CONFRONTING CANONICITY AND PROMOTING DIVERSITY: GENDER AND CONTEMPORARY CONCERT PROGRAMMING

in collaboration with Donne UK, funded by Open-Oxford-Cambridge Doctoral Training Partnership

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I) PROJECT BACKGROUND & GOALS

Working with the Donne Foundation, this Collaborative Doctoral Award seeks to create an evidence base on gender disparity within contemporary classical-music concert programming and the aim of realising effective strategies and pathways for the programming of diverse women composers within international orchestral and ensemble concerts.

What's the issue?

Based on Donne UK’s 2021/22 report, ‘Equality & Diversity in Global Repertoire’, it is clear that gender equality has not been reached in the world of Western classical music. In its analysis of 111 orchestras worldwide, Donne found that only 7.7% of pieces performed were composed by women, the majority of whom were white. Representation is important for a number of reasons including inspiring future generations, promoting self-esteem among audiences, diversifying storytelling, and enriching culture and cultural practices. Gender representation in the concert scene needs to be improved.

Project goals and aims

Based on this, the goal of this project is to study the barriers (both historically and contemporaneously) to performing women’s music in conjunction with working with select organisations and ensembles themselves to create strategies and pathways that can be implemented to increase meaningful gender diversity. The potential for impact on the cultural sector is high, as the research seeks to provide strategies for organisations to use in addressing their own gender imbalances when programming concert seasons. It will also provide a basis for future research on avoiding tokenism and achieving diversity in classical music performance.

Research and methodology

This research will consist of two primary methods: an exploration of issues relating to the topic based on texts and analysis of previous related projects, and case studies of ensembles to create practical strategies to address gender balance in classical music programming. A full enquiry must be made to explore the reasoning and historical precedent that contribute to this gender imbalance and the development of feminist musicology, which can then inform, in collaboration with ensembles committed to inclusive programming, strategies to move away from this misogynistic model. This methodology is necessary to ensure that an understanding of the legacy of gender inequality in the classical music scene is established as well as direct communication with those who are actually involved in the programming of music and how we might effectively increase gender equality in the UK concert scene.

A handful of barriers, just to scratch the surface...

**Consonation**

- the Western classical music canon is dominated by men like Mozart, Haydn, Schubert etc.
- known composers tend to be male
- textbooks and key texts focus on men and omit women
- rise of problematic ‘counter-canons’ (Lillian Robinson, 1983) that elevate only a handful of women
- lack of accessible performance editions and sheet music for performers

**Tokenism**

- some might avoid programming women to avoid appearing tokenistic
- some might only programme women sometimes or at certain times to appear inclusive without making meaningful change

**Intersectionality**

- gender diversity can sometimes be subsumed into other diversity issues or seen as lesser
- gender inequality has its own very specific challenges
- gender inequality can only be solved if thought about in an intersectional way - where does it overlap with other equality issues such as race, social class, disability, LGBTQIA+ issues and neurodivergence?

**Unconscious gender bias → active misogyny**

- slope of inadvertent gender bias leading to omission of women sliding to active misogyny which goes out of its way to omit works created by women

**Change resistance**

- time/financial investment into changing attitudes and creating new resources
- natural resistance to change in tastes

**Current ‘anti-woke’ agendas**

- current climate of ‘anti-woke’ sentiment in the UK (fuelled by UK government and right-wing press)
- being ‘woke’ is synonymous with an awareness of inequality and a sensitivity to issues around topics such as Black Lives Matter, LGBTQIA+ issues, and gender (amongst many other social issues)

II) BARRIERS TO PERFORMING WOMEN’S MUSIC

There are a huge number of barriers in place that prevent or inhibit the performance of music composed by women. These can be broken into four general groups: (I) governance issues, (II) financial, (III) educational, and (IV) permeating issues - a category that encompasses and goes beyond the other three and includes socio-historical factors that contribute to gender inequality and the legacy of women being underrepresented in classical music.

III) ORGANISATIONS & STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Organisations represent a snapshot of ensembles in the UK and include all four devolved nations (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland), to fully explore differences based on governance and socio-geographical issues, as well as to reflect the OD’s own makeup. There is a split between amateur and professional orchestras. Amateur orchestras are included to reflect the UK’s very specific and important amateur music scene, with many amateur ensembles being made up of professional musicians volunteering or being semi-professional (paid conductors, orchestral leaders etc.), and their importance culturally to communities throughout the nation.

Organisations involved

- Leeds Symphony Orchestra
- UPROAR
- The Fourth Choir
- Northern Chamber Orchestra
- Welsh Chamber Orchestra
- National Youth Orchestra of Wales
- Royal Scottish National Orchestra
- University of Leeds International Concert Series
- Grimethorpe Colliery Band
- Hallé (pending)
- Royal Albert Hall (pending)

Within these groups, my plan is to identify, or allow the groups themselves to identify, the people within the organisation who have a significant impact on programming, which could be anyone from conductors, to trustees, to orchestral leaders. Once these individuals have been identified, their experience, personal background, current programming processes, and other insights will be explored via an introductory survey and in-depth interview.