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Open Letter to Music Professionals

by Evelyn Glennie (2006)

Dear Colleagues,

My comments here demonstrate my huge concern over what our business is actually offering our customers today. As many of you know, I am naturally “stubborn” and do not just accept the dismissal of a need when there is an urgent requirement for its address in a healthy, open, honest and constructive way from ALL quarters of the business and beyond.

I'll just repeat that:- an urgent need for healthy, open, honest and constructive dialogue from all quarters of the business and beyond.

So who are our customers? While my employer may be the many orchestras and other promoters that hire me to perform over 100 performances per year, my customer is actually the paying public who come to these venues and events to be entertained and stimulated by our artistic endeavours and experience the passion which we bring to our specialities. An artist without passion is the same as any other employee who is just doing their job – our extra effort makes the difference.

I was rehearsing in the wonderful Disney Hall in Los Angeles – the new building designed by Frank Geary – and looked up and counted approximately 200 fixed lighting features and about 20 moving light fixtures - I walked past far more backstage. There is also a fantastic sound system built into and especially for the space. I was banned from using all of it and was told that, “This is a concert Hall and not a theatre” and that the logistics of the event in which I was involved excluded even the modest audio reinforcement that I and the composer had requested. We have all the ingredients right in front of our faces to consistently put on great events but at this point I see this part of the music business and many of our performances like the ingredients of a cocktail sitting in a glass and needing to be shaken or stirred. Let's face it, we aren't going to repeat a bad cocktail experience by choice.

So what is the difference? Is it only the monotone costumes which are worn, a throwback to 19th century waiter's attire? Or is it that an orchestral concert is ‘culture’ and therefore above the crude wrappings of theatre and entertainment?

Brushing aside the arrogance of this assumption I must reply with another question:

“Why can a questionably talented teenager fill a 50 thousand seat stadium with top priced tickets and put on a great show when a hugely talented 100 piece orchestra struggles to fill 1 to 2 thousand seat venues?”

The elitism and refusal to accept that what orchestras are doing now is far less relevant to the general public is answered by the old mantra “they need to be educated”.

Perhaps “They” are not the problem.



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Similarly, I do not believe that entrenching ourselves in tried, trusted and accessible repertoire is the answer. It cannot be denied that the composers of these pieces are great composers with many wonderful works available to us to experience - It is the only reason why these pieces continue to be performed. However, with the advent of the myriads of alternative entertainments available to the public why should they want to come to hear the same thing time and time again done in exactly the same way? We would not expect a contemporary artist to continue to play the same repertoire endlessly and continue to make a living yet this is exactly what we see the orchestras doing.

There is currently a surging interest in seeing live events; the general public is willing to pay to see attractions onstage and to be inconvenienced for the pleasure. Yet we see a continued decline in attendances at the many classical venues around the world. The argument that "the audiences will return when they get rid of the kids" is proving to be untrue. Costs and expenses rise relentlessly and in the "Cultured" arts these costs are born by long suffering sponsors and patrons which is both amazing and testament to the goodwill of the many that do. Think what has been spent in time and money to organise fancy receptions, after concert dinners, luncheons and suchlike and how that money could be spent on improving the event we experience on stage.

How long can this generosity and benevolence be expected to continue?

On the many stages that I visit throughout the world I see varying levels of support but labour laws in the USA (particularly) allows for the insistence that any number of crews be allowed to work an event irrespective of what is actually required. I travel with my own technician and with one sound and lighting technician from a venue can set up and rig my increasingly technically demanding performances in one day from scratch. This, when contrasted against the nauseatingly labour intensive New York venues would appear to be a minor miracle. As an example of this I was invited to perform at Carnegie Hall a few years ago and my 20 flight cases were removed to the sidewalk from the truck by a crew of 9, a second crew then brought the cases the remaining 30 meters to below the stage where the venue crew had the right to insist that they exclusively build my instruments despite my own technician being present and indeed the only person who knew how to assemble the instruments. He could only stand watching but was allowed to "point"! The apathy shown to both the orchestra and I - who were unable to finish the rehearsal because of the crew having to go to dinner - is beyond belief. Be under no misunderstanding: while the venue at Carnegie hall is indeed wonderful, working there is a trial and some balance is required where each person working on an event is justified and knows what we ALL aiming for as a team - to please our customers.

And all the time the sponsors are paying for this.

I have had the good fortune of having led a successful career for over 21 years. I have performed on many stages throughout the world to Kings, Queens and Presidents, the great and the good. I will be the first to admit that I have been most fortunate. I can only put my success down to MY mantra:

"Making a difference".



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Putting it another way, if we believe in what we are doing and do our best to achieve it we can do no more. This is proven historically with motivated individuals succeeding despite the huge odds stacked against them. I believe in what I do as does the committed team that I have the pleasure of working with. I expect nothing less from the orchestras and other performers I visit and work with and this must include the assorted managers, agents and backstage folk who are needed to play their part. We are all part of the chain. Excellence is required from me as a performer on stage. It will be my name in the paper the days after the event. I expect, not ask, the same dedication from all members involved in the event.

I will not sit idly on one side when there is an urgent need to rethink what and how we do things. The times have changed from when we could rely on a fresh audience turning to our activities in mid-life and the business model has changed immeasurably. I do not wish to be performing the same pieces in the same way next time I am asked and will not be doing the same thing in the same way in 5 years' time; we must continually reinvent what we do to remain fresh and appealing to our customers.

I believe that one of the first things that must be done is to set the stage for our audiences. I recently had the pleasure of seeing the Blue Man Group in Toronto. From the minute that I walked through the door there was a total 'Blue Man experience'. This approach must be considered from the orchestras. I feel it is unacceptable and scruffy to be able to watch the musicians wandering around on stage practising the pieces they will be performing while the audience is walking in. It doesn't happen at the Opera, the Ballet or at the theatre. Even a bar or wedding Band doesn't spend the beginnings of their set practising and warming up – how has it become acceptable for an orchestra to do so? Players can arrive to warm up on stage but depart once "doors open" which I as a soloist need to do – it would be absurd to see any soloist warming up on stage whilst the audience is being seated. Setting and dressing the stage, presenting the performance appropriately and engagingly with performers who appear happy to be there and welcoming to the audience are small and totally inexpensive steps which will radically change the current orchestral experience.

To further expand on possibilities, the increasingly affordable technological opportunity available to us all allows a degree of audience participation and involvement which was previously unaffordable except for special occasions. It is now possible to run a visual presentation during a performance which expands the experience to the audience. Lighting and sound which I have only briefly touched on so far are also options which greatly enhance the experience yet are perceived as changing a 'Classical' performance into a Pops show. The direct inference being that a Pops show is substandard – who has the audacity to suggest that to be true?

I am a performer now because at the age of 12 I saw my school orchestra on stage during an assembly which whetted my interest in percussion and inspired me to become a professional musician. I was encouraged by my Head-teacher, school teachers, and subject teacher to take the opportunity to participate in music-making. I was lucky that this universal enthusiasm and vision was prevalent throughout the whole school for all subjects. This was an unusual situation then and is now virtually unheard of after successive governments in the UK, America and other countries have continued to cut back on funding for the Arts and for education in the Arts. On the rare occasions when a younger



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audience is present we should not be compounding the problem with aloof and distant performances. If the performer is not excited by the prospect of their performance, how can our audiences be expected to be excited. So, our question is: why should an audience come to our concerts?

Despite the classical orchestras being perhaps the older of the Arts we have not learnt new tricks. The pop world, theatre, dance and the graphic and written arts have all reinvented themselves and where deserved, thrive. This is also known as evolution.

Is this old dog going to learn new tricks or should it be taken to the Vet for that final, kind, last injection?

Every single time someone comes through the doors of our venues it is the opportunity to plant a new seed and to inspire. . Perhaps they could become the next great performer, perhaps the inspired performance they see will inspire still further and a great incarnation in another field will occur. Perhaps they will feel compelled to donate to the Arts or perhaps they may simply and quietly buy a ticket for the next show.

Please consider your actions, your inactions and remember to ask, "What can I do to make a difference today?"

Dame Evelyn Glennie, June 2006