the importance of nurturing home-grown talent and maintaining the status of our premier ship orchestras in a competitive global market. On day two, thoughts turned to the thorny issue of print media and how it publicises classical music in an age when the genre often seems subservient to the cultural hegemony of rock and pop. A session entitled 'Identity Papers' – with a panel led by the *Herald's* arts editor Keith Bruce and featuring Andrew Clark, chief music critic of the *Financial Times*, Stephen Maddock, chief executive of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Edward Seckerson, arts correspondent from the *Independent*, Leonora Thompson, head of communications at the Barbican Centre and yours truly on behalf of *Muso* magazine – discussed the steps required to promote the identity of orchestral music.

Obviously, the issue of the somewhat precarious future of print media reared its ugly head and talk turned to the importance of online media (see musolife.com) and promoting digital coverage (visit musolife.com), as well as utilising other formats such as blogs (on musolife.com) and all the free social networking tools (follow *Muso* on Twitter: twitter.com/Musomag) to bombard music fans (have I mentioned musolife.com?!). The promotion of classical music coverage is inextricably linked to the bigger question of how people perceive the genre. Some members of the panel and audience felt that certain coverage tended to 'dumb down' the technical aspects of the music (there were several examples of editors asking writers to make

discourse more suitable for a populist palate) whereas others – including myself – believed that it is possible to promote classical music without resorting to jargon or making passing listeners or readers feel like outsiders.

It is a difficult balancing act: how do we publicise what orchestras are doing in a way that has broad appeal but doesn't do the highly skilled nature of their work a disservice? Among the ideas suggested was that of further emphasising the non-concert work that many organisations do, particularly any educational programmes or community projects. This will undoubtedly snare the attention of a wider variety of publications, particularly local papers (if there are any left) – but surely the music should always be central to any reporting?

Elsewhere, the 'Creative People' session raised the issue of unpaid workers in the arts and the disturbing news that posts are being made redundant and replaced by unpaid internships. As frontline services are protected, already-at-breaking-point organisations are forced to making 'efficiency savings'. However, as several individuals at the ABO conference pointed out, training people up to do a particular job for six months and then doing it all over again with the next intern isn't exactly an efficient business model.

Further in, talk turned to festivals and what role orchestras will play in developing the future of these events, whether niche, classical or rock. The most interesting example came from Tania Harrison, arts and special events promoter for Festival Republic (of Reading and Leeds fame). Harrison relayed details of Suffolk-based Latitude Festival's experience programming contemporary classical music acts last year, particularly the Britten Sinfonia (pictured). Despite a few technical problems (expensive cellos don't take kindly to English summer weather), the story confirmed what *Muso* has been saying for a while: people are open-minded – and sometimes classical music needs to get off its high horse and find new life outside the concert hall.

The next ABO conference will be in Derby, 16-18 February 2011

KEITH MOTSON, PROJECTS MANAGER FOR THE ABO, REVEALS WHAT WENT ON BEHIND THE SCENES

The ABO annual conference is three days of frantic activity for a very small team, but it is the culmination of nearly seven months of detailed and intensive planning. For this, the biggest single annual event for the ABO, we put on 23 different sessions, featuring 81 speakers and panellists, to almost 300 delegates. We had visitors and speakers from Europe, North America, South America and Asia as well as from the UK, spanning all levels of orchestral management, musicians, agents, broadcasters and corporate traders from within the industry.

This was no small feat for a full-time team of just three! Advance planning starts well over a year before the event and in this case we were in initial discussions with our hosts, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, almost two years ago, identifying potential themes, looking at past conferences and topics we would want to follow up while all the time reacting to the very real issues that the sector is facing here and now. Our theme of 'Identity' was a pertinent one two years ago and became even more so as we were looking at the industry's response to the financial downturn. How do we make sure we are presenting an appealing identity to potential audiences, and how do we 'sell' that identity and its associations to sponsors and donors? How do recordings and presence on streaming sites improve or confirm our identity? And is what we perceive to be our identity the same perception that our audiences of all ages have?

Our team, bolstered by excellent support from some marvellous volunteers and staff seconded from our hosts in Glasgow, made three mad days go very smoothly indeed and the response has been very gratifying. Great sessions, inspiring speakers and some excellent networking and social events with colleagues resulted in an excellent conference.

Now, about 2011...