

Able Orchestra at Manchester, January 2020



Able Orchestra performance at the BBC Philharmonic Studio © Mark Allsop Nelson

Project report by Orchestras Live

“ It was the best experience ever, it was AMAZING! ”
Young musician

“ One of the most emotionally moving performances I’ve heard in years. ”
John Summers, Chief Executive, Hallé Concerts Society

The **Able Orchestra** is an inclusive ensemble of young and professional artists from different genres, including disabled people using assistive technology, with the ethos that all members can create and perform on equal terms.

On 29 January 2020 **Able Orchestra** made its debut appearance in the north west with a performance at the BBC Philharmonic Studio, Media City, Salford. It was a high-profile event, including the premiere of a new commission, which vividly illustrated how inclusive practice in an orchestral context can have extremely high artistic values and form a compelling case for increased diversity and inclusion in the context of the arts, culture and society as a whole.

This report summarises the project's process, outcomes and learning points, using evidence gathered from stakeholders, audience and independent reviewers.

SUMMARY OF LEARNING

This performance by Able Orchestra formed a landmark in the development of inclusive ensembles that points the way for the orchestral sector, demonstrating that:

- Rethinking the model of what an 'orchestra' is and what it could be in terms of hierarchy and control produces work of high artistic integrity.
- Being more ambitious in the way they adapt and develop will enable conventional orchestras to become more relevant to our diverse society.
- The success of inclusive work relies on artistic quality as much as any other established approach to music-making.
- The music profession has not yet made it possible for Disabled musicians and composers to occupy a label-free space, on their own terms.
- Raising the profile of such performances results in a sizeable public audience for whom the key point of interest is the artistic work rather than the inclusive nature of the ensemble.
- Applying a flexible approach to traditional paths or conventions of musicianship opens up creative potential for all.
- Cultivating and supporting disabled music leaders will broaden the professional workforce and create pathways for others to follow.
- Applying inclusive practice across an entire organisation can bring artistic and business benefits.
- Clear artistic and logistical planning and communications are important to ensure fully shared objectives that lead to positive outcomes for all stakeholders in collaborative projects, especially when they involve participants with complex needs.

BACKGROUND

Since its inception, the Able Orchestra has evolved as an inclusive ensemble of young and professional artists from different genres, including disabled people using assistive technology, with the ethos that all members can create and perform on equal terms. Produced by Inspire Youth Arts and Orchestras Live in partnership with the Hallé, and having achieved a series of performances, broadcasts and recordings, including a live debut at the BBC Ten Pieces Proms in London, Able Orchestra is renowned as an eclectic group that is a beacon for artistic inclusion and diversity. A key aim is to seek high profile collaborations and performance platforms to evidence and celebrate the creativity of diverse people whilst raising national awareness of inclusion.

THE 2020 PROJECT

Orchestras Live secured a performance opportunity for Able Orchestra at the Association of British Orchestras annual conference at Manchester in January 2020, hosted by the Hallé and BBC Philharmonic. Given the long-standing partnership with both orchestras, it was fitting for Able Orchestra to appear in a conference which focussed on looking ahead to what the landscape for orchestras will be in the next ten years, and a golden opportunity to showcase to an international audience of orchestra managers, artists and other cultural organisations, giving profile and potential influence that could be highly significant across the sector.

Aims

- Support a diverse group of musicians to create and perform music for a high-profile international music conference in Manchester
- Bring together young people, some of whom are profoundly disabled, from Nottinghamshire and Manchester, extending the reach, inspiration and influence of the Able Orchestra
- Develop the creative and technical skills of the young participants, as well as their confidence
- Support a rising star young disabled composer and his personal aspirations
- Develop the ambition and inclusive practice of two professional orchestras and raise the profile of collaborative, inclusive music-making and performance
- Project a positive image of disability in the classical music industry

Participants

As usual, the core group of young musicians was drawn from schools in Nottinghamshire:

Fountaindale School and Portland College, Mansfield: 10 disabled students using assistive digital music and multimedia technology

Outwood Academy Portland, Worksop: 6 students using acoustic instruments

The Minster School, Southwell: 6 students using acoustic instruments

As an extension of the collaboration, 2 disabled students from the Seashell Trust in Cheadle Hulme also took part using assistive technology, which was a natural development from their relationship and regular music workshops with the Hallé.

The team of professional artists leading the project was as follows:

Si Tew	Digital music artist
Tom Bacon	Digital music artist
Bec Smith	Digital projection artist
Peter Sampson	Beat box artist
Bea Schirmer	Hallé double bass player & arranger
Chris Emerson	Hallé viola player & arranger
Jess Fisher	Trainee Music Leader
Oliver Vibrans	Composer

An ensemble of 18 orchestral musicians drawn from the Hallé and BBC Philharmonic also took part in the final rehearsal and performance.

Process

It was decided the performance should consist of two elements: an existing piece of Able Orchestra repertoire and a new piece created especially for the occasion.

Orchestras Live approached composer Oliver Vibrans about writing the new piece. As a talented disabled musician who had grown up in Manchester and who could be a positive role model for the ensemble and audience, there were good reasons to collaborate with Oliver on this project. He attended an Able Orchestra performance at Nottingham in spring 2019 to get a feel for the inclusive ensemble, prior to accepting the commission from Orchestras Live. His vision was for the disabled young musicians to work in a new way by using technology to control sound effects that manipulate the acoustic orchestral instruments playing notated parts, creating a live electro-acoustic sound world. This would contrast with the other piece, *Fantastical Worlds*, based on beats and techno grooves created previously by the young musicians and re-orchestrated for the larger ensemble. Oliver composed his ten-minute piece, *More Up*, over a period of six weeks towards the end of 2019.



Able Orchestra workshops © Stuart Bruce

A series of workshops was held in the weeks leading up to the performance, with the groups of young musicians in Nottinghamshire working together in Mansfield, and separate sessions held with the Seashells participants in Manchester. The workshops involved the young musicians and professional artists creating a unified group, rehearsing the two pieces and creating digital visual material for both, and using the technology including Control One controllers¹ to find effective ways of manipulating the acoustic sounds.

Short films were made by Inspire Youth Arts for projection on a large screen above the ensemble immediately before the performance of each piece - one with Oliver explaining his

¹ A digital controller developed by Si Tew through the Able partnership, enabling people with very limited movement to control digital technology and contribute to the creation and performance of music.

<https://digitmusic.co.uk/>

new piece, the other featuring assistant music leader and disabled artist Jess Fisher talking about her experiences as a member of the Able Orchestra.

A preliminary rehearsal purely for the Hallé and BBC Philharmonic players and conductor Ellie Slorach was held in Manchester, enabling them to go through the new scores with the composer and with digital music leader Si Tew.

On the final day the numerous young musicians, with their teachers and carers, travelled to Manchester to join the orchestral players for an afternoon rehearsal followed by the 30 minute early-evening performance in the BBC Philharmonic Studio. A capacity audience of 250 people of ABO Conference delegates, project stakeholders, participants' family members and general public attended the event.

“ Watching the professional musicians play was really inspiring and seeing where they work and perform was also really cool. The actual performance was quite nerve-racking but it sounded brilliant, and after we had finished and the audience was clapping it felt incredible. ”

Young musician



Ellie Slorach and Oliver Vibrans rehearsing the Able Orchestra © Stuart Bruce

EVALUATION

Positive outcomes

- **The high artistic quality of the performance formed a landmark in the development of new kinds of inclusive ensemble.**

“ I was incredibly moved by the Able Orchestra performance at the ABO conference. Amongst the thousands of concerts I have attended it was certainly one of the most memorable. The combination of the forces involved, together with the strength and beauty of Oliver’s piece, achieved something which is very rare in my experience viz a work of great artistic merit to which the performers added many layers of meaningfulness, commitment and collaboration. ”

John Summers, Chief Executive, Hallé Concerts Society

“ The waves of inspiration from that one performance are already influencing thinking in Radio 3 – I think you might just have made a bigger impact than any of us imagined possible. ”

Simon Webb, Director, BBC Philharmonic Orchestra

“ For me, the most telling outcome was that numerous people I spoke to were thrilled with the quality of the pieces and the overall artistic experience. It felt like Able Orchestra had arrived as an artistic force, something that could make a real contribution to the orchestral sector, rather than being regarded as a music project to facilitate inclusion. ”

Stuart Bruce, Senior Creative Producer, Orchestras Live

“ The composer and musician on the videos spoke brilliantly. It was amazing to see so many different organisations working collectively on one mission of inclusive music making. The cross arts element with the visuals on screen were excellent. I felt the music was really well pitched and the musicians will remember the experience for years to come. Great work Orchestras Live! ”

Culture Counts Peer Reviewer

“ It was great to work with [the young musicians] and to get an understanding of their real passion for performing. Felt an unbelievably worthwhile thing to be doing. ”

Hallé musician

“

I don't see why all kinds of composers could not be commissioned to write for this line up / mix of abilities / mix of instrumental sounds. They have through this project, and I hope more can.

”

Culture Counts Peer Reviewer

“

Experimenting with digital manipulation of acoustic sound in a live setting, and not being in control of this manipulation, was new for the orchestra.

”

Hayley Parkes, Projects Manager, Hallé Concerts Society



Able Orchestra workshops © Stuart Bruce

- **The experience proved very positive for the various participants.**

“

Chris and Bea were super - they responded to students in a non-patronising and very helpful way. They challenged them and judged their level of communication perfectly.

”

Hannah Wallis-Windle, Director of Music, The Minster School

“

The experience of the Able Orchestra was the best. I loved every single moment of it, from stepping into the practice room of Fountaindale School, Mansfield to unwillingly stepping out at the BBC Philharmonic Studio at Salford. When I first saw the stage I was astonished, it was amazing to be a part of the stage. Playing with the BBC Philharmonic and The Hallé has been such a great honour. If I was asked again to be a part of the Able project, immediately I would say YES, but when I was younger I would definitely say no, so it has affected me as a musician A LOT. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity that I will never forget.

”

Young musician

“

What has been very clear is that the participants had the most wonderful experience. [At least one] had a life-changing time. It has been a pleasure to see confidence grow and feelings of wellbeing through all participants (adults and students alike).

”

Lucy Reid, Music Services Manager, Inspire Music

“

Musically, socially, spiritually; it was a very valuable experience for our students - and for us!

”

Rachel Steadman, Musician in Residence, RSM Seashell Trust

“

In the piece *More Up* there were lots of bars rest so I had to really concentrate and keep up with the conductor. I think this has helped me as a musician to stay in time. The other piece was also really fun because you could be creative and choose what you played, which I have never done before.

”

Young musician

“

The project has inspired disabled young people at Fountaindale School to pursue music and music technology in their continuing education and training.

”

Andy Dawson, Arts Manager, Inspire Youth Arts

- **The performance was felt to be genuinely inclusive by the participants and audience.**

“ I actually found it quite emotional listening to one of the disabled students saying how important music was to her and how disability was not a barrier to their enjoyment and participation.

”

Audience member

“ Working alongside the members of the BBC Philharmonic and the Hallé orchestra was amazing but my favourite part was playing with the Able Orchestra, it was such a good feeling and I loved how the music brought us all together and built new friendships outside of my own school. This unique experience highlighted to me that even though all of the groups of musicians involved had different levels of ability, we could all create incredible music together and form friendships and memories. I particularly enjoyed working all together, having lots of fun and learning new skills from each other. My absolute favourite day was performing in the BBC studios as one orchestra.

”

Young musician

“ The fact that the first piece's composer was himself disabled was a very important part of the evidence in the way the project had integrity.

”

Culture Counts Peer Reviewer



Able Orchestra workshops © Stuart Bruce

“ I'm sure it really opened a lot of eyes (and ears). It has really made me reflect on my own practice too and further underlined much we really do need a mass shake up in everything we do. ”

Helen Harrison, Trustee, Orchestras Live

“ [A young musician] has been enthusiastically telling me about all the new friends she made [with the disabled young people]. Never once did she describe them as having any difficulties or problems in communication. It never ceases to amaze me that our young people show us the way in behaving in an equitable manner. ”

Lucy Reid, Music Services Manager, Inspire Music

“ I really enjoyed learning the pieces and getting to know the people around me. It was also really interesting to hear what the [disabled] students were doing, how they played and to see how everyone's parts slotted together to make the two pieces that we performed. ”

Young musician

“ The players and the young people interacted well. Having them interspersed in the orchestra also helped facilitate better communication and sense of equality. ”

Hayley Parkes, Projects Manager, Hallé Concerts Society



Able Orchestra performance at the BBC Philharmonic Studio © Mark Allsop Nelson

- **Writing for large ensemble was a new departure for the composer, enhancing his skills, professional development and reputation.**

“ I was most impressed by Oliver Vibrans’s music. The sound palette he created was radiant and really gorgeous to listen to. ”

Lloyd Coleman, Associate Music Director, Paraorchestra

“ Thank you so much for the opportunity, it was entirely a privilege to be a part of, let's do more! ”

Oliver Vibrans, composer

“ The Hallé players and management were so taken with Oliver’s work that we are commissioning him to write a piece for the Hallé Youth Orchestra. ”

Steve Pickett, Education Director, Hallé Concerts Society

- **The project was successful in giving a platform for an inclusive approach to music-making, both for an influential audience at the performance and through wider sector awareness at the ABO Conference and through partners’ national communications networks.**

“ The well curated messaging on the screen, and the flow of the event, was very well thought through and delivered. Given the 'high profile' nature of the presentation, with lots of ABO delegates as well as family / friends attending, it was a 'showcase' event that did a lot to demonstrate the value of the project and the musicianship of all involved. ”

Culture Counts Peer Reviewer

“ After five years developing Able Orchestra as a dynamic inclusive ensemble, it was the right time to present it to the international orchestral sector to illustrate what could be achieved with some imagination and a willingness to consult with, and bring together, disparate groups and individuals with the shared purpose of exploring and making music. ”

Stuart Bruce, Senior Creative Producer, Orchestras Live

- **The performance illustrated the breadth of the artistic work by the Hallé and the BBC Philharmonic, complementing the more conventional orchestral concert at Bridgewater Hall during the conference.**

“ It was a very special event at the BBC Studio and for us all. Quite unexpectedly we had to turn people away from attending because there was so much interest. ”

Jen Redmond, Manager - Digital & Learning, BBC Philharmonic

“ The players remarked that the project was a very worthwhile and rewarding piece of work to be involved in. Several made the observation that it was refreshing to have a musical performance based around what music can achieve as a vehicle and not solely as a ‘means to an end’ e.g. create a cohesive ensemble of people communicating musically and taking pride in what each person can contribute, not just being worried about their own part. ”

Hayley Parkes, Projects Manager, Hallé Concerts Society



Able Orchestra workshops © Stuart Bruce

Challenges and learning points

- **Working in a new way with an independent composer who had a particular creative approach and artistic vision for this piece meant that expectations and requirements were not entirely aligned.**

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Whilst the piece was written for specific performers it did not involve the young people in devising any of the material, which was a key element of previous Able projects. This was a frustration for us and presented difficulties for the workshop leaders in managing expectations of the participants over the series of workshops.

”

Andy Dawson, Arts Manager, Inspire Youth Arts

“

We expected there would be some decision-making for the disabled young musicians in the way they used digital effects to manipulate the live acoustic sound, although actually the score was written very precisely and didn't give much scope for experimentation.

”

Stuart Bruce, Senior Creative Producer, Orchestras Live

- **Parts written for the young instrumentalists were not as extensive and challenging as their schools anticipated, causing some concerns about the commitment of time away from school for the series of workshops.**

“

The counting of SO many bars rest was more taxing than the notes we had to play.

”

Young musician

“

The project would have been improved...if the student performers had been given more to play in the newly composed piece.

”

Hannah Wallis-Windle, Director of Music, The Minster School

“

For me it was a waste of opportunity for not all the participants to be fully involved in the wonderful composition by Oliver Vibrans - it did feel very noticeable that some of the group were only involved for a relatively short period of playing.

”

Lucy Reid, Music Services Manager, Inspire Music

- **The practicalities of rehearsing material with separate groups in different parts of the country meant everything came together for the first time a few hours before the performance, causing some anxiety for participants and production partners.**

“ Bravo Ellie [Slorach - conductor]. A great job especially having to bring all those artistic voices together in such a short space of time. ”

Steve Pickett, Education Director, Hallé Concerts Society

“ [Some of the participants'] late arrival on the performance day was very concerning...and could have had huge implications on the project.... ”

Hayley Parkes, Projects Manager, Hallé Concerts Society



Able Orchestra workshops © Stuart Bruce

- **The way in which subtle triggering of assistive technology by disabled performers affected the sounds being heard was not entirely clear to the audience, and could have been illustrated more clearly during a transition film or through live demonstration.**

“ I would have like to have been able to more easily identify the sounds of the electronic instruments that the individual musicians were performing, as it is not as visually apparent as the acoustic instruments in a large ensemble. ”

Culture Counts Peer Reviewer

“ There were some details about the technology on the hand-out programme given to the audience, although something more practical would have been better. ”

Stuart Bruce, Senior Creative Producer, Orchestras Live

“ I wondered if there could be moments when the digital 'sections' of this wonderful integrated orchestra could shine, audibly clearly, alone. ”

Culture Counts Peer Reviewer



Able Orchestra workshops © Stuart Bruce

- **The large, complex collaboration between partners with their own requirements and responsibilities presented challenges.**



As ever with such a large partnership it can be difficult to make sure all communication is effective and targeted. Some colleagues felt overwhelmed with information requests multiple times. This could be streamlined for future improvement.



Lucy Reid, Music Services Manager, Inspire Music

MORE INFORMATION

For more information about Able Orchestra, visit:
www.orchestraslive.org.uk/projects/able-orchestra

Or contact Stuart Bruce, Senior Creative Producer – Orchestras Live
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Orchestras Live website: www.orchestraslive.org.uk
Inspire Youth Arts website: www.inspireculture.org.uk
The Hallé website: www.halle.co.uk
BBC Philharmonic website: www.bbc.co.uk/philharmonic

APPENDIX

Feedback from Culture Counts peer and participant reviews

As part of this project evaluation, we used evaluation surveys through Arts Council England's Impact and Insight Toolkit: Culture Counts. The performance was reviewed by a number of sector peers (quoted above as Culture Counts peer reviewers). The following graphs represent responses from a sample number of participants who responded to our Culture Counts survey.

