

GLYNDEBOURNE

Diversity and Inclusion at Glyndebourne

Opera is an art form that has traditionally folded the edges to the centre, often giving voice to characters marginalized and excluded from society and the levers of power, whether it's Mozart's dynamic servants, Figaro and Susanna, Carmen, the Romani woman, Rigoletto, the disabled jester, La Traviata's Violetta, a sex worker, Otello, the ethnic outsider, or the many women, disenfranchised in the narrative and in society, but whose voices dominated the nineteenth century operatic stage.

We accept, however, that the reality of how we work has fallen short: opera companies, both on stage and off, have failed to realise the full creative potential which would be released by a fully inclusive and diverse workplace. Glyndebourne is no exception. It is our aim to improve this situation, and, inspired by the energy of #BlackLivesMatter movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, we have committed to examine how we work across all areas. As an artistic company, this includes examining decisions about repertoire (our artistic output), as well as the choice of key interpreters for the operas we present – conductors, directors, designers – and how we cast the performers.

Many operas in the canon reflect the society and norms of previous ages, where historical political opinions and social assumptions may offend a contemporary audience if put forward uncritically. In particular there is often an element of exoticism and orientalism in the presentation of non-European cultures and people. We are constantly faced with the challenge of how to explore these narratives through a modern lens. Opera exists to reflect and challenge and, sometimes, provoke through music and theatre, and often we examine the dark and uncomfortable side of life, but we must become more active in identifying problematic areas, discussing and re-evaluating our approach, in particular by listening to the points of view of members of the communities represented in the narrative. For example: If we were to produce Carmen we should engage in open conversations with the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller community early in the development process.

As a company part of our mission is to reach out and enrich as many lives as possible through opera, to do this we must continually broaden our audience. This is, of course about numbers, but at its heart this mission requires us to be as inclusive as possible, that we identify and then actively attempt to pull down the barriers, which stand in the way of people gaining access to our work. Progress will come through whole company engagement in the project, through a continuation of our imaginative, leading edge education and outreach work, through open conversations with the communities we serve and with other companies in our sector, and through effective communication. We have a long journey ahead of us, partially because of the high-art, exclusive resonance of the word “opera”. We believe there is nothing inherently exclusive about opera, but we have to prove it, and communicate it.

The Diversity and Inclusion Group, which is made up of volunteers from across the company, is continuing the important work of the previous Diversity and Equality Committee. The group is focusing on refreshing our policies and is empowered to challenge, share knowledge and serve as the engine room for the changes which will help steer Glyndebourne on this journey. We believe that a genuinely diverse workforce both on and off stage, as well as processes and performances that put inclusivity at their heart, will allow us to make opera which touches people whatever their background and reflects society in a profound and meaningful way.