

Awarded by The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

Report by Dr Sarah Penicka-Smith, Churchill Fellow 2024

To research socially-engaged orchestral and operatic models to run projects in Australia



Doors to the Fundación Barenboim-Said, Seville, Spain

Indemnity Clause

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST

Report by Dr Sarah Penicka-Smith

To research socially-engaged orchestral and operatic models to run projects in Australia

I understand and consent to the Churchill Trust publishing this Report in any form.

I indemnify the Churchill Trust against any loss, costs or damages it may suffer arising from any claim or proceeding made against the Trust relating to the publication of any Report submitted to, and published by the Trust.

I also warrant that my final Report is original and does not:

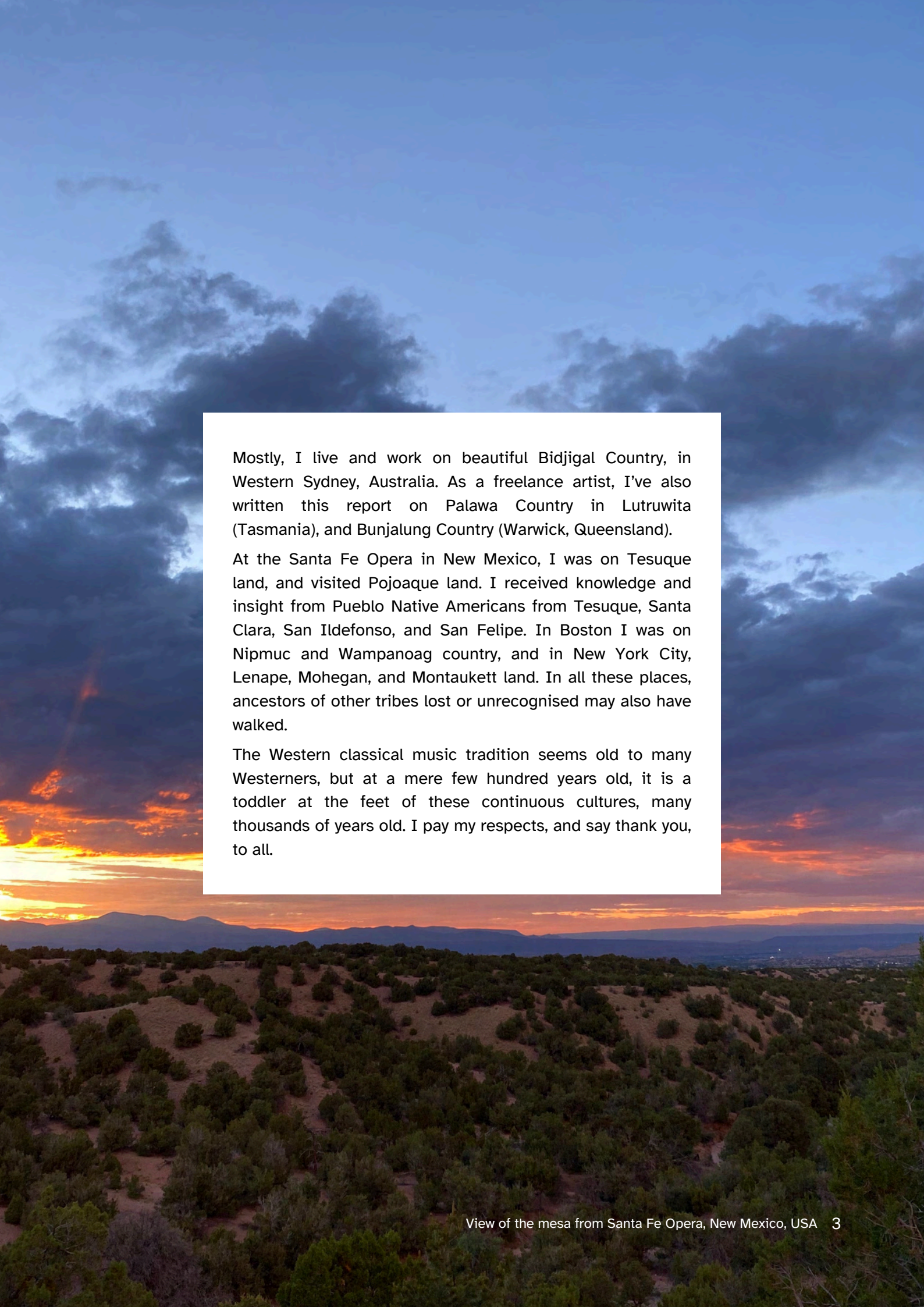
- (a) infringe the copyright of any person;
- (b) contain anything which is defamatory;
- (c) breach any privacy law or obligation;
- (d) breach confidentiality; or
- (e) pass off or contravene any other private right or law.

Signed: Sarah Penicka-Smith

Date: 10 November 2025

Keywords

classical music; community engagement; First Nations engagement; opera; orchestra; socially-engaged art

The background image is a wide-angle photograph of a landscape at sunset. The sky is filled with large, dark, textured clouds that are illuminated from below by the setting sun, creating a gradient of colors from deep blue at the top to bright orange and yellow near the horizon. The horizon line is visible in the distance, with silhouettes of mountains or hills. In the foreground, there is a dense field of low-lying, green shrubs and bushes, some of which are in sharp focus while others are blurred, suggesting a sense of depth. A white rectangular text box is centered in the upper half of the image, containing three paragraphs of text.

Mostly, I live and work on beautiful Bidjigal Country, in Western Sydney, Australia. As a freelance artist, I've also written this report on Palawa Country in Lutruwita (Tasmania), and Bunjalung Country (Warwick, Queensland).

At the Santa Fe Opera in New Mexico, I was on Tesuque land, and visited Pojoaque land. I received knowledge and insight from Pueblo Native Americans from Tesuque, Santa Clara, San Ildefonso, and San Felipe. In Boston I was on Nipmuc and Wampanoag country, and in New York City, Lenape, Mohegan, and Montaukett land. In all these places, ancestors of other tribes lost or unrecognised may also have walked.

The Western classical music tradition seems old to many Westerners, but at a mere few hundred years old, it is a toddler at the feet of these continuous cultures, many thousands of years old. I pay my respects, and say thank you, to all.

Executive Summary

Australia has a wealth of classical music organisations, from professional institutions to amateur, community and youth ensembles. However, one kind of ensemble is less conspicuous: those formed with an extra-musical purpose, whether it's for social justice, social cohesion, or some other kind of public good. The choral world, which is where I have made my professional home for the past twenty years, has much more to offer in this regard. Yet Europe and America both offer a rich array of project-based ensembles dedicated to using classical music as the vehicle through which they seek to engineer some kind of social change, or amplify a social message.

My Churchill Fellowship project was born out of my experience organising a volunteer pop-up orchestra and choir to perform Handel's *Messiah* in the foyer of a local oncology hospital. The passion, dedication and desire to repeat the experience on the part of so many of the volunteer musicians led me to consider how I could offer more: more regular performances, to more Australians, using more artists.

The desire to give, especially in the face of disaster — whether the personal disaster of a cancer diagnosis, or the collective disaster of flood or fire — seems a common human response to the helplessness such uncontrollable and unpredictable experiences create. Our usual recourse is giving money, but not everyone has money to give. A project orchestra is a meaningful way people can give their time and their specific skills, using their particular expertise and passion. I visited organisations in Europe and the USA which have all been created, often by one person, for an extra-musical purpose. I also learned about First Nations engagement in classical music at the Santa Fe Opera. From these organisations, I learned the key elements that have enabled both their survival and their success:

- a clear and compelling vision
- prioritising excellence
- 'doing, not showing': maximising participation opportunities
- developing strong personal connections
- maintaining clear boundaries between art and therapy
- offering a better welcome into the artform, and better, more connected pathways

In addition, I received a wealth of advice on operational matters such as funding, governance, organisational structure, using volunteers, marketing, and risk management.

While my findings will have practical applications for my own creation of a project-based ensemble designed to connect musicians with Australians undergoing stress, findings in this report will also be of use to arts organisation or artists interested in the following areas:

- community engagement
- First Nations engagement
- arts and health
- founding an orchestra
- socially-engaged arts practice.

Table of Contents

Indemnity Clause	2
Keywords	2
Acknowledgement of Country	3
Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Organisations Visited	7
A Note On Referencing	8
Itinerary	9
The Churchill Experience: Barenboim-Said Fundación, Day 1	12
Santa Fe Opera & the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council: A Case Study in Classical Music & First Nations Engagement	14
The Pueblo Opera Program	15
Doctor Atomic	16
Advice on First Nations Engagement	17
Extending a Welcome	20
‘And what could be next?’	21
The Churchill Experience: Barenboim-Said Fundación, Day 1 continued	22
Six Key Takeaways	24
The Best Recruitment Strategy is a Compelling Vision	25
The Primacy of Excellence	26
Doing, Not Showing	27
The Ethics of Audience Engagement	30
The Artist is not a Hero	32
Personal Connection	34
The Churchill Experience: Barenboim-Said Fundación, Day 9	37
The Practicalities	38
Funding	38
Operational Models	41
Governance	45
Survival	46
The Churchill Experience: Barenboim-Said Fundación, Day 10	47
Conclusion	48
Recommendations, Dissemination & Implementation	49
The Churchill Experience: Daniel Barenboim Stiftung, Berlin	51
Resources	54
References	54
Contact Details	54
Acknowledgments	55

Introduction

I am a professional conductor with twenty years experience, mostly in choral music, but with frequent symphonic and operatic projects. I'm based in Western Sydney, and, at the time of writing, am Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of River City Voices, a newly-established symphonic choir in Parramatta, and Associate Conductor of the Willoughby Symphony Orchestra.

I grew up in a family of classical musicians but my first professional engagement was with the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Choir. Thirteen years there saw me well-bitten with the social justice bug; subsequently I found it impossible to restrict myself purely to concert hall settings. Under the banner of our partnership, Penicka-Smith Arts & Event Management, my wife Melanie Penicka-Smith and I founded and produced projects such as Pacific Pride Choir, a queer choir touring to places where queer folk are marginalised, such as Poland, Vietnam and Cambodia, and *OCDiva*, a one-woman autobiographical opera for and about mezzo-soprano and OCD advocate Yasmin Arkinstall, composed by Dr Eve Klein.

I was also one of four inaugural recipients of a CASE Incubator residency (Contemporary Artists, Socially Engaged), run by Sarah & Vic McEwan of The Cad Factory (Narrandera, NSW). Until then, I didn't realise there was a term for the kind of art I made. I've since been connected with artists from a range of disciplines, all focussed on making art for and with particular communities, telling local stories, and creating real change.

One day, in 2018, I had what seemed like a crazy idea. Inspired by the excellent acoustics of the foyer of the Chris O'Brien Lifehouse, an oncology hospital in Sydney, as well as by the supportive volunteer team, I put out a call to musicians to join me in a 'pop-up' version of Handel's *Messiah*: one hour of the cheeriest bits, no rehearsal — only a 'brief top and tail' — all pro bono, in the hospital foyer, three days before Christmas.

In two days, one hundred musicians signed up.

Students, music teachers, professional players, talented amateurs — everyone joined in a performance that was greater than the sum of its parts. It moved the patients, most of whom were in the hospital for Christmas, and it moved us.

We managed two more performances before Covid, and then the music industry closed down. Nevertheless, I continued to receive emails asking, 'when can we go back?' I realised this project had legs. The appetite for giving was equal to the desire to receive.

As a freelance musician and producer, all my projects have been pilot projects. Starting something new is the hardest part. My Churchill Fellowship was about choosing which project I felt I could sustain for the next twenty years, and finding sustainable ways to do it. Extending the Chris O'Brien Lifehouse project, so it could reach other Australians in need — be they in hospitals, aged care, or regional Australia during disaster recovery — has become my focus.

Europe and the USA has a number of such projects, in part because the long summer break allows musicians to pursue passion projects in between contracts, and in part because there's less of the highly problematic bias present in Australia towards seeing excellence only in 'High Art' (the concert hall), as opposed to professional artists working in a socially-engaged capacity. I travelled to gather operational information for beginning and maintaining a socially-engaged orchestra project: funding models, risk management, musician recruitment, training and development, ethics and care, community engagement, consultation with/inclusion of First Peoples, concert programming, sustainability, and what makes musicians commit.

This report is divided into three main sections: a case study of First Nations engagement in classical music from Santa Fe Opera, the key themes for success that emerged, and practical advice around operational matters. Throughout, I've interspersed excerpts from my blog. While we were cautioned against writing a travelogue instead of a report, my intention in showing these moments is to give the reader an impression of the profound physical and emotional impact, as well as the extremely vivid experience, of Churchill Fellowship travel.

Organisations Visited

Barenboim-Said Fundación (Seville, Spain)

On the principal that music cannot be isolated from society, the Fundación develops and runs educational and cultural projects including an Academy of Orchestral Studies and music education programs in Andalusia and Palestine.

Interviewees: Muriel Páez Rasmussen (General Director) and Joseph Thapa (Coordinator of Music Education Projects)

Boston City Hall Artists In Residence (Boston, MA, USA)

A program uniting artists and City employees that share deep investments in community and social justice. Run from the Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture.

Interviewee: Karin Goodfellow (Director of Transformative Art and Monuments)

Daniel Barenboim Stiftung & West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (Berlin, Germany)

Support transcultural dialogue through music education and concerts. Projects include the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded in 1999 by Maestro Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said, which includes Arab and Israeli musicians. Other educational projects include the Barenboim-Said Akademie for tertiary music studies, and the Barenboim-Said Center for Music, Ramallah.

Interviewee: Katherine Kaplan (Director of Finance and Operations)

Foundation for Art & Healing (Boston, MA, USA)

A non-profit organisation created by Dr Jeremy Nobel using medicine, science, and a public health model to develop creative arts interventions which address national health issues. Current project: Project UnLonely.

Interviewee: Chris Doucette (Executive Director)

Opera for Peace at the Lerici Festival (Lerici, Italy)

Non-profit providing education and mentoring to emerging opera artists from diverse backgrounds, plus advocacy around re-shaping the opera industry to be more contemporary and representative.

Interviewee: Julia Lagahuzère (Co-Founder/General Director)

PROTESTRA (New York, USA)

Formed in 2017 in response to the first Trump administration's Muslim ban. An activist orchestra with regular concerts educating audiences about issues of social justice.

Interviewees: Michelle Rofrano (Artistic Director, Co-Founder), Ian Vlahović (Chair of Board, Co-Founder)

Refugee Orchestra Project (Boston, USA)

A project orchestra founded by Maestro Lidiya Yankovskaya to demonstrate through music the important role of refugees in American culture and society.

Interviewee: Allison Drovairos (Executive Director)

Santa Fe Opera (New Mexico, USA)

Founded in 1956, Santa Fe Opera (SFO) generally presents five operas annually from June to August. Has highly-developed community engagement, including the Pueblo Opera Program, established 1973 to connect First Nations youth to the opera. From 2018, work began to develop the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council (POCC), to provide First Nations leadership and consultation.

Interviewees, POCC: Jordan and Mina Harvier, Toni Herrera, Marita Swazo Hinds, Claudene A. Martinez, Leon and Renee Roybal

Interviewees, SFO: David Lomelí (Chief Artistic Advisor), Charles Gamble (Director of Community Engagement), Amy Owens (Director, Young Voices), Andrea Fellows Fineberg (former Director of Community Engagement), and Dominik Morningdove (Keresan composer and usher at SFO).



Muriel Pérez Rasmussen,
myself & Joseph Thapa
outside the Barenboim-Said
Fundación, Seville

A Note on Referencing

Most of the information that follows comes from interviews I conducted in the course of my Fellowship travel. With the exception of Marita Hinds, with whom I spoke on three separate occasions, I interviewed each person once. To simplify referencing, the first time I reference an interview, I have footnoted it. Subsequent references to the same interviewee's name can be assumed to be taken from the same interview. I have continued to reference any time the context is unclear.

Itinerary

Dates	Place, organisations, people
Monday 23 June 2025	Santa Fe Opera Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA • Docent-led backstage tour as guest of Santa Fe Opera • Interview Charles Gamble (Director of Engagement) & Amy Owens (Director, Young Voices) • Attend <i>Rigoletto</i> staging call with Maestro Carlo Montanaro
Tuesday 24 June	• Attend <i>Rigoletto</i> orchestral rehearsal with Mo. Montanaro • Meeting with Pueblo Opera Cultural Council • Attend Pueblo Opera Program Youth Night, including education program '3,2,1 Opera!', and <i>Marriage of Figaro</i> dress rehearsal with Maestro Harry Beckett
Wednesday 25 June	• Attend <i>Rigoletto</i> staging rehearsal with Mo. Montanaro • Attend Apprentice Workshop delivered by David Lomelí (Chief Artistic Advisor) • Attend <i>La Bohème</i> dress rehearsal with Maestro Iván López Reynoso
Thursday 26 June	• Interview David Lomelí • Attend <i>Rigoletto</i> orchestral & staging with Mo. Montanaro
Friday 27 June	• Visit Poeh Cultural Centre • Attend <i>La Bohème</i> opening night
Saturday 28 June	• Attend preview dinner with Pueblo Opera Cultural Council
Sunday 29 June	• Rest day
Monday 30 June	• Attend <i>Rigoletto</i> staging with Mo. Montanaro
Tuesday 1 July	• Tour Museum of Indian Arts & Culture as guest of Marita Hinds (Director of Engagement, Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, Pueblo Opera Cultural Council member, Santa Fe Opera board member) • Interview Marita Hinds • Interview Andrea Fellows Fineberg (former Santa Fe Opera Director of Engagement)
Wednesday 2 July	• Attend <i>Turn of the Screw</i> staging with Maestro Gemma New • Interview Michelle Rofrano, (PROTESTRA Artistic Director/Co-founder)
Thursday 3 July	• Attend <i>Die Walküre</i> staging rehearsal with Maestro James Gaffigan & Director Melly Still • Attend <i>Rigoletto</i> Wandelprobe with Mo. Montanaro

Dates	Place, organisations, people
Friday 4 July	- Attend <i>Rigoletto</i> Wandelprobe with Mo. Montanaro - Interview Keresan composer Dominick Morningdove
Saturday 5 July	Boston, Massachussets, USA Travel day
Sunday 6 July	Rest day (included a visit to Boston Public Garden to view Kate Farrington's socially-engaged work 'Monument to the Trees of the Boston Public Garden')
Monday 7 July	Refugee Orchestra Project Interview Allison Drovairos (Executive Director)
Tuesday 8 July	Artist in Residence program, Boston City Hall Interview Karin Goodfellow (Director of Transformative Art & Monuments)
Wednesday 9 July	New York, NY, USA Travel day
Thursday 10 July	Foundation for Art & Healing Interview Chris Doucette (Executive Director)
Friday 11 July	PROTESTRA Interview Ian Vlahović (Co-founder/Chair of Board)
Saturday 12 July	Rest day
Sunday 13 July	Travel day
Monday 14 July - Sunday 20 July	Holiday
Monday 21 July	Seville, Spain Barenboim-Said Fundación - Visit Entre Amigos, community organisation located in Polígono Sur - Attend holiday project with teacher Vicente López Romero & pre-school students at Polígono Sur IES (secondary school) - Meeting at Barenboim-Said Fundación with Muriel Páez Rasmussen (General Director) & Joseph Thapa (Coordinator of Music Education Projects)
Tuesday 22 July	Attend holiday project with teacher Vicente López Romero & pre-school students at Antonio Ortiz IES
Wednesday 23 July	Attend holiday project, Polígono Sur IES

Dates	Place, organisations, people
Thursday 24 July	• Attend holiday project, Antonio Ortiz IES • Interview Joseph Thapa
Friday 25 July	• Attend holiday project, Polígono Sur IES
Saturday 26 - Sunday 27 July	• Rest days
Monday 28 July - Tuesday 29 July	• Attend holiday project, Polígono Sur IES
Wednesday 30 - Thursday 31 July	• Travel days (overnight Milan)
Friday 1 August	Lerici, Italy Opera For Peace • Attend Lerici Festival performance
Saturday 2 August	• Attend Lerici Festival performance (scheduled Opera for Peace rehearsals were cancelled on the day)
Sunday 3 August	• Attend rehearsal & performance, Opera for Peace • Speak with Opera for Peace Singers, meet Julia Lagahuzère (Co-Founder/General Director) & Maestro Gianluca Marcianò (Festival Director)
Monday 4 - Tuesday 5 August	• Travel days (overnight Pisa)
Wednesday 6 August	Berlin, Germany Daniel Barenboim Stiftung/West-Eastern Divan Orchestra • Tour Barenboim-Said Akademie with Leonie Mühlbauer (Executive Assistant to the CEO) • Interview Katherine Kaplan (Director of Finance and Operations) • Attend West-Eastern Divan Orchestra rehearsal conducted by Maestro Daniel Barenboim
Thursday 7 - Friday 8 August	• Writing days
Saturday 9 August	• Rest day
Sunday 10 August	• Attend West-Eastern Divan Orchestra concert at the Waldbühne

In total, 44 activities undertaken across 26 meeting days.

The Churchill Experience: Barenboim-Said Fundación, Day 1

It's 10 o'clock in the morning and I'm crouched on a mat patterned with zoo animals and dusty shoe-prints, surrounded by kids volleying Spanish at me. The only English in the room comes from the young girl sitting next to me, who is singing 'Happy birthday' on repeat (the only English she knows). I'm here at the invitation of Seville's Barenboim-Said Fundación, whom I contacted in my quest to learn more about the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded and directed by one of the world's most famous conductors, Maestro Daniel Barenboim, and his friend and ally, philosopher Edward Said.

Earlier this morning, Joseph Thapa, Coordinator of Music Education Projects for the Fundación, met me near my hotel for coffee, before we taxied to Asociación Entre Amigos for our 9.30 meeting. Joseph tells me that from my hotel to the other side of the railway tracks is really another world: the Polígono Sur, Seville's most disadvantaged area, into which the *gitanos* (Romani) were pushed during gentrification of the city centre, and which is now also home to many migrant communities.

Entre Amigos runs out of a small, bright office in the heart of Polígono Sur. At 9.30am there are already two women in the waiting area, here for any one of a number of services offered: family support, job support, health advice, education. The Director greets me in the way I learn pretty fast is standard for Seville - this is a two-kiss country, important to know - and even though I don't speak Spanish, I feel welcome.

Together, we walk across to the school. Even within this short distance, I can see both the area's difficulties, evident in the piles of rubbish, broken glass in the gutters, and dilapidated apartment blocks, as well as the work locals are doing to raise their community's reputation, reflected in the vibrant street art encouraging recycling, the trees in blossom from the dusty verges, the high school's rainbow facade.

The school's already buzzing with kids of all ages, just wrapping up their morning meeting about this year's theme for summer camp - health. Music pumps from outdoor speakers and kids young and old dance off their morning energy before the high schoolers pile into buses for an excursion, and the little kids scatter into classrooms. Throughout all, teams of young volunteers and teachers in forest green T-shirts keep up both the energy and the control.

I meet Vicente López Romero, the music teacher provided by the Barenboim-Said Fundación. He's a tall, slightly frazzled-looking man who transforms into a bundle of mischievous energy when faced with a handful of small kids. His English is better than my Spanish but it's clear I'll mostly be learning by mime and absorption.

I do have enough Spanish to understand that we'll be covering three classes each day: three, four, and five-year-olds. This is way younger than I've ever worked with (I'm used to starting around eight). Each class has 6-8 kids and an Entre Amigos teacher, who works with them all day. The kids also get breakfast and lunch, and a dinner pack to take home to their families.

The first class is the four-year-olds. I'm fascinated by Vicente's teaching method. It's like nothing I've ever seen before. He's Dalcroze-trained, but despite his little green book of over eighty self-composed children's songs, most of what he does in class is in direct response to something the kids say or do. The class rolls out like a theme and variations: a melody becomes a dance, then a game with percussion, into musical hide-and-seek, all centred on the kids learning to identify

different musical patterns — rhythms, melodies, cadences, timbres. I pretend to be a kid and learn along with them.

Vicente gives me a look as we swap classes to the three-year-olds. Language barriers notwithstanding, we understand each other well enough for me to wish him luck. The class is entirely little boys; some seem troubled. One in particular is clingy, quiet and prone to tears, which the Entre Amigos teacher handles with love. In fact, all these young women show great joy and care in their work, tying up shoelaces, wiping snotty noses, and assisting without pause in the structured mayhem.

Vicente teaches the small boys with sensitivity. In one exercise, he brings each child up to the keyboard, playing with them one-by-one to establish a tempo and rhythm. Then we all play together, trying to copy Vicente's rhythms and dynamics, marked by dramatic changes in his endless supply of facial expressions.

Vicente and I walk away confident that at least one message got through - the kids had a perfect grasp of 'forte' (loud)! Yet the moment that remained with me was Vicente taking out a tiny sopranino recorder and piping a brief tune, just a few seconds long, creating a moment of total quiet and focus among the normally rambunctious kids.

The last class is the five-year-olds. We walk in to see a poster declaring brightly, if a little unsteadily, 'The music has arrived!' Each child has contributed their name and a separate drawing, including one fetching study of Vicente entirely in green and red pencil.

This class is immediately more focussed, the kids following the rhythm and dynamics of Vicente's keyboard playing, before he teaches them a melody. Four different percussion instruments represent each phrase. Each child takes a turn tapping out the tune's rhythm on the four instruments, changing instruments each phrase. When one child struggles to remember which instrument to hit next, Vicente instructs us to assist by hiding the instruments behind our backs until it is their turn to be played, immediately involving both 'soloist' and 'audience'. And the tiny kid's face lighting up as instruments pop out from behind our backs for her to whack is worth the plane fare from Australia.

Above all, the intense concentration and fascination a few of the kids show towards music deeply affects me. Even aged three, the rhythmic abilities and listening skills of some kids in each class show they are not just captivated, but capable. I don't know anything about these kids, but I've worked across enough areas and countries to know that love of music and musical ability does not see class or situation - even if, in most circumstances, musical education depends on both those factors, often heavily. Where will all these capable, curious, but so very under-resourced kids end up?



Santa Fe Opera & the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council: A Case Study in Classical Music & First Nations Engagement

I chose to go to the Santa Fe Opera because it's the longest-running program of engagement with First Nations communities by a classical music organisation that I've found. I hoped both the opera staff and the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council would be prepared to provide frank and fearless advice on what worked for them, and what didn't.

I am very mindful that no two First Nations cultures or communities are the same, and the case study below should not be seen as being reductive when considered in an Australian art-making context. The key message is, to find out what works for the people you seek to engage — ask.

Spend genuine time.

And if anyone takes the time give you an answer, listen.

No one is obliged to like or to value your artform, so it's worth thinking about the difference between sharing (marked by reciprocity and curiosity) and arts evangelism. My experience at Santa Fe also highlighted the importance, and key elements, of a genuine welcome.

The Pueblo Opera Program

John Crosby founded Santa Fe Opera (SFO) in 1956. The first theatre was famously completely open-air. The opera house now boasts a unique set-up: a full roof, stage and pit, and a 2,234-seat theatre with a back wall but no side walls, and only sliding flats along the back of the stage. This allows the sunset and weather to play starring roles in every production, with the audience treated to radiant views of the mesa behind.

Santa Fe Opera stands on Tesuque land.

In 1973, the Pueblo Opera Program was founded. SFO's first Director of Engagement, Andrea Fellows Fineberg, recalled that initially most community engagement projects were run by the Guilds, chapters of SFO volunteers located in neighbouring areas. The Pueblo Opera Program (POP) began largely as free opera tickets for Pueblo youth, managed by volunteers, and with Connie Tsosie Gaussoin as liaison to all the Pueblos and tribal councils. The program started with the eight northern pueblos closest to the opera: Tesuque, Santa Clara, Nambe, Picuris, Pojoaque, Ohkay, Taos, and San Ildefonso.

When Connie stepped down, an Advisory Council began, via an open call-out to anyone who wanted to be involved. At this point the relationship began to be more reciprocal, with SFO asking for input from the Advisory Council, and both sides working to develop more of a sense of community outside the opera season.¹

Pueblo Opera Cultural Council (POCC) member and SFO board member Marita Swazo Hinds also noted POP was founded in part as an acknowledgment of the opera being on the Pueblo people's lands.² Current Director of Engagement, Charles Gamble, concurred, seeing POP as "clear acknowledgement of that fact that these are native lands - we're an occupying entity".³

I raised the question of, 'why opera?' Why are Native Americans willing to engage with a European artform in this way, especially one which often battles with its status as an elite and expensive pursuit? Both Marita, from her perspective on the POCC, and Andrea from her perspective working with the Pueblo Native Americans, pointed out that many Pueblo people view the experience as a cultural exchange, a chance for Pueblo youth to learn something about Western culture, presented on their doorstep. This perspective — that a Pueblo Native American attending an opera is doing so to be educated about Western culture, not by it — is a gentle but humbling refutation of colonialist assumptions in First Nations engagement. Andrea felt that this curiosity about getting to know one another is the basis of true cultural exchange, rather than cultural tourism.⁴

Currently, POP Youth Nights begin with SFO providing buses to bring young people from the surrounding Pueblos. They are served a buffet dinner, curated in consultation with the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council. SFO sometimes runs events beyond the Youth Nights, such as fashion shows.⁵

"This is generational. We've been doing this for a while. We're all very passionate about it. Our children have gone through the program ... we know that this is generational. It's been going on now for fifty-three years. So it's something we'll continue to work on and continue to do what we can to bridge that relationship with each other." — Marita Hinds

1. Fellows Fineberg, Interview with author, 1 July 2025

2. Hinds, Interview with author, 1 July 2025

3. Gamble & Owens, Interview with author, 23 June 2025

4. Hinds, Fellows Fineberg

5. Gamble & Owens

Doctor Atomic

In 2018, just over fifty kilometres from the Trinity test site at Los Alamos, Santa Fe Opera presented John Adams' opera *Doctor Atomic*. Peter Sellars, the opera's librettist, directed, and Yup'ik choreographer Emily Johnson was also engaged. I found that, no matter who I spoke to, all conversations about the Pueblo Opera Program came around to this memorable production. Everyone had their own *Doctor Atomic* story to tell.

Sellars hoped to involve both the local Pueblo people and Tularosa Basin Downwinders on-stage. For the Pueblo people, this included presenting a dance both before the opera and, ultimately, during it as well. Jordan Harvier, from Santa Clara Pueblo, explained Sellars wanted to show the resilience of the Pueblo people, that despite everything they had been through, they were still there, performing their dances the same as they had for many years. His wife, Mina Harvier, also a POCC member, and who remembers going to the opera as a child, elaborated on the message: "it doesn't matter what the chaos is [around us] - we're here to bring the balance".⁶

The Pueblo committee involved in consultation for *Doctor Atomic* (a pre-cursor to POCC) eventually settled on a corn dance, which had to be created completely anew for two reasons: although all local Pueblos have a corn dance, they vary in detail, and there are also cultural sensitivities around presenting sacred dances outside their context. Charles Gamble noted the corn dance brought together people from three different Pueblos: San Ildefonso, Santa Clara and Tesuque, and this opportunity for different Pueblos to work together on a dance was unusual.

Bringing Pueblo dancers together to create new work and feature on the main stage of the opera taught SFO staff a lot about First Nations engagement, some of which is outlined in the next two sections of this report. It also shifted things for the Pueblo dancers, many of whom had had a long history of involvement in the Pueblo Opera Program, from the first time they visited the opera as children. It made them aware of how much more there was to the opera than being audience, and galvanised the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council.



Jordan Harvier, Toni Herrera, Mina Harvier, myself & Melanie Penicka-Smith inside the Crosby Theatre

6. Harvier, Harvier, Herrera, Hinds, Roybal & Roybal, Interview with author, 24 June 2025

Advice on First Nations Engagement

Much of the advice offered by the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council was highly practical. While not everything will apply to every First Nations community, the recommendations below suggest, as a starting point, that arts organisations may need to jettison their standard models of communication and collaboration when seeking to partner with First Peoples. Our discussions also opened up interesting questions around the ethics of including First Nations communities in audience development strategies.⁷

- Open board/committee meetings with an acknowledgment (at Santa Fe it's a grounding statement, "to say we're here for a purpose, to do the work we need to do, and to do it with respect").⁸
- Start with the Elders (in Santa Fe, the equivalent is the Governor and/or a tribal council). Let them know what you want to do, and make sure nothing you're planning is disrespectful, or appropriating cultural content. The POCC shared a useful example with me: before starting work on *Doctor Atomic*, choreographer Emily Johnson asked Marita to organise a meeting with the Governor of Tesuque Pueblo, so she could explain what she was doing and gain his permission both to do the work, and to do it on Tesuque land.⁹ Dominik Morningdove pointed out that it's very hard to galvanise people in a particular Pueblo without the Governor's support.¹⁰
- Provide event information to communities in hard copy. Renee Roybal puts sign-up sheets at her seniors' centre. An added advantage of distributing hard copy information and sign-ups to community centres, schools and aged care is that you are physically present to take questions. A big question for SFO is "do we have to get gussied up"? (Answer: "only as much as you want to.")¹¹
- "Spread it to the edges", was Dominik's advice. A lot of things are word-of-mouth and if you don't know/talk to the 'right people', you might not hear, so distribute material as widely as possible.
- Ideally, create marketing collateral in both English and the local language.
- Speak directly to as many people as you can reach in an area, particularly elementary (primary) schools if you can. Bring singers if possible, who can sing an excerpt, so kids understand what they're going to see.¹²
- Be wary of sounding too evangelical, or presenting an assumption that folk will want to come to your event.
- Go as deeply into communities as you can. Send teaching artists — it doesn't have to be in classical music, it could be in other artforms. It could even be in behind-the-scenes work, e.g. stage management, set design etc.¹³
- Give small performances at schools, community centres, in aged care.
- Involve First Nations people at every level, including administration and technical services, not just as audience or artists.¹⁴

7. See the section 'The Ethics of Audience Engagement'. This should not be taken to imply that Santa Fe Opera's Pueblo Opera Program was established as an audience development strategy — it's clear to me this was not the case. Rather, after fifty years of working together, some of the experiences within Santa Fe Opera highlight the vital importance, and value, of genuine reciprocal relationships.

8. Marita Hinds in Harvier et al

9. Hinds & Martinez, Interview with the author, 28 June 2025

10. Morningdove, Dominik, Interview with the author, 4 July 2025

11. Harvier et al

12. Morningdove

13. Hinds. Also Lomeli, Interview with author, 26 June 2025

14. Lomeli

- Include a First Nations person on the board; make sure they don't feel like a token inclusion but are actively consulted and their offers taken seriously and graciously. Marita, who is also Director of Education at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, often has tour groups visit, including opera societies from interstate. She enjoys introducing herself to them as a Santa Fe Opera board member and seeing their surprise. It's a good surprise — Marita acknowledges that operas and their boards can be perceived as 'kind of stuffy'.
- Consider Diversity, Equity and Inclusion training. If you run it, ensure your stakeholders take it seriously. Teach cultural competency, and have it led by people from the relevant culture/s.¹⁵
- Have people in leadership positions with your organisation attend Indigenous cultural events, and not just as 'cultural tourists'. As Andrea Fellows Fineberg used this term, I asked her how to avoid being a cultural tourist. She suggested to stay curious, and have respect. Don't do anything you wouldn't do if you were invited into someone's home.
- Build relationships with a range of First Nations institutions, especially artistic organisations. Invite them in.¹⁶
- If you're working with First Nations artists, it's okay to establish the conventions of the art form. Respect for the project is important, as are boundaries and expectations. For example, Peter Sellars emphasised that being on time was essential to all performers coming together as a community. In Andrea's words: "We can't create a moment in time unless we all agree that time matters". When asking people to respect time, though, you need to do the same, by making sure you give them adequate time to arrive, to dress, and to prepare themselves.¹⁷

Rehearsal in the Crosby Theatre by day (below); curtain call by night (right)



15. Fellows Fineberg
 16. Hinds
 17. Fellows Fineberg

- Be mindful of schedules. Are you holding your event at a time when the First Nations folk you're inviting can attend? Consult before you set the date.
- If including First Nations content or performers, ensure the audience is seated and the performance is announced beforehand, with appropriate etiquette guidelines. This was a lesson from *Doctor Atomic*, where the corn dance first appeared as a prelude to the opera, and audience members weren't always aware or attentive.¹⁸
- If you invite First Nations people to an event, ensure they feel welcome. Claudene gave the example of the POCC attending a panel at the Opera America conference. Claudene felt the conference attendees didn't really engage with them, either at their presentation or as they moved around the event. She also commented that not all the technology was working properly for their presentation and they were on "at an odd time". We talked about the likelihood that many people at the conference were probably very keen to have a similar program in their own companies, yet they couldn't find a way to engage with Pueblo folk when they were right there. Claudene suggested a round table discussion, rather than a formal presentation, would have worked better.¹⁹

"I've been asked 'how do we get a Pueblo Opera Program? Like really, people have asked that clumsy of a question, and I generally have responded by saying that the Pueblo Opera Program is such a misnomer. It's really the Pueblo Opera Relationship. And so that's where the Council has helped shift people's understanding, because we can refer to the tenets and principals of the Council by way of explaining what does it mean to have a relationship with sovereign nations on land that was stolen? And so that now is really the core of the relationship - that it's Pueblo-driven, not opera driven.'" — Andrea Fellows Fineberg



- I was warned several times to beware of accidental appropriation, and that any consultation with local knowledge-holders should include repertoire and other artistic considerations. Claudene gave a surprising example of perceived appropriation: a performance of Janáček's *Cunning Little Vixen*. She said as soon as the performers came out on stage dressed in deer and fox costumes, the way they were moving and their outfits had all the Native Americans in the audience asking each other, "are they making fun of us?" There was much discussion at interval, with most people eventually coming to the consensus that what they were seeing was part of the opera, and not a representation of Pueblo people. *Vixen* is a classic, generally presented in animal costume, but nevertheless not presented frequently enough that most Santa Fe audience members would have seen it. It's an interesting example of potential conflicts that would likely never have crossed the minds of the opera's producers.²⁰

18. Gamble & Owens, Harvier et al

19. Hinds & Martinez

20. Hinds & Martinez

Extending a Welcome

Claudene's grandson Damien, fourteen years old and recently initiated, remembers that, as a child, he found his first opera "pretty interesting". Like many Pueblo Opera Program youth, Damien is the third generation of Claudene's family to attend Santa Fe Opera. We met at the preview dinner before Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*; he said he was slightly nervous about attending because he didn't know if he'd enjoy the singing. Claudene replied that it'd be fine for them to go at interval if he wasn't enjoying it. There's an acknowledgement on both sides — the opera's and the Pueblo audience — that not everybody who attends an opera will want to stay until the end, and that's okay.²¹

Andrea Fellows Fineberg, SFO's first Director of Community Engagement, expanded on this understanding in our interview. "Part of what I always liked about the Pueblo Opera Program is that it's a reciprocal relationship of hospitality and culture," she said. "Hospitality is critical - we're inviting people to our house - what does that mean? You take care of them, make them feel welcome." It's a good way of thinking about inviting newcomers to classical music: not just as inviting people to witness an artform, but as guests being welcomed into your space.

Practicalities here include:

- Do your own check - what is the space you're inviting people into? What did you need when you first went into that space yourself?
- Feed people. Your audience may have to commute a long way if they've come from remote communities, and operas can be long. That's a number of hours without food if you don't provide it, and no one wants to sit through a concert on an empty stomach.
- While SFO tends to provide sit-down buffet dinners for the Pueblo youth, a great tradition for regular opera goers is the 'tailgate picnic' — essentially, picnicking in the carpark. It requires good traffic management to ensure safety, but it's a very social, relaxed and cheap way to ensure the audience can eat before the show.
- If working together, offer water, food, and breaks at intervals appropriate to people who may not be used to your artform's schedule.
- Provide somewhere to sit/rest. Sofas are better than chairs; for an all-ages community engagement project, a plastic chair for three hours won't suit everyone.
- Provide backstage monitors so your performers get to see the show.
- Be responsive to what you hear around the traps, whether or not it's your responsibility, and make sure there are avenues for feedback.
- Don't make assumptions — and, importantly, this includes not micro-managing, worrying too much, or treating people too gingerly.
- Finally, Andrea said, "It's also not being 'done'. Not thinking everything's set. And also accepting not everything's going to be perfect."

21. Hinds & Martinez

‘And what could be next?’

This question formed the title of the 2023 documentary by Beverly R. Singer, celebrating fifty years of the Pueblo Opera Program. To my surprise, one thing the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council wants to be next is a cultural exchange to Australia, to Indigenous communities here, and to the Sydney Opera House.

“With Sydney, we see that big opera house, and it’s just like the Holy Grail,” Marita explained. What’s impressive to her about the Sydney Opera House is the building itself, but she also points out that while Santa Fe’s building is pretty impressive too, it’s the environment that really sets it apart.

Our opera house in Sydney might be more famous, but there’s much about Santa Fe Opera that’s utterly unique, and that also includes the presence of the POCC itself — something from which we in Australia could learn a lot, while the POCC is equally keen to meet Indigenous Australian communities and artists, many of whom have unique and groundbreaking practices of their own. And Marita is rightly proud of it.

The POCC is dedicated to continuing to build opportunities for Native American youth to work at all levels of the company. A Native American opera is also high on the agenda and is already in development. Young Keresan composer and SFO usher Dominik Morningdove told me, “I feel like opera would be one of the perfect avenues [for language reclamation] because the culture’s not just spoken — it’s in the things we wear, the way we greet and speak to each other... opera is the perfect avenue to incorporate everything it is to be Native American.”

Charles Gamble sees the future of opera as an artform lying in elevating “voices that aren’t part of the traditional canon”. Santa Fe Opera’s willingness to engage with the people to whose lands it owes most of its impact and uniqueness, coupled with the generous and engaged response from members of the surrounding Pueblo nations, has created, and is co-creating, something that shows opera’s potential to exceed one of its greatest contemporary questions: the artform’s capacity not just to survive, but thrive.

No one I spoke to knows of any other classical music company that has a fifty-year history of First Nations engagement. Regardless of what could be next, the collaborative achievement of Santa Fe Opera and the surrounding Pueblos is mightily impressive.



Mel Penicka-Smith, Marita Hinds & myself outside the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture (left); another New Mexico sunset from the Santa Fe Opera (top left)

The Churchill Experience: Barenboim-Said Fundación, Day 1 continued

My first class with Vicente at the school holiday camp complete, I get in a cab to the Barenboim-Said Fundación. The sun shines hot and bright, and the streets of the Polígono Sur are quiet.

I'm moved by what I've seen in the school. As I head to the taxi, I consider taking photos of the streets around me, the most immediate way to communicate Polígono Sur's reality. But I'm reluctant. For approximately fifty thousand people, this area is home, and likely the only home available to them. That they are getting on with life here deserves respect.

Neighbourhoods like Polígono Sur were constructed in most major Andalusian cities from the 1940s, and most parts of Europe have their own versions: neighbourhoods on the edge of town into which the underprivileged were channeled, developed in the 1940s but exploding in the 1970s, and from the looks of it, with no significant building investment since then. Fifty-year-old apartment blocks, with no maintenance evident and built cheaply to begin with, house an average of seven people per dwelling, quarantined from the city by a riverbed, a ring road and train tracks. The taxi may as well be Cinderella's carriage bearing me from Polígono Sur to Seville's extravagantly beautiful city centre. Through its window I see for the first time the city's cobbled streets, massive parks, countless facades in white, gold and terracotta, horse-drawn carriages, and iridescent tiles. The line between these two parts of Seville is the most profound culture shock I will experience on my travels.

The Fundación is in a tiny cobbled square which also houses the public entry to the Real Alcázar, the tenth century palace still used by the Spanish royal family, and which has a view of the Giralda, Seville Cathedral's astonishingly tall bell-tower. My taxi pulls into the square through a massive stone arch, does a brief circuit of the central orange grove, and lets me out, still covered in the dust of the school yard, in this fairytale arena. I push the Barenboim Said Fundación's doorbell.

Joseph greets me. He's a thoughtful and intense person, wholly dedicated to excellence and access in music education, which is his focus at the Fundación. Every stage of musical life is somehow covered with a Fundación offering managed by Joseph or one of his colleagues: early music projects like the one I've been attending; a school of 135 kids where everyone receives a violin or cello and daily lessons; an orchestral academy; public workshops; teacher training; professional performance opportunities such as those provided by the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, and more. There are over two thousand participants a year.

Joseph tells me about an interview he once saw with conductor Gustavo Dudamel, being asked why he encouraged so many people to learn an instrument when there weren't enough professional orchestras for them all to go to. Dudamel's response: "I'm sorry, but I don't understand the question." A perfect answer to a misguided question suggesting that the only value in learning music was its earning potential. The fact that the Fundación, in its beautiful setting, already has a well-developed relationship with Polígono Sur, a place of limited opportunity, shows why Dudamel's words have stayed with Joseph.

We go upstairs to meet Muriel Páez Rasmussen, the Fundación's Managing Director. Within five minutes, it's clear she's the kind of person that could probably do a pretty good job of running the world, if only somebody gave her a crack at it. But instead she's here, and, like Joseph, has been for twenty years — she says she still feels lucky. Both she and Joseph talk at length about the experience of working with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and Maestro Daniel Barenboim.

While an orchestra of Arab and Israeli musicians has always had its tensions, things are even more difficult in 2025, both for the musicians within the orchestra, and those working to resource it. I ask about the music school in Ramallah and Muriel says it's all still running; most of the teachers the Barenboim-Said foundations provide now have such long ties there, they've chosen to stay. She and Joseph advise me to watch 'Knowledge is the Beginning', which documents the lead-up to the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra's 2005 performance in Ramallah.

Joseph sends me the link and Mel and I watch the documentary in our apartment (just over the tracks from Polígono Sur). I cry three times.

While I know not everyone agrees with Barenboim's stance on Israeli-Palestinian relations, especially in Israel, one thing in the documentary is very clear: Barenboim appears painfully aware that speaking his mind will come at a personal cost. He's frightened. At one point, he even says so.

I don't think the fear is for his person. It's for knowing that speaking what he feels to be true will not win him unreserved adulation. And as a conductor at the height of his powers, who's had his share of standing ovations, he could be forgiven for resting on his laurels, rather than making art that is clearly challenging him and others. A journalist rather scathingly asks him what it is he expects to achieve by performing a solo piano recital in Palestine - world peace? Barenboim's answer is very simple.

'One the one hand, I came to stretch a hand, and play a little music, because that's what I can do,' says the Maestro. 'On the other hand, I came to learn.'

Back to school for me tomorrow, in the Polígono Sur.





Six Key Takeaways

Certain themes surprised me by emerging consistently across most of the interviews I conducted, no matter the size, type, or aims of the organisation. They now represent to me the key elements to bear in mind for a successful socially-engaged classical music project.

“If you’ll pardon the profanity, I’ve always considered our subtitle, ‘musicians who give a f**k’, and it’s really heartening to see how many there are that do.” —Ian Vlahovic

The Best Recruitment Strategy is a Compelling Vision

While some themes emerged gradually across many interviews, there were two that most of my interviewees emphasise were key to success: a compelling vision, and excellence. Katherine Kaplan, Director of Finance and Operations at the Daniel Barenboim Stiftung, was unsurprised to hear I had no trouble filling places for performances at the Chris O’Brien Lifehouse. She believes that musical excellence and a convincing story attract both artists and financial support.²²

Allison Drovairos, Executive Director of the Refugee Orchestra Project (ROP), has found the same thing: “I’ve found personally that people really aren’t reaching out to us to perform with our orchestra unless they feel really compelled to support the mission of the organisation.” Interestingly, both for ROP and for New-York-based PROTESTRA, this self-vetting process usually resulted in an excellent ensemble, with little need for auditions. Both ensembles require players to be supportive of the organisations’ missions. For ROP, while it’s not a requirement for performers to have a refugee background, around 95% are either refugees themselves or first generation refugees.²³

A strong vision and mission has allowed PROTESTRA to run on minimal funding. Chair of the Board and Co-Founder Ian Vlahović recalled the orchestra’s beginnings: “Michelle & I both used to be really active in social media, typing out long, righteously justified rants about everything that goes on, and one day she just gave me a call, and was like, what if we just stopped creating these rants, and did something a little more tangible? ... Would it be just crazy? And the answer is yes, and it continues to be yes”, but Ian believes music has the additional emotional impact that a social media rant lacks, with more chance of shifting the dial.²⁴

Ian observed that the younger generation appears very motivated in terms of activism. PROTESTRA membership skews towards musicians in their 20s and 30s, although the full age range is from 18-70. He believes the changing nature of protest has inspired people to join them, especially the feeling that forms of protest that used to be effective no longer work. He also pointed out many musicians, himself included, wouldn’t want to risk an injury at a street protest that might affect their performance career: “When the rules go out the window, you gotta change up the strategy. I don’t know exactly what that is, but we’re trying one way here... We’re trying to redefine what it means to be an activist and how you can be an activist - it’s not all about the frontline. We’re just trying to create those opportunities for people.”

22. Kaplan, Interview with the author, 6 August 2025

23. Rofrano, Interview with the Author, 2 July 2025; Drovairos, Interview with the Author, 7 July 2025

24. Vlahović, Interview with the Author, 11 July 2025

The Primacy of Excellence

What constitutes excellence is regarded as a vexed question in the Australian socially-engaged art community. Artists often speak of their work or themselves being disregarded by major institutions because they make ‘community’ work. I thought it was just the classical music scene, but this de-valuing of socially-engaged work is felt across all artistic sectors. Yet excellence, whether it is institutionally recognised or not, is critical to socially-engaged artists both here and abroad.

“Perfection creates admiration”, David Lomelí said, in our discussion of his pursuit of the highest artistic standards. It’s not just aesthetic; an organisation’s sustainability can depend on it. Both David and Katherine Kaplan stressed that excellence is needed to attract funding and lucrative paid performance opportunities.²⁵

Katherine explained that, as a Daniel Barenboim Stiftung project, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra is critical to the both the foundation’s visibility and viability. The Divan’s professional performance fees are an important source of income for the Stiftung, and a high level of excellence is required to ensure high level donor support, high value ticket sales, contracts with major festivals, and the like.

For Joseph Thapa at Seville’s Barenboim-Said Fundación, the assumption that because a group is “just kids”, or not professionals, or not musicians, and therefore can’t be good, is anathema. In community-engaged work, excellence becomes a way of building self-esteem, collective energy, and public profile. He believes that the potential for excellence should never be separated from community-engaged work: if you start with low expectations, you’ll get a second-rate result that nobody feels good about.²⁶

“For Barenboim and in Dalcroze methodology, even if you’re doing things for the community, and even if your musicianship is for the sake of something different than excellence, it’s very difficult — and it’s also not right — not to want the best that you can for the excellence of the music. It must be there.” — Joseph Thapa

Joseph also pointed out that music is a “way of life, a way of thinking”, or in Barenboim’s words, “the orchestra is a kind of microcosm”, which teaches musicians much about human relationships, lessons which can then be translated into the real world. Andrea Fellows Fineberg would agree. Her shorthand for reductive music education programs is “‘Three Little Pigs’ set to ‘The Marriage of Figaro’”: she argued that such ‘dumbed-down’ versions of opera aren’t representative of the quality presented on the main stage. Out of a desire to remedy this, and in conjunction with six other companies, she helped develop the Opera For All Voices program, commissioning new works more reflective of under-represented voices.

Excellence also helps attract players. Both the Refugee Project Orchestra and PROTESTRA leverage their conductors’ skills and networks to create strong ensembles. Allison Drovairos was inspired to join ROP due in part to “a strong pull” towards the work of founder Lidiya Yankovskaya. Michelle Rofrano from PROTESTRA agrees:

25. Lomelí, Kaplan

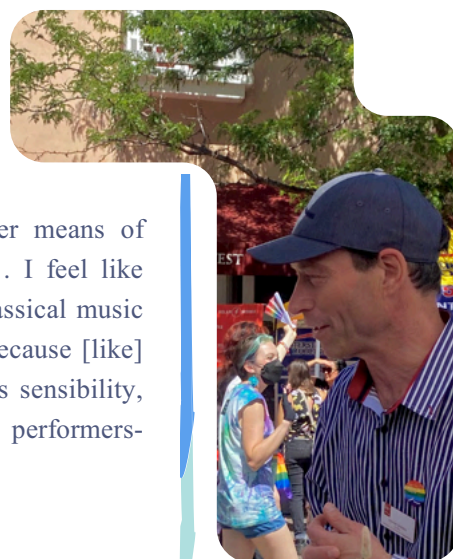
26. Thapa, Interview with the author, 24 July 2025

“Would I love to spend all of my time responding to everything, every single day? Yes. Can I? No. And it also benefits PROTESTRA if I get to work other places too. I’m a better musician and I get to know more people.” — Michelle Rofrano

Michelle also pointed out that playing great repertoire helps (e.g. Mahler’s *Symphony No. 5*), as it’s a nice change from subbing on Broadway or music teaching. Ian did note one disadvantage to excellence, or the perception of it, however: people often tell PROTESTRA they create a professional and polished impression, which can lead to incorrect assumptions around the level of funding the group receives.

Doing, Not Showing

“Our orientation is as much as possible about looking for other means of engagement aside from ‘you are the audience, this is the music’. I feel like that’s important. I didn’t grow up in a household with opera or classical music and in some ways I find that, for me in this position, it’s useful, because [like] many of the folks that I’m working with, I come with an initiate’s sensibility, you know — is this really for me? So I find looking beyond performers-audience is really important.” — Charles Gamble



Coupling a strong vision with opportunities for participation emerged as a common strategy for each organisation’s success in engaging a diverse audience with their message.

At the Barenboim-Said Fundación, Joseph Thapa spoke extensively about the value of giving children direct experience, such as the Polígono Sur project. He pointed out that while it’s quite possible to make music in isolation, without any external connection or relationships, one of music’s great benefits is its ability to be relational: to build community, to teach listening. He says sometimes this transfer from understanding music individually to relationally occurs serendipitously, but sometimes it needs help. At the Barenboim-Said Akademie in Berlin, musicians attend lectures by people with lived experience of different aspects of the conflict in the Middle East, and are also tutored in philosophy, which complements the relationships and understandings they build at the Akademie.²⁷ A key theme that emerged from Boston City Hall’s Artists in Residence program was that participants often felt better able to advocate for themselves, either individually or collectively.²⁸

Amy Owens from Santa Fe Opera put it like this: “In community engagement, opera is not the point, it’s the vehicle”. The coming-together of many artforms — song, dance, set design, lighting, theatre — offers multiple entry points to a newcomer. She also pointed out that when young opera singers are asked why they’re pursuing opera, they generally talk about having been in a production

27. Kaplan

28. Sherman Cultural Strategies, *How Artists Change the City: Boston Artists-in-Residence Program Year Three Program Evaluation*, p. 19

as their inspiration: “for me, opera is more interesting because I do it, not just because I watch it. And I think that’s the key - when you’re just handing out free tickets, that is not the most interesting part about a choral event or a musical event.”

I witnessed an excellent example of engagement at the Pueblo Opera Program Youth Night where, between dinner and the show, young people were treated to a short presentation called ‘3, 2, 1, Opera!’ with Oliver Prezant. A pre-concert talk with a difference, Oliver commandeered the skills of the SFO costume department to fit out enough children to represent each major role in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Not skimping on the overture, which he had the whole hall singing (great for recognition later on), Oliver whirled through the plot. The costumed kids modelled the characters with varying degrees of success and hilarity. Dr Bartolo’s performance was Oscar-worthy, but his scene was stolen when Susannah and Figaro refused to hold hands, holding sleeve cuffs instead. I was impressed that Oliver taught the kids to sing key phrases from arias in Italian (“it’s like Spanish, right?” he encouraged them). The whole event was funny, smart, and most importantly, full of active, intelligent participation.

One of the main focuses in Community Engagement at SFO is in providing pipelines into opera for children. There’s the Opera Storytellers program, while a high school apprentice-style program — Young Voices — offers completely free singing training, from which students often progress to major in music at university level. In 2023, a Young Voices graduate was selected into the highly competitive SFO Apprentice Program for the first time.²⁹

Many opera companies in the USA have a classroom-based opera program as their principal means of connection with elementary-aged (primary) students. Andrea told me this program was originally relegated to after school, which was problematic in terms of accessibility for some students. She connected with the Kennedy Centre, “in some ways the mothership of arts integration”, to assist in creating ALTO (Active Learning Through Opera), a program that relates opera to an aspect of the school curriculum, bringing the SFO program back into the classroom. Amy shared Charles’ description of the program as “making learning more sticky”; combining academic learning with art (and often, therefore, emotion) helps retention. And, as she said, “it’s hard to argue with sticky academic learning” (either from a board and funding perspective, or from a teaching perspective).

Joseph Thapa would agree; number one for him is that kids can have fun learning music. They’re playing and learning: “oh my god, this is a good deal! They’re learning and they’re playing, and they’re having a good time, and this is the best thing you could wish for a child, they’re learning in a healthy way.”

Beyond improving retention in learning, and understanding of artforms, there are health benefits in the ‘doing’, too. This is the essence of the Foundation for Art & Healing, which uses a public health model to create evidence-based creative exercises to assist in addressing current social and health issues. The Foundation’s current focus is the loneliness epidemic. Executive Director Chris Doucette told me, “If you engage in creative expression, it helps improve your mental and physical health, and it helps you reduce loneliness and foster connection.” He agrees that “observing art does have its place and its role in public health”, but creating art has a far deeper impact.³⁰

29. Gamble & Owens

30. Doucette, Interview with the author, 10 July 2025

The Foundation currently delivers its work via three channels: Project UnLonely Films, CreativityHub Online, and Workshops. Each simple, sixty-minute workshop has three main components: mindfulness, creative expression, and social and emotional learning. The mindfulness component is usually a simple breathing exercise, which allows people to begin by connecting with themselves. The creative exercise, which follows a simple prompt such as 'remember something kind someone did for you', uses a variety of artforms, including drawing, poetry, or movement. Abstraction and simplicity is encouraged — lines, squiggles, dots, whatever. Chris was very clear that the Foundation is not teaching people how to do art: "we facilitate an art-making experience, just people expressing themselves. We have a phrase at the Foundation for Art & Healing - no Picassos!"

The final component is social and emotional learning; workshop participants pair up and share their art. The whole process only takes an hour, and in every workshop, each person has a chance to create, to share, and to listen.



Puccini's *La Bohème*
in rehearsal in the
Crosby Theatre

The foyer of the Barenboim-Said
Fundación; the Hans Christian
Anderson quote translates as
'where words fail, music speaks'.





The Ethics of Audience Engagement

One theme emerged which I was not expecting: audience engagement, a core struggle for any performing arts organisation. We all need audience. Introducing new people to classical music is how we survive, even if we're not dependent on ticket sales. We spend a lot of energy creating pathways which we hope will lead new bums to our seats. This is where my understanding of audience engagement took an unexpected turn: too often, we forget that a newcomer we've invited to the artform, especially a young person, is blissfully unaware as to which box we're hoping they'll tick.

It may not be the one that says 'audience'.

On my second-last day at Santa Fe Opera, I met young Pueblo composer Dominik Morningdove. From San Felipe Pueblo and now in his mid-twenties, Dominik's first encounter with opera was in 2017, when he was about sixteen. From that point, he started to consider writing opera. He told me the experience "pushed me towards going to college for vocal performance". He undertook a Bachelor's degree at Fort Lewis College, which has a Native American tuition waiver. Nevertheless, he estimated his six years of college cost him about US\$6,000 a year in living expenses, with the first year, when he was required to live in college, especially tough. And here's the rub: he studied Voice because Composition wasn't offered at Fort Lewis, the college that was accessible to him.

Nevertheless, during college Dominik started writing for orchestra and also gained experience conducting ensembles. Since then, he has been paying someone to review his scores, whenever he can afford it, but he is hamstrung by not knowing exactly to whom he should talk to get his works on stage. It's clear he needs a pathway, firstly for his own development and then career progression.³¹

Marita believes that these pathways into SFO are coming. She gave the example of Native Americans having worked backstage, and SFO engaging Hopi artist Dan Nahminga in marketing collateral design. There are always scholarships for the various opera camps; Marita said the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council makes sure of that. And Mina told me, "If you do something for kids, do something for adults too", giving the example of SFO's Pueblo Opera Program 'Date Night': opera and dinner for couples (or pairs of friends) who don't get to engage with the opera via their kids.³²

Across Germany, Spain and Palestine, Barenboim-Said foundation offerings are marked by the creation of robust pathways. In Seville, every stage of musical life is somehow covered with a Fundación offering. When I told Joseph what I'd observed among the kids in Polígono Sur, that some have a quick ear, he told me one project he is considering would connect students from the Fundación's Orchestral Academy with individual students in Polígono Sur for mentoring. Again, here is evidence of thinking about pathways, which is part of what makes the Barenboim-Said institutions so impressive. A project that begins as a stand-alone highlights a need, and the next step is to find strategically viable pathways to shift the dial. Santa Fe Opera highlighted to me that true engagement takes time; Seville demonstrated that the necessary follow-through shouldn't just be horizontal — a continuous timeline — but move diagonally upwards: continuous and evolving.

31. Morningdove

32. Harvier et al.

Katherine Kaplan at the Daniel Barenboim Stiftung in Berlin was clear: as they are dealing in a Western artform, there is a responsibility to create pathways for Eastern musicians who are interested. In the case of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Israel has well-established pathways for classical musicians, from early education to professional career opportunities. Many of the Arab nations, especially Palestine, don't, creating the need for the Centre in Ramallah, and then the Barenboim-Said Akademie. Yamen Saadi, recently appointed concertmaster of Vienna State Opera and Vienna Philharmonic at age 25, followed this path; he was born in Nazareth, studied at the Barenboim-Said Conservatory in Nazareth, and then the Barenboim-Said Akademie in Berlin. At the Akademie, efforts are made to ensure that, while training is predominantly in Western classical music, Eastern musical traditions are also represented and embraced. This is especially evident in the Pierre Boulez Saal programming, and among the Akademie composers, some of whom choose to work with their traditional instruments and influences. Akademie concerts also include Arabic music nights.³³

Not every pathway can lead to a professional performance career, but may nevertheless offer surprising benefits. David Lomeli gave the example of Vincerò Academy, which provided mentoring and performance opportunities for opera singers from diverse backgrounds. In reality, the Academy may not create an automatic pathway for every singer to have an international career - but their engagement will boost their earning capacity as teachers and performers in their own communities. He pointed out that even being able to charge an extra US\$10-\$20 an hour as a result of the prestige and development the program offered will have a significant cumulative effect over an artist's life.

This returns us to the Santa Fe Opera, and Dominik Morningdove. Here is a young Pueblo person, product of the Pueblo Opera Program, who has fallen passionately in love with the artform and dedicated his life to it ever since. It's clear that, in terms of creating engagement, the Pueblo Opera Program is working. But there are also gaps.

Some of these are being filled: there are opportunities for young singers in the Young Voices program, and for technical crew in the Apprentices program. But there's nothing for Dominik. Yet. Whether or not he ever writes a Native American opera, his example raises awareness of the barriers still in place.

Is Santa Fe Opera responsible for creating pathways for every single individual who expresses an interest? I don't believe so. There are always individual situations that exceed the capacity of any organisation to solve. Yet I believe that, if we're not ready for the person who falls in love with the idea of doing, not viewing, then we can't truly say we believe our artform is for everyone.



We must recognise that when we invite people to fall in love with what we love, it's not just as the audience members we desperately need to fund our own passionate affairs. It must potentially be as our future colleagues and our future competition, onstage, backstage, around the world. And I also believe, if we issue that invitation, the ethical response is for us to be prepared to assist in resourcing that journey.

33. Kaplan
Image: Dominik Morningdove

The Artist is not a Hero

Another key question in socially-engaged art is the perceived ability of art — and the artist — to save or aid traumatised people or communities. Or, as Chris Doucette put it, “How do you get involved without getting involved too deep, or deeper than the facilitator is qualified handle?”

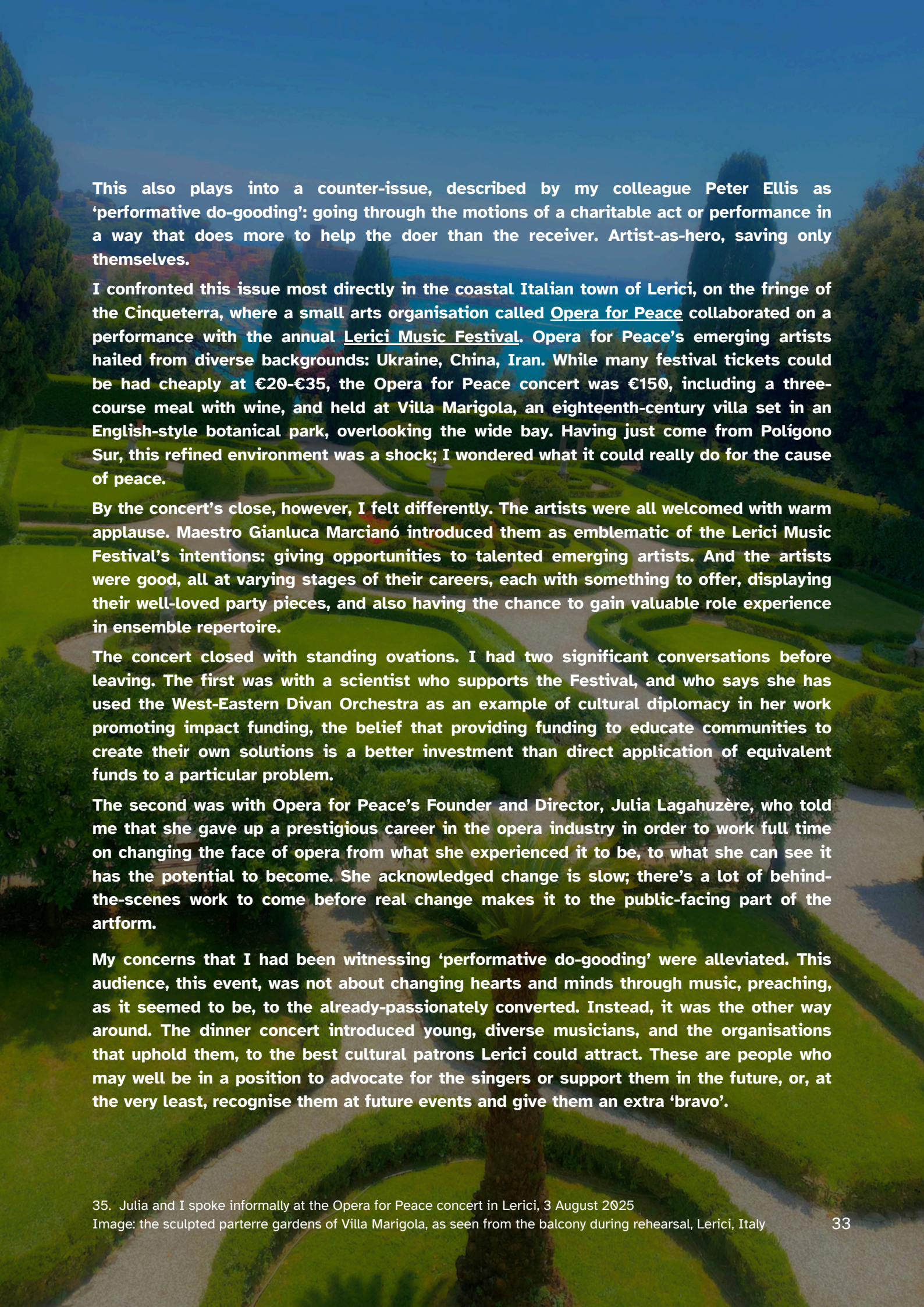
The Foundation for Art and Healing’s response is clear: “What we tell people is that Number 1, we are not a research institution. We are not doing ‘capital R’ Research. Number 2, our programs are not therapy, and they’re not promoted as therapy. Number 3, we refer to our programs as experiential — more like ‘emotional stabilisation workshops’. We’re asking people to feel their feelings and express them, but with prompts that really limit the depths to which they reveal themselves.”

Karin Goodfellow at Boston City Hall agreed that clarifying boundaries is important. A review of the City’s Artists-In-Residence (AIR) program noted one of the things artists identified would be helpful was ‘training in trauma-informed practice’. This points to the thorny issue of artists often running the risk of doubling as quasi-therapists when working with communities, or being perceived as there to ‘fix’ problems that are really outside their remit. Karin pointed out the same perceptions can affect City Hall workers too, saying they’re “still just other people”, who also may not be qualified to deal with that kind of work: “The city itself is not an endless bucket of skill-sets and capacity, that I think sometimes externally people want it to be.” Negotiating between people’s (including artists’) expectations of what the City can and can’t achieve sounds like part of the work of this program.

Karin suggested the next step is probably creating resources to assist artists in knowing how to direct people with problems. Artists need to understand they can’t fix things: “they need to be able to have that clarity, and offer that clarity to other people, and the same is true of City staff”. She has considered hiring additional support. Yet she also pointed out that program participants need to be aware that while City Hall can bring on people to consult and assist, that’s not what the AIR program is there to do.

34. Goodfellow, Interview with the author, 8 July 2025
Image: Karin Goodfellow & I at Boston City Hall,
overlooking the city skyline





This also plays into a counter-issue, described by my colleague Peter Ellis as ‘performative do-gooding’: going through the motions of a charitable act or performance in a way that does more to help the doer than the receiver. Artist-as-hero, saving only themselves.

I confronted this issue most directly in the coastal Italian town of Lerici, on the fringe of the Cinquetera, where a small arts organisation called Opera for Peace collaborated on a performance with the annual Lerici Music Festival. Opera for Peace’s emerging artists hailed from diverse backgrounds: Ukraine, China, Iran. While many festival tickets could be had cheaply at €20-€35, the Opera for Peace concert was €150, including a three-course meal with wine, and held at Villa Marigola, an eighteenth-century villa set in an English-style botanical park, overlooking the wide bay. Having just come from Polígono Sur, this refined environment was a shock; I wondered what it could really do for the cause of peace.

By the concert’s close, however, I felt differently. The artists were all welcomed with warm applause. Maestro Gianluca Marcianó introduced them as emblematic of the Lerici Music Festival’s intentions: giving opportunities to talented emerging artists. And the artists were good, all at varying stages of their careers, each with something to offer, displaying their well-loved party pieces, and also having the chance to gain valuable role experience in ensemble repertoire.

The concert closed with standing ovations. I had two significant conversations before leaving. The first was with a scientist who supports the Festival, and who says she has used the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra as an example of cultural diplomacy in her work promoting impact funding, the belief that providing funding to educate communities to create their own solutions is a better investment than direct application of equivalent funds to a particular problem.

The second was with Opera for Peace’s Founder and Director, Julia Lagahuzère, who told me that she gave up a prestigious career in the opera industry in order to work full time on changing the face of opera from what she experienced it to be, to what she can see it has the potential to become. She acknowledged change is slow; there’s a lot of behind-the-scenes work to come before real change makes it to the public-facing part of the artform.

My concerns that I had been witnessing ‘performative do-gooding’ were alleviated. This audience, this event, was not about changing hearts and minds through music, preaching, as it seemed to be, to the already-passionately converted. Instead, it was the other way around. The dinner concert introduced young, diverse musicians, and the organisations that uphold them, to the best cultural patrons Lerici could attract. These are people who may well be in a position to advocate for the singers or support them in the future, or, at the very least, recognise them at future events and give them an extra ‘bravo’.

35. Julia and I spoke informally at the Opera for Peace concert in Lerici, 3 August 2025

Image: the sculpted parterre gardens of Villa Marigola, as seen from the balcony during rehearsal, Lerici, Italy

Personal Connection

"The Divan is more than music. It is a commitment to what connects us, rather than what divides us." — Katherine Kaplan³⁶

Personal connection is the basis of the Foundation for Art & Healing's Project UnLonely, who sees it as critical not just for mental health, but for physical health. As discussed above, the Foundation's creative interventions prioritise social and emotional learning: each person has a chance to create, to share and to listen. Chris Doucette described it as "deceptively simple": people can express themselves within sixty minutes, without overstepping how much it might be safe for them to share. "Everyone can have a shared experience that feels safe and enjoyable, and yet expressive and authentic."

It's clear to me how an exercise like this might help someone feel a bit safer taking the next step, choosing to share further with someone more qualified to help them through their issues. Chris agreed: "You can't solve loneliness in one workshop. You can't solve anyone's emotional and mental challenges. But what we did find is that by participating in a workshop like this, we found a 50% increase in those participants joining something else — either on campus or outside the college or university. It helps inspire people to say, I joined this thing I didn't know about, and I had a really great experience, and now I feel safe to go join something else, or seek out support somewhere else. So that's a 50% increase in engagement with something else, which is exactly what we want, because the more we connect, the more we're able to get our needs met."

Connection begets connection, and has a health outcome, too.

The success of Karin Goodfellow's AIR program is due in part to leveraging the commitment to their community of two seemingly-disparate groups: Boston City Hall staff members, and local artists. As the [program website](#) says:

"The artists bring artistic expertise and experience with creative approaches. Our City partners provide subject matter expertise and experience with existing City systems. Artists learn more about government, while City departments learn about creative problem solving. They co-design projects that test new approaches to City policies and processes. They explore how City initiatives impact the experience of all Bostonians. Projects are often responsive to the social and political context of that year."

When I asked Karin about community engagement in AIR, she pointed out that both City Hall staff and the artists were themselves community members, so separate community engagement wasn't integral to the program. Some artists did incorporate it, though, and it worked best when expanding on existing relationships already established by either the artist or the staff member. Trying to forge a new relationship within the context of the project usually wasn't so successful; participants only have a year to complete their work.

36. Katherine Kaplan's LinkedIn profile, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/katherine-kaplan-ll-m-b456b82/>, accessed 23 October 2025

One exception to this was artist Karen Young and her Taiko drumming project. She worked with 'Older and Bolder', a women's group from a local community centre. While Young's relationship with the group was new and she worked hard to develop it, the women in the group already had relationships with each other, and with people at the community centre where they met. During their work together, it emerged the women's group had concerns around a dangerous crosswalk, and worked with Young and the City's transport department to create an event that drew attention to the issue.

"The thinking, at least for myself, as it evolved, has really been that there are community members who want to do this utilitarian work," Karin explained. "They're already interested in using their work to achieve a purpose. People who work in City Hall, who are running things here, many have really good intentions and want to improve their community. They want creative solutions; they may not be able to come up with them or implement them themselves all the time, but they have knowledge of the systems within here. Then I'd be out in the arts community and see exhibitions about the work that we're doing at City Hall, but there's no connection. So the hope was really that there are artists who wanted to be activists, and those are the ones who are good for the program."

PROTESTRA leverages personal connection for marketing. It sounds cynical, but it's actually empathetic. Focussed as the orchestra is on current issues of social justice, the team is very aware of their potential to alienate stakeholders over any one issue. Their performance of Mahler's fifth symphony to raise funds for the victims of war in Gaza was a big example; they spent several weeks ensuring the messaging was both strong enough, and also not seen as blaming particular people. Michelle emphasised they always have a lot of eyes on their messaging, to make sure they capture genuine perspectives: "Before we launch every concert, we joke about the 'V' word - verbiage. We're like, we're workshopping the verbiage for this concert. And we're exhausted by the time we announce every concert, because it really goes through so many rounds of editing, especially our team members who might be more personally connected to the issue."

PROTESTRA always tries to get multiple people's perspectives, recognising that learning about the issue is not the same as lived experience. They do get feedback about their messaging, both throughout and after a campaign, which they treat as a learning experience that their message didn't work for or hit home with a particular person or group. Nevertheless, as Michelle says:



A botanical participant in Kate Farrington's *Monument to the Trees of the Boston Public Garden*, Boston, USA

"We don't shy away from issues even if they don't directly affect us, because I think it's important for all of us to care about issues of human rights. We all should care, because that's how you fix it." — Michelle Rofrano

I asked a similar question of Katherine Kaplan regarding the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra: whether individual musicians' personal political stances, as expressed on social media, ever impact donor decisions. She is straightforward: they're all adults and are free to make their own decisions. External stakeholders are also aware of the blended nature of the organisation they're supporting, otherwise they wouldn't sign up to support it. Crucially, both the Divan and the Akademie create spaces for musicians to have face to face political conversations; talking through things in person seems to defuse the likelihood of toxic debate taking place on social media.

This all sounds very sensible, but it's also a stark reminder that nothing can replace direct human connection and conversation, no matter how hard we might try. Bringing everyone together and creating these opportunities obviously takes time, care, thought, and resources: the physical space and scheduling required, the feedback loops available to consider the best times and ways, the personnel (the orchestra has its own committee which is key to consultation), the consideration of ground rules (there's only one), and the repetition of these opportunities in different forums: the empathy cafe (where someone is always available to talk through issues with anyone who needs it), bringing in guest speakers followed by face-to-face discussions, the orchestra having dinner together every night (I'm reminded of Andrea Fellows-Walters' emphasis on care and feeding). There's also trust: the orchestra managers are in regular phone contact with all orchestral musicians between projects, maintaining the connection and also the organisational awareness of where everyone is at.

Unconditional listening is a core tenet of the Divan and the Akademie. Katherine explains their main principal: you can say what you need to say, but you have to listen to what the other says. The listening must also be unconditional - there can be no "I'll listen to you only if you don't say..." or "only if you'll accept that..."

In summary, it seems to me that one of the key (unstated) elements of the Daniel Barenboim Stiftung's success is working to build, maintain and leverage strong personal connections. Maestro's personal connections help secure resources (both human and non-human) but also brings people who are able and inspired to realise his dreams; the Divan orchestra managers will call every musician when needed (not just send a bulk email); Stiftung staff, Katherine included, go on tour and talk into the small hours with the musicians; space is provided both at the university and on Divan tours for musicians to meet and talk through issues face to face. That organisational staff approach their artists from a basis of trust and connection seems to result in equal trust and respect.

The foyer of the Barenboim-Said Akademie. Said's quote translates as 'Humanism is the only, or rather the last, line of defense that we have.'



The Churchill Experience: Barenboim-Said Fundación, Day 9

“Remember Dudamel?” Joseph says to me as we walk to a cafe. “I don’t understand the question.” I’ve just explained to him the divide that artists often encounter in Australia — from the public, from funding bodies, from agents, from each other — between what counts as ‘excellence’ (‘high art’) and ‘community engagement’. The word ‘community’ often spells the death-knell for any artistic project to be taken seriously as a piece of art worthy of professional representation, as my colleagues and I on Cad Factory projects have often discussed. It bothers me. Firstly, because quite frankly I think it’s wrong, and secondly, because it can be an excuse to marginalise or under-resource work or artists seen as worthy, but not good. Joseph finds it wrong-headed, too.

Joseph reminds me that on Monday, I told him and Muriel that it was the excellence of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra’s Beethoven recording that made me pay attention to them, and want to find out what was behind the organisation. The orchestra isn’t a salaried institution, but it was nevertheless their standard that caught my attention in the first place.

“The point is not to have the best orchestra compared to Berliner Philharmoniker,” Joseph says. “The point is to make the best music with [your musicians] — the best they can do.” He points out that even if an ensemble only gets 70% of the way to excellence, if everyone has put in 150%, “you get a lot of things: you get craftsmanship, making music, excellence within their own possibility, and, on the other side, a lot of self-esteem, and the possibility to grow within their project.”

Aiming for excellence is a pre-requisite for Barenboim-Said projects. What excellence looks like for three-year-olds is an open question, but part of the answer is focussing on ensuring excellent teaching. I’ve been watching that all week with Vicente.

In Australia, Maestro Daniel Barenboim is mostly known for his work with the world’s top symphony orchestras. With this in mind, I ask why three-year-old kids are part of the Barenboim-Said Fundación’s work. Joseph responds, “Why not? Barenboim always said that music education should start as early as possible. There’s also a neuroscientific justification: from 0-7, 8, 9, is the biggest development in the brains of children. Not only cognitive, but social changes and emotional changes.” Music can influence all these things, as well as being another kind of language, so if you want music to assist the brain at its most plastic, it has to be as early as possible.

The Fundación’s teachers aren’t selected for any particular training. Their teachers may have backgrounds in Dalcroze like Vicente, or Orff, Kodaly and others. They’re selected for their skill and their ability to understand the children in each class. And the kids adore Vicente. I tell Joseph about my second day at school in Polígono Sur. I arrived first. A minute later, there’s a suspiciously Vicente-shaped tower of child in the courtyard. One child envelopes his torso, and one clings to each of his legs. He is so adored, he is regularly mobbed by kids.

He finds ways to connect with each one, subtly shifting tasks to ensure each child can have small wins. Some kids demonstrate really impressive aural skills, but when Vicente and I talk afterwards, he says that the children’s personal circumstances — lack of sleep, disrupted home life, all the disadvantages that go along with poverty — means learning rarely sticks. He types something into Google translate for me: “Teaching here is like building a sandcastle on the beach.”

I type back: “At least kids have fun building sandcastles.”

Maybe it’s not a lot in the grand scheme of each child’s life, but it’s something. It’s a possibility. For some, it could be a beginning. It’s certainly respite — and isn’t that also important?

The Practicalities

Funding

“There are definitely more economical ways to be an activist than put on a classical music concert.” — Ian Vlahovic

A Grassroots Funding Model: PROTESTRA

- The PROTESTRA team acknowledges classical music is expensive. There is almost no government funding in the USA, so the orchestra is funded entirely by grassroots donations from donors who believe in what they do. Occasionally they receive a corporate match of about US\$2,000 - a significant amount for them.³⁷
- On average, PROTESTRA concerts cost US\$20-25k each, which includes venue hire and paying musicians, as they seek to find a middle ground between volunteering (the standard charity benefit model) and paying full wage.
- Almost the entirety of this amount is fundraised; they don't even count ticket sales as income when budgeting a concert.
- Ideally, the full amount needs to be found before the concert is announced. Sometimes the PROTESTRA team get 60% of the way there and commit anyway, as they've discovered people are more likely to donate to a project that's running and has momentum than one that's just an idea.³⁸
- The Executive Director is now the only paid administrative position. Their stipend increases in brackets aligned with funds raised, as a regressive percentage (e.g. a flat stipend to begin; when the first bracket is reached, the Executive Director receives a percentage of that, then a lesser percentage for the second bracket, and so on — essentially structured like the tax system). PROTESTRA is now at the point where the Executive Director really needs to be a full-time position and will recruit when they're in a position to fund it in this way.

37. Rofrano

38. Vlahović

A Professional Project Orchestra: The Refugee Orchestra Project

- Initially, the Refugee Project Orchestra had to create its own performance opportunities: a large concert in Boston, small donor events in NYC and Boston. Often the funding came out of Founder and Artistic Director Lidiya Yankovskaya's pocket, because it was her passion project.
- Great PR coverage and project successes led to being able to move to what Allison Drovairos calls a 'gig model': organisations complete a Google form or email regarding their event; ROP reserves dates, negotiates on budget, and signs contracts. The negotiated fee must cover administration, musicians, PR, music rental fees, and all other on-costs. The revenue per concert is small, if anything, because the money per gig is almost entirely funding the gig itself.
- Allison estimated 98% of ROP funding is sourced in this way.
- The nature of the organisations means securing philanthropic and grant funding hard. Grants are often tied to projects that deliver outcomes for a specific area (local government or state). Philanthropy takes work, which ROP hasn't had the capacity or need to pursue, due to the success of the gig model.

Maestro Lidiya Yankovskaya
conducts the Refugee Orchestra
Project (photo: Scott Bump)



Excellence and Funding

David Lomelí had this to say: “There’s a human sensation that we have in all the years of studying psychology of audiences — people want to be associated with success. So if you are the number one, it’s easier to fundraise than if you’re number twenty-three.” Also: “within your organisation, make it a culture to push the buck to the highest calibre”. You might be surprised which artists say yes to working with you, if the timing is right for them.

Ethics and Funding

On the issue of whether funding wouldn't be better spent going directly to communities in need, instead of making music, Amy Owens shared her personal views: “Funding this doesn't mean taking away from that. And also spending more time with individual donors and what their priorities and motivations are helps me understand that when you're doing good work it doesn't mean that 'oh, this money could be better used elsewhere'. That's not really the right question, actually. I ask it to myself all the time, but when you're doing mission-based work, especially if it's non-profit, and people are donating for that cause, there's a certain trust you have to have in their motivations, and you're now a steward over money that's for a vision. Take the 'could this be used in a better way' out of the equation, and just be a good steward for the vision that you've already advocated for. That helps me.”

Sustainability

Chris Doucette at the Foundation for Art and Healing pointed out to me that it's very easy to create a project that will help a small group of people; spending a million dollars on fifty people is highly likely to get great results, but it may not scale. Chris likes the public health model as a way to ensure what they're doing is replicable: "I think that if we want to make change in this world, we have to make it reach as many people as possible."

We had a small laugh about classical music being not very scaleable. Chris said part of the Foundation's philosophy to not teach 'Capital-A Art' is exactly because it isn't so scaleable: "You can't learn to play a violin in sixty minutes. But what you can do in sixty minutes is hum. What you can do is get everyone to hum together." He gave an example of doing exactly this at the Foundation's recent twentieth anniversary event. Chris said it felt "ethereal" and "was such a connecting and warm experience. Sure a violin is more sophisticated, but that moment gave everyone what they needed in just a brief period of time."³⁹

Other Thoughts on Funding Models

- Many organisations start by using volunteers and then transition to paid work. Claudene Martinez said for SFO's *Doctor Atomic*, Pueblo corn dancers were paid a stipend to perform after a period of volunteer work while the show was in development.⁴⁰
- Karin Goodfellow at Boston City Hall often secures philanthropic grants to pilot projects which, once successful, can be funded more long-term by the City.
- Katherine Kaplan recommended diversifying financing, ideally having three or four pillars, not disproportionately dependent on any one pillar.
- Katherine also warned that working in war zones requires a very robust budget. For example, flying people in and out of war zones can often require last minute cancellations and rebookings; the budget must be able to sustain this. The musicians performing in their own countries is a critical part of Barenboim's vision, however, so, within the bounds of safety, it's a non-negotiable for the Divan. This is a useful note to me if I plan to take ensembles into disaster recovery areas; I must be prepared not to go, or to re-book, and be aware of any financial consequences.

A staggering 22,000 people attend the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra's concert with Maestro Daniel Barenboim at Berlin's Waldbühne - including at least two familiar Australians



39. Doucette

40. Hinds & Martinez

Operational Models

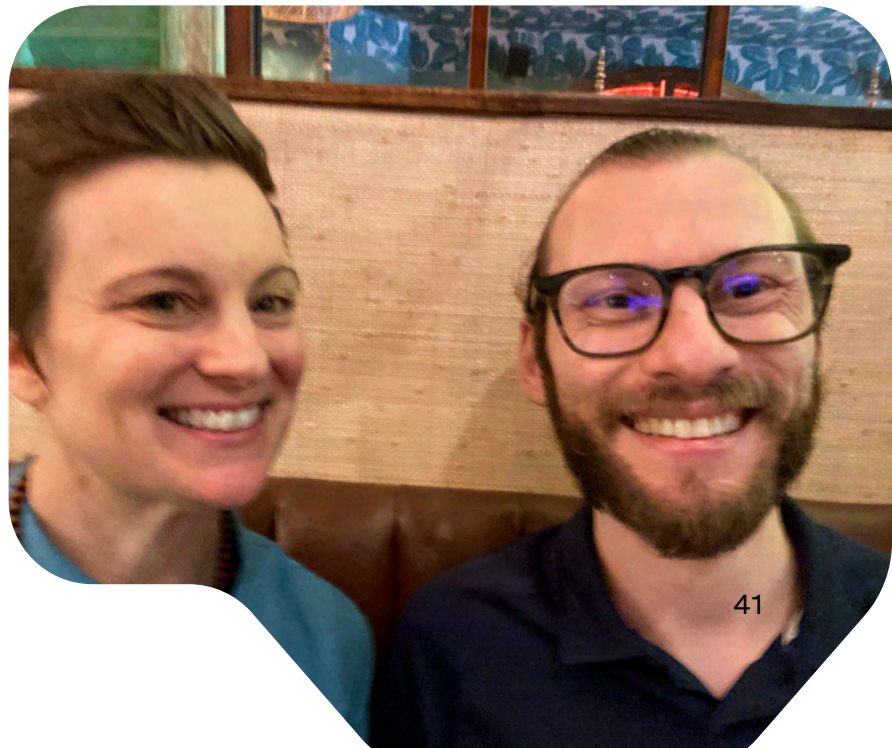
On Volunteering

- David Lomelí believes in volunteering as an artist — “I think that is part of the work”— and it feeds the soul. Artists should also have the right to say no.
- Using volunteering can be a good way to start, even if you want to move to a paid model. For the Refugee Orchestra Project, all staff started as entirely volunteer-based. Allison estimated this is still true 95% of the time. Their next step was awarding the Executive Director a one-year stipend (mostly personally funded by founder Lidiya Yankovskaya). The stipend ceased by mutual agreement as the ongoing income stream was small, and the orchestra moved to the gig model described below.

“It’s always been about finding like-minded people who have a resource to offer, whether it’s the space, or their time.” —Ian Vlahovic

- PROTESTRA, the most grassroots-funded organisation I interviewed, has found a middle ground between volunteering and professional rates, by paying musicians a small honorarium. The lump sum is in acknowledgment of costs like parking, meals, missing lessons and so on, but at approximately US\$150, it’s far below the hourly rate for musicians. Musicians are sent the honorarium amount up front, along with relevant concert information: dates, repertoire, the concert’s mission. At this point they are also offered the option to donate their fee directly to the charity being supported, in the musician’s name. Michelle estimates about one third of the musicians choose to donate their fee. She says the honorarium does go a long way as a gesture.
- Having organisers volunteer their time helps musicians accept a lower wage or volunteering. PROTESTRA organisers donate their time. Both the conductors for PROTESTRA, Michelle Rofrano, and the Refugee Orchestra Project, Lidiya Yankovskaya, donate their time.
- Giving performers buy-in also helps. For PROTESTRA, musicians can pitch causes (and have done so).
- One downside of using volunteering is that it results in an inconsistent season, built around players’ and organisers’ availabilities.⁴¹

Ian Vlahović & I
finish our very long
lunch, New York City



Starting with No Budget

“It’s kind of like trying to build a plane in midair, but that’s the fun of it.”
— Ian Vlahovic

With no name recognition and no charitable status, PROTESTRA Co-Founders Michelle Rofrano and Ian Vlahović knew they had both no money, and no chance of getting any, for their first concert. Here’s how they pulled it off:

- A strong mission: the first Trump administration’s ‘Muslim Ban’ was in force. The concert raised money for non-profits working in immigration support.
- Michelle and Ian donated their time, working non-stop in a local cafe for two weeks, mostly recruiting alumni from their college days.
- Flexibility for musicians if they have paying gigs conflicting with one rehearsal. As the orchestra develops, there has been no pressure for any member who is unable to do a particular gig.
- Several living composers donated their music minus licensing fees. A local minister donated the church they used as a performance venue.
- A portion of fundraised money and ticket sales fees went to the nominated charity (after costs were covered). This is still the model PROTESTRA uses today.
- About one third of all PROTESTRA musicians for any one gig donate their fee.
- The first concert included 50-60 people in the first orchestra, 150 in the audience, and raised about US\$3,000 for the various NGOs. The concert didn’t cost anything (except the time, as Ian pointed out, “and probably a couple of hundred bucks each in coffee”).

Paying by the Gig

- Having started with staff as volunteers, the Refugee Orchestra Project now compensates staff on a per-project basis. Allison Drovairos gets paid for the concerts she administers, as do other key staff. Their fees go into the project budgets which determine the fee negotiated with collaborating (fee-paying) organisations who book the orchestra.
- Musicians are always paid, and “well, given our budgetary restrictions”, in Allison’s opinion. Travel is also compensated. The fee varies depending on the project’s length, number of rehearsals, musician’s involvement and so on.

Flexible Ensemble Models

- For the Refugee Orchestra Project, contracting organisations often request a small ensemble. ROP goes to musicians in the relevant area, contracts them, and leaves it to the musicians to determine how many rehearsals they need prior to the concert, based on the repertoire. If rehearsal space rental is required, ROP pays for it. For example, the Harvard Art Museum booked a trio. ROP rented a rehearsal space, and paid for three rehearsals which the musicians organised, as well as the performance.

- The number of rehearsals varies depending on the nature of the performance. Large concerts with full orchestra, chorus and soloists usually require one or two general rehearsals, a dress rehearsal, and the performance.
- ROP can get away with a condensed rehearsal time as their musicians are generally professionals.

Building An Ensemble

- For the Refugee Orchestra Project, conductor Lidiya Yankovskaya draws on her own professional network.
- When the orchestra is engaged by an organisation from a city without pre-existing networks (e.g. London), ROP connects with a local professional who has their own network, and requests their assistance in contracting musicians.
- For cities such as Chicago, Washington DC, and Boston, they're usually engaging members of the orchestra they know well, including knowledge of what players have performed before. That makes it easier to gauge how many rehearsals are needed. ROP will often program music they know the musicians know, in order to streamline rehearsals.
- Now they're more well-known, ROP has musicians reach out to them and ask to play next time ROP is in their area. ROP takes feedback to make sure new members have contributed well (and, to date, they all have). PROTESTRA has a similar process, recruiting through Michelle's networks, accepting musicians who reach out to them, perhaps reviewing a video recording and CV if required.

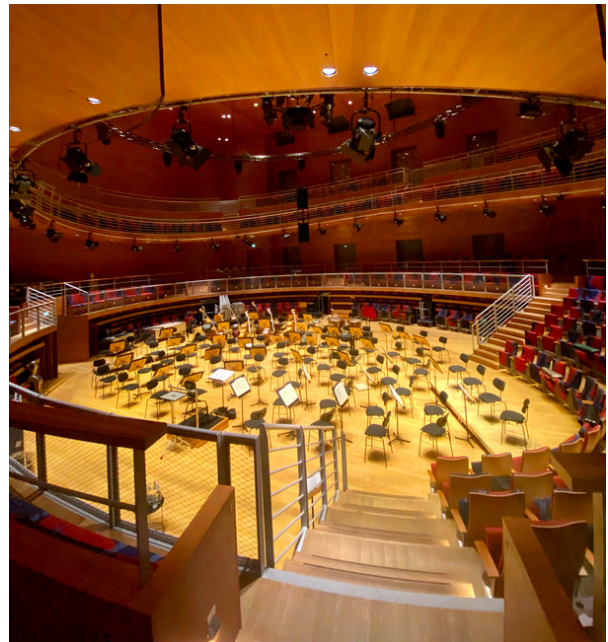
How to Grow

- Chris Doucette described the Foundation for Art and Healing as using a public health model with three key components:
 - a. Is it effective?
 - b. Is it scalable?
 - c. Is it sustainable?
- From both a business perspective and a public health perspective, the emphasis on scalability requires that programs can be replicated by others easily and affordably. Facilitators require no specific licensure or certification. For example, Chris explained that the Foundation's 'Campus Colours and Connection' workshop can be facilitated by a member of faculty or a student; there's no special training except a one-hour 'how to facilitate the workshop' session, which can be conducted online. This makes the work sustainable; it's easy to recruit facilitators, and to roll out the program nationwide.
- The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra is the longest-running individual project I researched. It's now under the umbrella of the Daniel Barenboim Stiftung, where a transition period is in place. Katherine Kaplan explained that, over the past three years, and looking ahead to the next five, the Stiftung has been focussed on sustainability: "Where do we want to be next?" Part of the Stiftung's success is in regarding itself as an entrepreneurship, not a charity, although it accepts donations.

- As part of the current transitional process, Katherine described the Stiftung as consolidating existing projects and strengthening connections between them, rather than starting new ones. This will improve both visibility and sustainability.

“What we did before was like pearls on a necklace - each pearl is one step to the next. Now it’s like a molecule, with all the project interconnecting.” —
Katherine Kaplan

- Katherine recommended ensuring I have ‘sensible’ legal entities. Consider what needs to have a separate legal entity, or a separate board, and what can be shared. Having foundations abroad has allowed for international fundraising and government support: there’s a UK trust for fundraising, a foundation in New York run by Mariam Said, as well as the Seville Fundación. Katherine also gave an example from the Stiftung: there’s one chancellor who has legal and financial oversight for both the Akademie and the Pierre Boulez Saal, but each has separate artistic directorship. All Stiftung projects, including the Divan orchestra and the Berlin school project, run under the same entity.



- In case I ever develop a foundation that supports different artists and projects, Katherine and I discussed how to ensure the various projects don’t cannibalise each other’s donors, resources, and so on. She gave the example of having one Director of Development who oversees the Stiftung, the Akademie and the Saal, and that within those projects, there’s an agreement that staff won’t approach new donors without ensuring no one else has also planned an approach to the same potential donor. Communication is key (and it helps that everyone is in the same building).
- Finally, Katherine described Maestro Barenboim as surrounding himself with people who have the capability to make his dreams happen. While there’s no doubt she’s right, what I see goes beyond that. The staff across the various foundations aren’t just capable of the practicalities. They are creative, seeing the next links needed in the ecosystem they are collectively growing. And they are personally committed.

Governance

- A number of interviewees recommended I begin with an advisory council of trusted collaborators, and postpone forming a formal board until it's needed.
- PROTESTRA's board started with musicians, then targeted audience members who were regular attendees. Initially, board membership was voluntary; now it's currently 'bring or buy' for a fee of US\$3,000.
- Keep involvement minimal but not meaningless. For example, at PROTESTRA, the board approves each concert's budget and concept. The Executive Director is ex-officio, but also the tiebreaker.
- The Refugee Orchestra Project's board was formed through Lidiya's industry contacts. I noted it has a higher proportion of artists and arts workers than most boards in Australia, which tend to consist of professionals with backgrounds in finance, legal, and corporate organisations. Allison told me that this structure is also common in the USA, but the ROP board is mostly an advisory board, not relied on for voting. They may move to a more formal governance structure in the future but haven't needed to so far.
- The ROP board doesn't have any formal roles. Allison noted they've struggled over the past year to fully engage their board. At quarterly meetings, the board is updated on projects and financials, and provides advice on anything management might need. Allison is considering whether giving the board more specific roles will engage them more. That said, because the 'gig model' has been so successful, there's not so much the organisation currently needs from the board, although Allison acknowledged that, after ten years, now is probably the right time to consider giving the board more structure.
- Chris Doucette from the Foundation for Art and Healing and I discussed whether I should consider having someone in public health or with a mental health background on my board, to give us the best chance of making sure we're aligning with best practice in mental health, and not overstepping our boundaries as an arts organisation.
- PROTESTRA's volunteer administrative team includes team leads in marketing, social media, website, donor development, and production. 'Rank and file' volunteers come and go, but team leads are recruited from more stable and regular participants.
- At the Santa Fe Opera, Andrea always tried to establish/articulate the following at the top of a project or collaboration: What do you personally/your organisation need to get out of this? What's at stake for you? If it wasn't a relationship that would progress to a formal MOU, she'd hold a roundtable discussion to establish this.
- Consider the power of being connected with a recognisable and respected figure. Katherine Kaplan described to me how the Akademie and Saal came to have its own building. A previous storage site of the Berlin Staatsoper that was "essentially derelict", Maestro Barenboim convinced the city to give it to the Stiftung on a 99-year peppercorn lease (the Stiftung paid for all renovations).

"You do need someone with a certain weight and persuasiveness, vision and genius. He's incredibly important to us, as a symbol and as a person." — Katherine Kaplan

Survival

Burnout often happens around available resources not matching the passion and desire. Both Ian and Michelle would love PROTESTRA to be their fulltime jobs — Ian says he's never had a job as meaningful. Katherine Kaplan talked about the joy she gets from touring with musicians, staying up until 2am speaking with them, and developing a genuine connection. Nevertheless, she said, boundaries still need to be maintained for the organisation to remain sustainable. Not every request will be possible to honour. Both Katherine and the musicians refer to the orchestra as a 'family', but she points out it's also a job, and a practical eye to sustainability (both human and financial) must be kept.

Discussions with Karin Goodfellow at Boston City Hall reminded me of one thing I know to be true: you should always be prepared to give more personal attention to people involved in a project than you might expect on commencement. Nevertheless, if I had the opportunity to ask most people how they sustained the work, almost all of them replied that it was the work that sustained them.

"I want to believe that me, speaking up for an issue I care about, and you, and the musicians in the orchestra, will have some kind of ripple effect, even if it just gives someone else courage and they're the ones who have a bigger effect, I want to believe it matters. Because if we don't try, then nothing will get better." —Michelle Rofrano

"There are projects that I do because my personal artistry has to be fed, there are the ones that I do to pay my bills, and there are certain things like my very limited moment with the Pueblo Opera Program, with the Hispanic initiatives we have here, the women conductors in Dallas, the Vincero Academy online, for me to see the change in the world ... if I have crossed paths with you and I've left you in a better position to succeed towards your dream, it does feed me." — David Lomeli

"I've always had something in my private life that I feel helps to give back - that's just been a really important part of my life, so when this organisation was created, and I had really good friends that were a part of it, and I loved the mission, I just felt 'why not? Let's put another thing on my plate.'" — Allison Drovairos



"A lot of it honestly is the opportunity to continue to reconnect with my own work as an artist, a theatre artist ... the team that I get to work with - the people I get to work with, I find inspiring ... to be part of a small, curious team from a range of backgrounds, I love that. I love that collaborative place, to be vulnerable and take risks together, I find that very sustaining. That feels good." — Charles Gamble

The Churchill Experience: Barenboim Said Fundación, Day 10

You wouldn't think that I, a classical conductor, would have had to travel halfway around the world to be reminded about creativity — but here I am.

I've spent the past nine days shadowing Vicente López Romero, one of the Barenboim-Said Fundación's early music teachers, as he takes classes of three-to-five-year-olds on summer camp in Polígono Sur, Seville's most socio-economically depressed area.

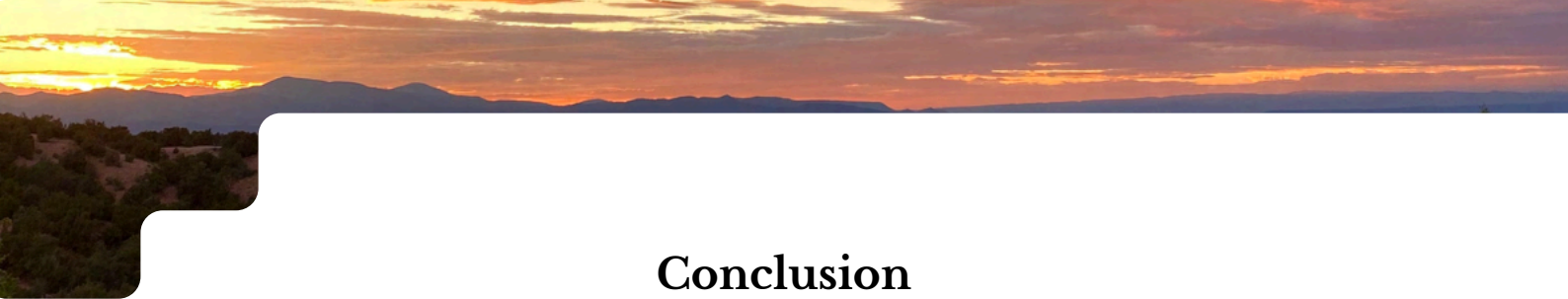
Vicente is a master improviser. He riffs on the first thing a kid says, does, sings to him, building a whole lesson from a single gesture or sound — a ball, a mosquito, a few hummed notes. The spontaneously-occurring motif is woven into songs, dances, stories, rhythmic games, all united in their focus on aural skills — getting the kids to recognise timbres, harmonies, melodies, rhythms, and react accordingly.

On our last day, pairs of claves became motorbikes, light sabres, horses, Pinocchio's nose, houses, all because one kid started playing with his claves like they were building blocks, and before you could blink, Vicente had woven it into the dance.

Vicente says that creative stimuli are at the heart of learning for all ages, but especially little kids. What impresses me most, though, is the freedom this quite brilliant creative play requires, coupled with being present with, and responsive to, your musical partners — even if they're only three.

I'm already wondering how I can weave more of this creativity into my own rehearsals. What would it look like for a classical conductor to be creative in rehearsal with an ensemble? Conducting is already a creative act — bringing the score together with a group of people is a new process each time — but how could Vicente's radical creativity look in an adult context?





Conclusion

The chief question of my Churchill Fellowship was whether it seemed possible for me to establish a socially-engaged project orchestra in Australia. The answer is yes. The myriad examples I found showed artists with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of resources have all found different ways to do what I now hope to do.

The second question was how? My research illustrated three key areas of response: the practicalities (such as operational models and funding), the big thinking required for engaging people in such projects, and the awareness of some unexpected outcomes and considerations.

The practicalities were extremely well covered, with detail on everything from suggested board structure to different financial models for engaging musicians. I also benefited from uncompromising and honest conversations around burn-out, and maintaining clear boundaries between providing an artistic offering that may result in a therapeutic outcome, and verging into attempting to offer arts therapy.

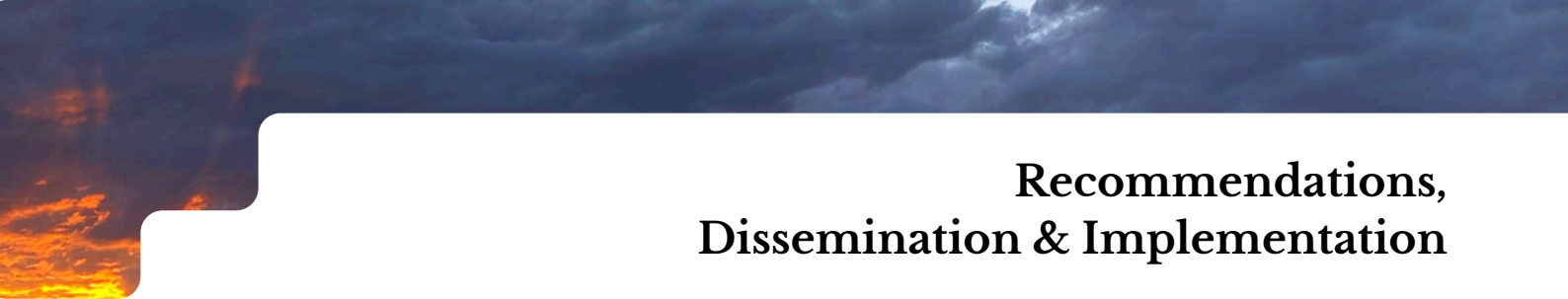
Yet before turning to operational details, all of my interviewees were most passionate about, and interested in, the importance of clear thinking around key engagement issues:

- a compelling vision
- prioritising excellence
- engaging people as participants, not just as audience
- starting from a position of, and diligently maintaining, personal connection.

My case study in First Nations engagement at the Santa Fe Opera showed all these aspects are part of genuine and respectful collaborations, as well as highlighting the need for classical music organisations to consider the appropriateness of their methods of welcoming newcomers to the artform, and what responsibilities organisations may have regarding the creation of pathways into both their organisations and artforms.

In fact, pathways became the crux of an unexpected research outcome: the ethics of engagement. When seeking to engage with people not already connected with your artform, especially due to lack of opportunity or resourcing, I believe honest questions must be asked about whether we seek only new audience, or whether our welcome extends to assisting people who feel a genuine desire to find their way in more deeply. Or to put it bluntly: having opened the door, at what point do we have the right to shut it?

There is no clear answer for me here yet. I don't believe every arts organisation can provide personal resourcing to every newcomer who might fall for an artform, but find themselves under-resourced to pursue it. Yet my research showed me that perhaps we should all be aware of the implied power structure — the yes to this, but no to that — which underpins encouraging new audience when we don't have the resources also to offer deeper levels of participation. Ultimately answering this question lies outside the scope of my project, but it did make me aware of our collective need always to assist in creating complete pathways, and to be aware that people I may consider as audience may see themselves as — or hope to become — something quite different.



Recommendations, Dissemination & Implementation

My desire in undertaking this research was always to set up an organisation of my own. My aim was to extend the occasional performances undertaken at the Chris O'Brien Lifehouse into other places: more hospitals, then aged care, then regional communities undergoing stress (drought, low tourist numbers), and finally, perhaps into areas affected by natural disaster, at whichever point a concert combining local and travelling musicians could assist in disaster recovery, whether by boosting tourism numbers, providing creative and community engagement for local musicians and audience, or simply by providing an hour of respite at a difficult time.

I visited PROTESTRA, a grassroots and volunteer-reliant organisation, as an example of a model with which reflects how I'm most likely to begin (albeit I don't intend my project to be a fundraising orchestra). I visited the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and the two Barenboim-Said foundations as an example of what we might possibly become, should we continue for twenty-five years or more: an umbrella organisation through which a range of complementary artistic projects can be run, benefiting all kinds of Australians, and as many parts of Australia as possible.

Having already run four of what unwittingly proved to be pilot projects at the Chris O'Brien Lifehouse pre-Fellowship, I am now planning the following steps to build my as-yet unnamed project:

- I've had further discussion with the Chris O'Brien Lifehouse and we'll hold another pop-up Messiah in December 2026;
- I've discussed the possibility of performances at Westmead Children's Hospital with Churchill Fellow Jonathan Brand;
- In pursuit of excellence, I've resigned my position with River City Voices and will spend the next two years travelling both internationally and locally to finesse my conducting technique and rehearsal experience. The more experienced I am, the more comfortable musicians will be to work with me, especially in difficult situations, and the better the job we can do together. This includes a return trip to the Barenboim-Said Fundación in Seville to learn more about working with children of all ages;
- To get practical experience in working in the kinds of spaces the orchestra might inhabit, I intend to join a threshold choir, to better understand singing in a palliative care context, and volunteer for BlazeAid, to get firsthand experience of their model bringing volunteers into areas affected by natural disaster without taking local resources. It's been a while since I've done any fencing but I'm up for the challenge.

In 2026 specifically, I will:

- hold an open meeting of musicians and interested stakeholders to discuss my findings and my plans, and seek feedback on which operational models and projects people are most interested in supporting;
- Develop an advisory committee of trusted collaborators from a range of fields, including arts, health, business, and regional networks;
- Begin developing a repertoire of suitable music that can work for a range of abilities, audiences, and ensemble sizes and types.

I already have speaking invitations for some local groups and will continue to offer presentations for anyone interested. Hopefully by December 2026, the Chris O'Brien Lifehouse performance will constitute the launch of an organisation with a name, a structure, and a gentle but promising schedule of future performances.

Finally, and unexpectedly, I am involved in discussions to arrange a cultural exchange to Australia for the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council. We hope there will be a public outcome for this visit that will allow the Australian community to learn from the POCC and Santa Fe Opera about the journey they have been on together.

‘With Sydney, we see that big opera house, and it’s just like the Holy Grail, [but] there is not an opera house in the world like ours. So we can aspire to go to Sydney, but also, we have it really good over here too. Where can you see an opera like this? I can go all over the world and go to an opera and visit it, but it’s nothing like our opera. It’s very, very special.’

— Marita Hinds



View from the Opera Club at Santa Fe 50

The Churchill Experience: Daniel Barenboim Stiftung, Berlin

What does the name 'West-Eastern Divan Orchestra' mean to you?

In the early 2010s, it meant nothing to me. Then a friend gave me a recording of Beethoven's complete symphonies, conducted by Maestro Daniel Barenboim (a name I did recognise). I'd put it on the CD player without paying much attention to the other performers.

The first notes were electric. These well-known works sounded so fresh, it was like I'd never heard them before. That's when I checked the orchestra's name: West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. My Goethe wasn't good enough to get the reference, so I googled it.

From the [orchestra's website](#): 'In 1999, Daniel Barenboim and the late Palestinian literary scholar Edward W. Said created a workshop for young musicians to promote coexistence and intercultural dialogue. They named the orchestra and workshop after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's collection of poems West-Eastern Divan, a central work for the development of the concept of world culture. The orchestra's first rehearsal sessions took place in Weimar and Chicago. An equal number of Israeli and Arab musicians form the base of the ensemble, together with members from Turkey, Iran, and Spain. They meet each summer for rehearsals, followed by an international concert tour.'

Their extraordinary story stayed with me, generating much of my curiosity about classical music's ability and, all too often, its unwillingness, to engage in questions both political and humanitarian. I was fortunate enough to study at the University of Sydney Music Department at a time when the boundaries between music theory (studying music in the abstract) and musicology (studying the composer) were being fiercely interrogated. I came to find the idea of 'art for art's sake' artificial, a grand pretence that art can be separated from either the human who creates it, or from the times and climes that created the human. I still believe that.

And I also believe that, while a musical performance doesn't need a message to have value, all the musical experiences that have remained most permanently under my skin have had something to say. And it was the impact of the music that embedded the message. So if you have something to say, and you happen to either be a musician, or to have a few handy, you can get more done.

I learned this while working with the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Choir. People who wouldn't listen to queer folk at talks, protests, television and radio interviews, couldn't help enjoying themselves when confronted with a song. It's very hard to be angry at a bunch of poofs and dykes who are just singing something nice for you. No explicit message in the music was required - our face-to-face presence was often enough.

For permanent change? A 'yes' vote in a marriage equality plebiscite, perhaps? Probably not.

But enough for us to get under your skin? To be the start of a different possibility? For you to think: actually I quite enjoyed hearing from those people, and isn't it funny how ordinary they all looked?

Absolutely, yes.

Classical music can often be a bit allergic to this kind of thinking, that our artform can have a real world impact beyond generalisations around 'moving' people. We're accused of living in ivory towers for a reason. And Maestro Barenboim could have stayed in his tower, conducting the best orchestras in the world, instead of spending his summers working with what some critics like to refer to as a 'youth orchestra'.

But now, towards the end of his career, when he has chosen to rescind his other positions and cancel his other engagements, one thing remains: the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra.

Visiting the Daniel Barenboim Stiftung and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra is the last stop on my Churchill Fellowship journey. I feel very fortunate to be walking through the door. The Maestro's recently-disclosed Parkinson's diagnosis, coupled with the ongoing war in Gaza, means this is a particularly difficult time for the Divan. I'm surprised and profoundly grateful that they accepted me, a stranger.

Leonie Mühlbauer, Executive Assistant to the CEO, welcomes me to the foyer, which is humming with conversation between the Divan Orchestra musicians, and the tock-tock of a table tennis game. She tells me about the building, once a storage space for the Staatsoper, now completely renovated to house both the Barenboim-Said Akademie, the Stiftung offices, and a new performance hall, the Pierre Boulez Saal, designed by Frank Gehry. If you're in Berlin, go to a concert there. It must be one of the best-designed concert halls on the planet.

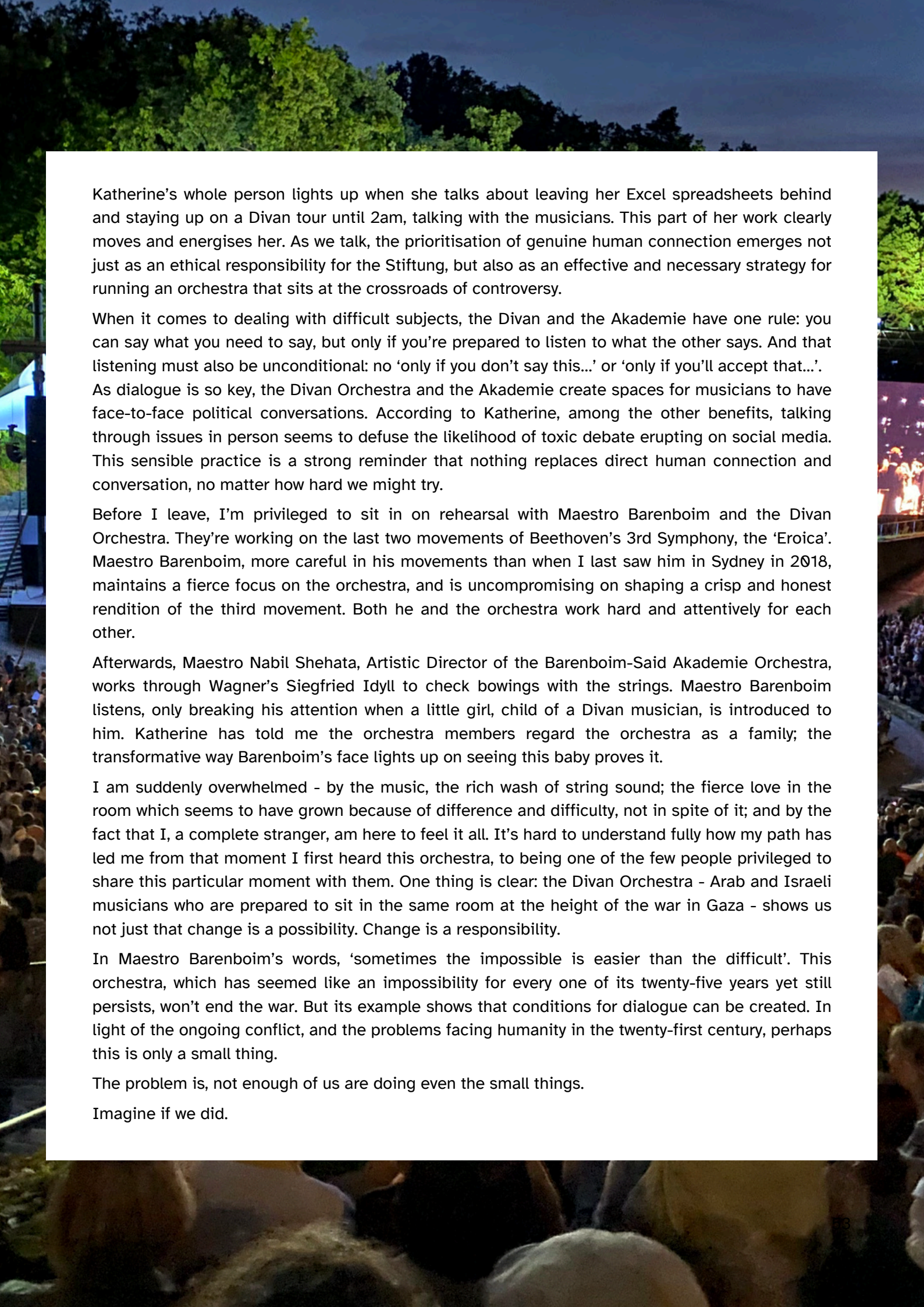
I have an interview with Katherine Kaplan, the Director of Finance and Operations at the Daniel Barenboim Stiftung. That she's sparing the time for me the day before the orchestra leaves for Bremen is pretty incredible. She wants to hear about my project, and is unsurprised to learn it's something musicians are so keen to be part of. According to her, a convincing story is key.

The other key is, of course, excellence. The Divan Orchestra is critical not just to the Stiftung's visibility; its professional performance fees from places like the Salzburg Festival are a significant funding source. Katherine points out that a high level of excellence is required to ensure high level donor support, high value ticket sales, festival contracts, recording contracts, and everything else that has allowed the Divan to survive over twenty-five years.

Much of our conversation focuses on how Katherine and her colleagues manage such a wide variety of projects across different foundations and countries. Sustainability is one of the Stiftung's core pillars. Currently, Katherine says, that means migrating their various projects from being like pearls strung on a necklace, each leading to the next, to being like atoms in a molecule: more interconnected. Consolidating and connecting projects won't just improve financial sustainability, it will increase their visibility.

As in Seville, there's a strong focus on building pathways for musicians. These are particularly needed in Palestine, hence the creation of a Barenboim-Said Centre in Ramallah, and the Barenboim-Said Akademie in Berlin, which offers further tertiary training.

Over all these projects reaches the name of Maestro Daniel Barenboim. Coupled with Said's, Barenboim's name, his reach and his prestige, have made much of this possible, including the building we're in. Katherine describes Barenboim as surrounding himself with people who have the capability to make his dreams happen. While there's no doubt that's true, what I see goes beyond that. The staff across the various foundations aren't just capable of the practicalities. They are creative, seeing the next links needed in the ecosystem they are collectively growing. And they are personally committed.



Katherine's whole person lights up when she talks about leaving her Excel spreadsheets behind and staying up on a Divan tour until 2am, talking with the musicians. This part of her work clearly moves and energises her. As we talk, the prioritisation of genuine human connection emerges not just as an ethical responsibility for the Stiftung, but also as an effective and necessary strategy for running an orchestra that sits at the crossroads of controversy.

When it comes to dealing with difficult subjects, the Divan and the Akademie have one rule: you can say what you need to say, but only if you're prepared to listen to what the other says. And that listening must also be unconditional: no 'only if you don't say this...' or 'only if you'll accept that...'. As dialogue is so key, the Divan Orchestra and the Akademie create spaces for musicians to have face-to-face political conversations. According to Katherine, among the other benefits, talking through issues in person seems to defuse the likelihood of toxic debate erupting on social media. This sensible practice is a strong reminder that nothing replaces direct human connection and conversation, no matter how hard we might try.

Before I leave, I'm privileged to sit in on rehearsal with Maestro Barenboim and the Divan Orchestra. They're working on the last two movements of Beethoven's 3rd Symphony, the 'Eroica'. Maestro Barenboim, more careful in his movements than when I last saw him in Sydney in 2018, maintains a fierce focus on the orchestra, and is uncompromising on shaping a crisp and honest rendition of the third movement. Both he and the orchestra work hard and attentively for each other.

Afterwards, Maestro Nabil Shehata, Artistic Director of the Barenboim-Said Akademie Orchestra, works through Wagner's Siegfried Idyll to check bowings with the strings. Maestro Barenboim listens, only breaking his attention when a little girl, child of a Divan musician, is introduced to him. Katherine has told me the orchestra members regard the orchestra as a family; the transformative way Barenboim's face lights up on seeing this baby proves it.

I am suddenly overwhelmed - by the music, the rich wash of string sound; the fierce love in the room which seems to have grown because of difference and difficulty, not in spite of it; and by the fact that I, a complete stranger, am here to feel it all. It's hard to understand fully how my path has led me from that moment I first heard this orchestra, to being one of the few people privileged to share this particular moment with them. One thing is clear: the Divan Orchestra - Arab and Israeli musicians who are prepared to sit in the same room at the height of the war in Gaza - shows us not just that change is a possibility. Change is a responsibility.

In Maestro Barenboim's words, 'sometimes the impossible is easier than the difficult'. This orchestra, which has seemed like an impossibility for every one of its twenty-five years yet still persists, won't end the war. But its example shows that conditions for dialogue can be created. In light of the ongoing conflict, and the problems facing humanity in the twenty-first century, perhaps this is only a small thing.

The problem is, not enough of us are doing even the small things.

Imagine if we did.

Resources

The Daniel Barenboim Stiftung

- 'Knowledge is the Beginning' - Documentary on the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=TX7beRaixdA&dp_isNewTab=1&dp_referrer=serp&dp_allowFirstVideo=1

The Foundation for Art and Healing

- Dr Jeremy Nobel's book: <https://www.artandhealing.org/book/>
- Embrace Your Signal Video: <https://www.artandhealing.org/announcing-embrace-your-signal-loneliness-art-and-the-brain/>
- Project UnLonely Films — 150 short films on loneliness and connection:
<https://www.artandhealing.org/puf-get-access/>
- Podcast with Dr Jeremy Nobel: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/finding-connection-through-creativity-with-dr-jeremy/id1772701967?i=1000673164674>

Santa Fe Opera

- Key Change podcast: <https://www.santafeopera.org/keychange/>

References

- Doucette, Chris (2025). Interview with the author, New York City NY USA, 10 July 2025
- Drovairos, Allison (2025). Interview with the author, Boston MA USA, 7 July 2025
- Fellows Fineberg, Andrea (2025). Interview with author, Santa Fe NM USA, 1 July 2025
- Gamble, Charles & Owens, Amy (2025). Interview with author, Santa Fe NM USA, 23 June 2025
- Goodfellow, Karin (2025). Interview with the author, Boston MA USA, 8 July 2025
- Harvier, Jordan and Andreemina, Herrera, Antionette, Hinds, Marita Swazo, Roybal, Leon & Roybal, Renee (2025). Interview with author, Santa Fe NM USA, 24 June 2025
- Hinds, Marita Swazo (2025). Interview with author, Santa Fe NM USA, 1 July 2025
- Hinds, Marita and Martinez, Claudene (2005). Interview with the author, Santa Fe NM USA, 28 June 2025
- Kaplan, Katherine (2025). Interview with the author, Berlin, Germany, 6 August 2025
- Lomelí, David (2005), Interview with author, Santa Fe NM USA, 26 June 2025
- Morningdove, Dominik (2005). Interview with the author, Santa Fe NM USA, 4 July 2025
- Rofrano, Michelle (2025). Interview with the author, Santa Fe NM USA, 2 July 2025
- Sherman Cultural Strategies, How Artists Change the City: Boston Artists-in-Residence Program Year Three Program Evaluation, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KGuz_LljZyy_puLlorN6d5iIVC8dtpY/view, accessed 23 October 2025
- Thapa, Joseph. Interview with the author, Seville, Spain, 24 July 2025
- Vlahović, Ian (2025). Interview with the author, New York City NY USA, 11 July 2025

Contact Details

Contactable via my page on the Winston Churchill Trust website:
<https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/sarah-penicka-smith-nsw-2024/>

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for giving me the opportunity to become a Churchill Fellow, and for supporting my Churchill Fellowship at every step. At the Churchill Fellowship onboarding event in Canberra, October 2024, we were all told that people's generosity towards us would likely exceed our expectations. This was true for me, in ways I found moving and unexpected. To everyone I interviewed, thank you for your candour, your trust, and your time. You have lit a fire that I hope will burn for the rest of my working life.

Barenboim-Said Fundación: Muriel Páez Rasmussen, Joseph Thapa, Vicente López Romero, & all the staff and volunteers at Asociación Entre Amigos

Boston City Hall: Karin Goodfellow

Daniel Barenboim Stiftung: Maestro Daniel Barenboim, Katherine Kaplan, Leonie Mühlbauer, Tabaré Perlas

The Foundation for Art & Healing: Chris Doucette, Dr Jeremy Nobel

Opera for Peace & Lerici Festival: Julia Lagahuzère, Michel El Ghoul, Maestro Gianluca Marcianó

PROTESTRA: Maestro Michelle Rofrano, Ian Vlahović

Refugee Orchestra Project: Allison Drovairos, Maestro Lidiya Yankovskaya

Santa Fe Opera & the Pueblo Opera Cultural Council: Marita Swazo Hinds, Andreemina (Mina) Harvier & Andrew Jordan (Jordan) Harvier, Antoinette (Toni) Herrera, Claudene A. Martinez, Renee and Leon Roybal, David Lomeli, Charles Gamble, Lisa Marie Lange, Maddie Adams, Amy Owens, Emily Doyle Moore, Mariah Oleson, Maestro Carlo Montanaro, Maestro Gemma New, Andrea Fellows Fineberg, Oliver Prezant, and Dominik Morningdove



And there are those people, mostly in Australia, without whom I never would have made it off the ground in the first place, often people who had more faith in me than I have in myself.

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, and in particular to Madeleine Garrett, Ian Krimmer, Nicola Raymond, Philippa Stevens, and Grant Wargren

FCM Travel and Jess Bujeya

My supporters, referees, mentors, connectors, and deliverers of the occasional well-timed kick up the butt: Len Amadio, Annette Brown, Warwick Fyfe, Louise Herron, Vic & Sarah McEwan, Nicholas Milton, and Mary Vallentine

My wife, Melanie Penicka-Smith

And the Chris O'Brien Lifehouse team, who started it all — in particular, Gail O'Brien & Lorraine Brecard

Images: Churchill Fellow, referee & cheer squad member Warwick Fyfe sends me a little inspiration the day before submission: 'Onwards to victory!' (top right); 'The music has arrived!': made by Polígono Sur's class of five-year-olds. Note portrait of Vicente in the top left corner (bottom left).