

# The 'crisis' in classical music: exploring alternatives in audience development



AHRC funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between the Department of Music at the University of Sheffield and Manchester Collective<sup>1</sup>

## Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors

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## Project summary

Classical music organisations are becoming increasingly concerned with issues of relevance, aging audiences, and diminishing box office returns. Alongside the work of a well-established heritage classical sector in the UK, there is currently a new cluster of organisations emerging, seeking to tackle these problems on their own terms.

Manchester Collective is one of these ensembles, promising “radical human experiences” to a new, culturally adventurous audience through a highly collaborative programme of cross-genre touring work, delivered in both traditional concert halls and alternative performance spaces across Europe and the UK.

The work of the Collective reflects a growing trend towards alternative presentations of classical music that remains as yet under-researched, and this CDA project will offer a timely opportunity for in-depth, longitudinal empirical research to investigate a) public discourse around classical music, b) the unique training, skills, and attitudes of a new generation of performers and producers, and c) the motivations and experiences of audience members.

## PhD Project description

Research into classical music has lamented the ageing and declining of audiences for some years (e.g. Kolb 2001; Burland & Pitts 2014), and talk of a ‘crisis’ has become commonplace in both academic and public discourse. A few arts organisations have led the way in devising new presentations of classical and contemporary music to address this crisis, including concerts in disused car parks and warehouses, and collaborations

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<sup>1</sup> If you are selected by the CDA project team to be put forward to WRoCAH, your application will be considered competitively within the main WRoCAH competition. Being put forward for consideration is not a guarantee of funding.

with dancers and DJs. This burgeoning area of classical music presentation remains under-researched though, and change is being driven by imaginative arts administrators with little systematic analysis of the effects upon audiences (Haferkorn 2018). This project will apply existing knowledge of how conventional concerts can be off-putting to new and diverse audiences (Dearn & Pitts 2017), and consider how venue, presentation and social experience can be reframed alongside a meaningful engagement with repertoire.

This CDA with Manchester Collective (MC) aims to fill the research gap around understanding and resolving the perceived 'crisis' in classical music, by granting a PhD student full access to the events, audiences and performers of this innovative ensemble for a wide-ranging, longitudinal study. Chief Executive of MC, Adam Szabo, approached the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre (SPARC) to initiate a collaboration that will help MC to understand how the musical content and collective audience experience of their shows interact to create an encounter with classical music that people want to repeat. This aim chimes closely with the AHRC-funded 'Understanding Audiences for the Contemporary Arts' project (SPARC, 2017-19), where in-depth, qualitative methods have investigated experiences of arts events within the context of participants' broader cultural consumption (Pitts & Price 2019). Our research aims are aligned, therefore, in ways that will be of practical benefit for arts organisations, as well as moving audience research beyond evaluations of single events and venues towards greater understanding of how arts audiences navigate a 'cultural ecology' that is specific to the places where they live (see publications detailed on [sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk](http://sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk)).

The project will take place across MC's 2020-23 seasons and will have three broad areas of focus, within which the CDA student will be encouraged to shape the research questions within an empirical, qualitative research framework:

Investigating the discourse around classical music: using marketing descriptions, social media and programme notes across a range of arts organisations to look at how classical music is described in what Dromey (2018) has called 'public musicology'. Focus groups with audience members could investigate how appealing different language is, and the impressions given around prior knowledge, emotional engagement, quality and reverence (Dobson & Pitts 2011).

Exploring the extent to which performers feel that they have the skills and training to engage audiences in innovative ways: interviewing MC performers to find out how their high level musical training provides them with the 'mobility mindset' (Burland & Bennett 2020) associated with innovative audience engagement strategies, and comparing these with a wider sample (sourced through existing connections with e.g. BBC Philharmonic) to identify barriers and incentives to commit to continual professional development within the classical music profession (Bennett & Hennekam 2018).

Analysing the motivations and experiences of audiences: using in-depth life history interview approaches (Gross & Pitts 2016) to understand routes into MC audiences, whether from more conventional classical music concerts or from other genres and artforms, and to identify the musical, social and experiential factors in audience satisfaction and loyalty.

We are looking for strong applications that show how these goals will be achieved within the timeframe of a three year PhD (or part-time equivalent), and that identify the ways in which this project will build knowledge in the field of audience studies and related academic disciplines.

### **About the Manchester Collective**

Manchester Collective is a flexible classical music ensemble committed to presenting “intimate and intense human experiences, built around live music, for everyone.” Read more about their current season and activity here: <https://manchestercollective.co.uk>

Chief Executive, Adam Szabo writes: Manchester Collective has always been an unusually audience-focused arts organisation: careful attention devoted to the needs and desires of a young, diverse, and culturally inexperienced audience has been at the cornerstone of our communications and artistic strategy since we were founded in 2016. This partnership with SPARC and the prospective CDA student is the next step in this journey: the student would be an invaluable resource in our continuing research in this area, devoting time that we would not otherwise be able to spare to conduct robust audience research to answer some key questions: what is it that draws audiences to our work?; what is it that they find difficult about the “standard” classical music experience?; how does the wider non-musical context of our work affect the audience experience?; plus many more besides.

### **Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives**

The CDA student will be fully involved in the activities of the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre ([sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk](http://sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk)) through organisation and contribution to conferences, public engagement activity (e.g. Festival of the Mind in Sheffield; Be Curious and Light Night in Leeds) and publications for academic readers and arts practitioners. Where appropriate, the student will also represent Manchester Collective at arts sector network events and international conferences, making the findings of the PhD research accessible and applicable to arts practitioners and promoters. The project will be connected with the AHRC Centre for Cultural Value (CCV), where Prof Stephanie Pitts is a Co-Investigator, and the CDA student will be encouraged to be fully involved in the research activities and agendas of the CCV as part of their doctoral training and development.

### **Financial support**

Full-time AHRC Competition Studentships for doctoral research are 3 years in duration (or 6 years part time). Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2020. No deferrals are possible. Awards will comprise UK/EU fees at

Research Council rates and, for eligible students, a maintenance grant (£15,009 in 2019/20).

### Eligibility

#### Residence

Applicants must meet the AHRC's academic criteria and residency requirements (<http://wrocah.ac.uk/new-student/2020-cda/>)

#### Academic

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject, as well as a Master's degree and professional experience relevant to the scope of the project (or experience of belonging to a collaborative team).

### How to apply

**Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about Collaborative Doctoral Awards, the WRoCAH training programme and requirements**

**<http://wrocah.ac.uk/new-student/2020-cda/>**

Please note that the selection of Collaborative Doctoral Award applicants is a two stage process:

#### STAGE 1

##### Applicants must apply for a place of study

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/postgraduate/phd/apply/applying>, clearly stating which project you wish to apply for, by the deadline given below.

To assess your academic ability to undertake three years of independent research you may be required to provide the following evidence:

- Project Statement (a two-page statement that conveys your motivation and enthusiasm for the project and demonstrate your suitability for the intended study)
- Curriculum Vitae
- Transcripts of marks for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees plus certificates where available
- Two academic references from referees who will be able to provide their references by the deadline for Stage 1
- IELTS Certificate (if applicable)

Interviews will then take place to select a suitable candidate.

## Deadline for STAGE 1 applications

Monday 25th November

## Date of interviews

Tuesday 10th December

## STAGE 2

### Apply for funding to WRoCAH

Candidates selected after Stage 1 then liaise with the project supervisory team to submit a WRoCAH studentship application via the WRoCAH online application form by the **5pm on Wednesday 29 January 2020 deadline**.

*NB: Candidates who have been unsuccessful in Phase One can submit a separate WRoCAH application as a non-CDA applicant.*

### For more information about this project contact

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