

**Linda Begbie, December 2021**

Dear Readers

Manchester Collective had intended to present a response to the paper '*Musicians as Makers in Society...*' at the Guildhall School conference on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2021. As circumstances have changed, and a new wave of the coronavirus pandemic is sadly taking hold, we are grateful to John Sloboda and his team for allowing us to offer you a written version of our thoughts.

I had intended to show you a short video excerpt before speaking. If you can, I'd love for you to still see this. You can link to it [here](#) or if you are not reading digitally, I will paste the link at the end of this text. It's relevant because it encapsulates so much of our approach and – in a way – provides an artistic, non-conceptual response to the ideas presented in Helena Gaunt's paper. The video shows a moment from our project *Dark Days, Luminous Nights*. It may look like a film with a musical soundtrack, but it isn't. The music was the starting point. This is an original, creative project that was led by musicians.

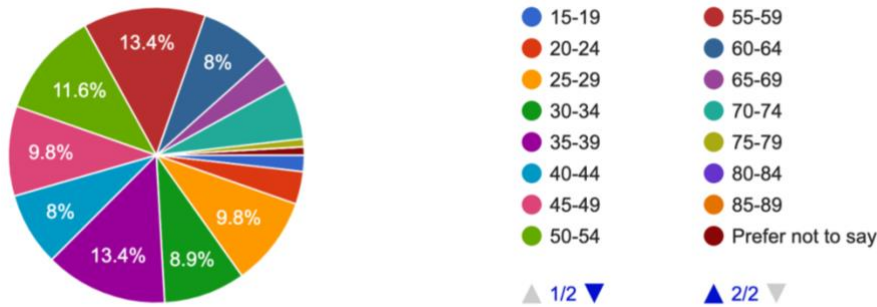
Do you remember the catastrophic shock we were all trying to process as the spring of 2020 rolled into summer? Freelance friends and colleagues who lost their livelihoods overnight. No energetic contact. A brutal full stop to our means of expression. Like everybody, we were going through the disorientating, shared experience of togetherness and separation. We were forced to live locally. The change was so quick and so radical and there was a feeling of scrabbling. Musicians were jumping on to Zoom, do you remember? We found digital streaming oddly cold and unsatisfying, and this rush made us ask questions. As musicians, what does it really mean for us to connect with others? What kind of experiences do we want to create for people? If we must incorporate a digital element into our practice, then how do we make that art in its own right?

From early on we could see that the pandemic was exposing painful social inequalities. In our city it was unveiling pockets of chronic, entrenched deprivation. We needed our music to feel human and real and unpolished. Whatever artistic beauty we created, it needed to acknowledge dark and uncomfortable truths. We worked with a photographer and filmmaker who knows the physical, human, and historic geography of Greater Manchester extremely well. We collaborated with the dancer Blackhaine who is embedded in the city's underground culture. We asked them if they would respond to our music which we recorded not as live but – employing leading sound engineers and using state-of-the-art technology – in a way that could be as immersive and visceral as possible.

The result was an experience that could transport audiences in the way art should. [Dark Days, Luminous Nights](#) is a flexible, travelling exhibition that can scale up or down. Using recorded music, film and photography, it is an hour long show that can run through the day and night and which people can safely attend in bubbles. Or it can grow outwards to



become a live concert with a paired digital backdrop. We premiered it in June and tickets sold so quickly we added extra days to the run. The chart below shows the age range of audiences attending. The myth that classical music is 'only for old people' is just that, a myth. How we communicate it, is everything. As John Stewart Mill famously said, truths that are simply repeated without being questioned, become dogma.



I'm using this anecdote as a way of saying that yes, we absolutely **do** believe that musicians are makers in society. We believe that musicians, their audiences and their communities, are a living, organic whole. It's incumbent on us to reach out and find resonance, not passively deliver our work. We **do not** believe that entrepreneurship and artistry are mutually exclusive, and it is very clear to us that – with some urgency – we **must now** be empowering musicians by equipping them with the craft, the mindset, and the confidence to engage with their contemporary world.



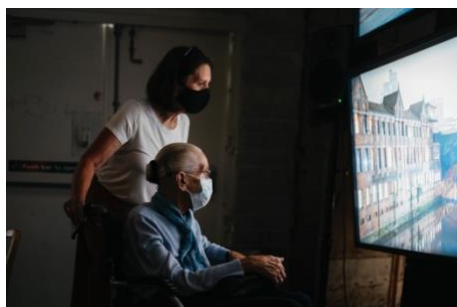
Attendee watching the film.



Promotional poster.



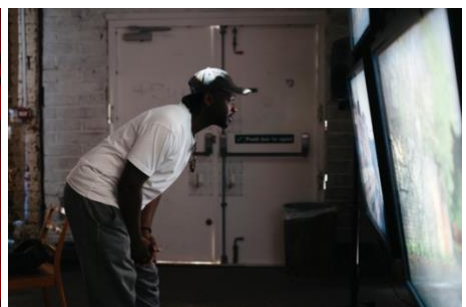
The White Hotel (club venue), Salford



Audience members looking at photography.



Entrance to The White Hotel.



One of our supported Northern Voices artists looking at photography after the music and film.

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We were asked to speak at the Guildhall conference not just as musicians but as an **employer** of musicians. Manchester Collective is often referred to as ‘a new kind of arts organisation’ and ‘an ensemble fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century’. **What does that mean?**

We don’t have a fixed ensemble structure and that is a conscious intention. If you want to innovate or evolve an art form, we think it’s important to move away from historical structures – to some extent at least. We have a core management team of five, plus our Music Director and a part time voluntary administrator. We then employ somewhere between 80/100 freelance artists and creatives each season. Here are some of them:



Nicholas Trygstad, cello (Principal, Hallé) and Ruth Gibson, viola (Castalian Quartet, Aurora Orchestra)



Pekka Kuusisto, violinist, joining the Collective in 2022 as part of new partnership with Norwegian Chamber Orchestra



Camae Ayewa, aka Moor Mother, New York based rapper, poet and activist, commissioned to write a work for string quartet and spoken word



Edmund Finnis, composer of *The Centre is Everywhere*, titular track of our debut album



Hannah Peel, electronic artist and composer of *NEON* premiered by us at Kings Place in 2021



Abel Selaocoe, cellist, singer, composer, and curator of our shows *Sirocco* (2019) and *The Oracle* (2021)



Beibei Wang, percussionist in recent tour *Heavy Metal*



Ben Nobuto, composer of *Serenity 2.0*, premiered in our show *Heavy Metal*



Alex Jakeman, flute (Principal, BBC Philharmonic) and Nathaniel Boyd (Albion Quartet) in our show *Voice of the Whale*



Chris Watson, BAFTA-winning field recordist for David Attenborough’s *Life* and *Frozen Planet* series. Commissioned to produce a natural world soundtrack to lay over our forthcoming performance of Michael Gordon’s *Weather*



Donald Grant, violinist (Elias String Quartet) and leader in string chamber music (RNCM) here performing a duet with our sound engineer Joe Reiser

This is just a tiny snapshot of our current work, but you can see immediately that it’s eclectic. Diversity of perspectives, of ideas and experiences, fuels our creative output. One thing we are **not** looking for when we recruit musicians, is polished, finely-honed, perfectly executed reproductions of standard repertoire. In fact – I think it’s fair to say – that we find the cult of perfection in classical music at best, boring and at worst, destructive.



This year we launched our own training initiative. We opened it to string players – at any stage of their career – based in the north of England. 67 high quality applicants competed for 13 places. Unlike the traditional audition system, we weighted applicants 50% on instrumental performance and 50% on a statement about their artistic ideas, influences and aspirations. We recognise that rapidly put together, accurately delivered performances may be necessary for orchestras that demand musicians go into concert with little-to-no rehearsal time, but it does not work for us. Indeed, we have actively rejected industry ‘stars’ who are highly accomplished but unable to work in an open, explorative way.

Manchester Collective does not exclusively perform new, experimental music. We frequently weave baroque, classical, romantic and folk repertoire into our shows. Non-siloed programming is part of our mission to break down barriers and stereotypes that put us in danger of becoming culturally irrelevant. Let me be clear, we are not dumbing down. We employ some of this country’s finest classical musicians. With them we perform in the Wigmore Hall, the Southbank Centre, at the Proms or in BBC broadcasts. But we also take them outside of the concert hall – to former mills, social clubs, warehouse spaces – where we expect them to play the same repertoire with equal quality and commitment.

To deliver our programmes we insist on a minimum of three full rehearsal days so there is sufficient space to test and refine. **The musicians we employ need a strongly developed craft.** They must have mastery of their instrument, but we need them to understand that ‘technique’ means a whole, dynamic system of instrument, body, and mind. To work with us, musicians are going to require a robust questioning and community problem-solving approach, to be able to flexibly adapt to different repertoire and acoustic environments. If they’re just brilliantly replicating how a guru teacher has instructed them to play, they’re really going to struggle. Rather than technique in the traditional sense, we might call this **agency**.

It sounds obvious but **we need conservatoire graduates to have all the fundamental musical building blocks solidly in place.** Like a tree with a healthy root system that enables its branches to be strong and malleable. We’re concerned that conservatoire training is still too heavily repertoire led, with students being made to serve the curriculum needs rather than their own. We often encounter young musicians in ensemble projects they’re not ready for. From our perspective as an employer, it would be more helpful if conservatoire graduates had an average-to-good lived experience of repertoire, but an excellent-to-outstanding grasp of rhythm, intonation, listening, improvisation, singing, verbal and physical communication... stagecraft... interaction with audiences. We see pockets of incredibly innovative work happening in conservatoire education but it’s far from culturally embedded. Traditional orchestral players still dominate instrumental teaching, many of whom have inherited and are perpetuating the guru model of training. As a result, we often see students caught in a tension between ‘the old and the new’ in a way that’s confusing and unhelpful for them. Moreover, significant damage to conservatoire students’ confidence to try, fail, and try again – to develop their own artistic voice – is still too widespread. We can think of no other contemporary, creative art form in which this would be accepted practice.



This leads me to perhaps the most important thing we're looking for and that is, **mindset**. We operate a collaborative approach to working – the fellow traveller model in this conference's headline paper. We think that **artist development should be life-long**. It's sustained by a genuine sense of enquiry that should be nurtured and well-grounded at undergraduate level – just as a visual artist will undertake a foundation year to embed creative thinking before deciding any subsequent pathway. We believe that artistic growth happens when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to go to places that feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar. This requires a working culture of support, inclusion, and suspension of ego. We expect all musicians we employ – whether soloists or ensemble players – to speak up and offer their ideas. They'll be listened to, and we expect them to listen to others. A hyper competitive environment with a culture of perfection, inhibition and shaming is completely un conducive to creative, collaborative work. Without hesitation, we call it out for the destructive effects it has, not only on musicians but also on audiences and artists from other genres, who too often feel alienated and excluded by the classical music sector. In our contemporary world, this way of working is inexcusable. It is, quite simply, out of date.

When we read this paper, we were relieved. We felt things had shifted. We were excited to imagine how incredibly rich and exciting this art we love, and have dedicated our lives to, could become. There was suddenly a possibility that classical music, if it radicalised its training and approach in this way, could in fact become one of **the** most innovative and powerful art forms in our whole cultural ecology. But then we were told – 'it's just aspirational'. It's a long way from how things are. And at Manchester Collective that worries us. So much so that we are now actively developing the Manchester Collective Academy to provide an alternative training pathway.

There is an urgency to this. In no scenario should every musician have to follow our approach – indeed, we encourage them to discover their own! But one thing is clear to us: it is ethically wrong to be routinely training so many young instrumentalists for an orchestral world where the level of industry demand is simply not there. Not only that, but in doing so actually depleting the very things they unquestionably **will** need to sustain an artistic career – confidence, self-agency, professional agility, broad social/cultural engagement, and lateral application. The paper is a good starting point. But we need courage, and action. We very much hope the conversations that take place because of this conference can drive forward radical, positive change. Thanks for reading. Let's do this...

Here's a short appendix:

- (i) **Link to Dark Days, Luminous Nights excerpt:** <https://youtu.be/taAUE5GxnJg>
- (ii) **Testimony from experienced principal orchestral player who works with the Collective:** *'I feel I can really contribute here. I have a feeling of ownership, of genuinely being part of a creative process. I would go as far as saying that the traditional conducting style is abusive. We're told what to do all the time and are often undermined. The only professional development I've been offered as an orchestral player is the option of taking a First Aid course. With the Collective I've continued learning... I've been exposed to repertoire I would never have discovered, and it's been interesting to learn that not all music functions in the same way. You make music less defined by genre, and that means I've developed different skills. Working with electronic artists has been mind-blowing!'*
- (iii) **Testimony from experienced chamber musician who works with the Collective:** *'I've often worked with contemporary classical repertoire, but I was out of my comfort zone here. It's been like an extension of my training – you tap into an energy that should surround **all** music making. You allow people to feel what they really feel. There feels like less division between performers and listeners, it's made me think about the way my own ensemble presents things. I love the way you mix venues, talk to people, and even the way musicians sit and relax after the gig – you feel part of the audience rather than separate to it.'*

