Community Partnerships at Opera North 2013 – 2018
Welcome

Opera North has always sought to reach new and different audiences in imaginative ways, and to ensure that our work is accessible to all. We are also incredibly proud to be based in the vibrant city of Leeds and believe that everyone that lives here should have the opportunity to engage with us. We were therefore delighted when Paul Hamlyn Foundation approached us about working together on a five-year Community Partnerships project, a project which has given us the resources to build and strengthen relationships with many local groups and organisations, to develop a programme of work which has broken down barriers, and to facilitate nearly 15,000 attendances at our performances and events.

We are enormously grateful to Paul Hamlyn Foundation, whose generosity has made this work possible, and also to our many friends and colleagues in groups and organisations throughout Leeds who have, through their enthusiasm and commitment, brought this project to life.

Richard Mantle OBE
General Director, Opera North

‘Opera North was one of five organisations to share in the Paul Hamlyn Club Awards, totalling £2.5m, which sought to transform relationships between arts organisations and local communities and were part of the Foundation’s 25th anniversary series of gifts made in 2013. During that time, the organisations involved have focussed on involving individuals and groups who traditionally have had the least opportunity to engage with the arts. Over the past five years, Opera North’s Encore Programme has built a deeper understanding of inclusive practice and developed new expertise in community engagement which has influenced work across the organisation. The Opera North team has created innovative resources for engaging with communities; established a clear commitment to partnership and relationship-building; and has successfully built a new and distinctive audience community. This is supported by compelling evidence of the impact this work can have on the wellbeing of vulnerable individuals.

We are delighted that this approach is now embedded within the organisation’s continuing strategy and look forward to seeing how this work can continue to deepen Opera North’s relationship with - and understanding of - its role in its community.’

Lou Errington, Grants Manager, Paul Hamlyn Foundation

‘My evaluation of Opera North found that opera has a special value for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Audience members enjoyed opera intensely and experienced it as a much needed distraction from their cares. Opera was enriching for the people who most needed enrichment. Far from being elite, as the stereotype would have it, the wrap around support funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation meant that Opera North was able to offer a strong welcome, a warm group feeling, and its special format to introduce the opera to participants. The large scale attendance that resulted yielded learning for Opera North and changed the feeling in the auditorium positively, with some artists commenting on the more lively and appreciative audience. Overall the Community Partnerships project had long term sustainable effects on Opera North, its artists, its audiences and local communities.’

Annabel Jackson, Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd, Independent Arts Evaluators

Opera North is honoured that City of Sanctuary has given us a Theatre of Sanctuary award in recognition of the work that we have done in welcoming and celebrating refugees and asylum seekers.
Opera North is a national opera company based in Leeds. Rooted in the north of England, international in outlook, we create extraordinary experiences, every day. In 2013 Paul Hamlyn Foundation - an independent grant-maker working to help people overcome disadvantage and lack of opportunity, so that they can realise their potential and enjoy fulfilling and creative lives - offered us a gift as part of their 25th anniversary celebrations. This enabled us to run a five-year Community Partnerships project which aimed to strengthen our relationship with our local community, to open up our art form to people who may have barriers which would usually stop them from engaging with us, and – ultimately – to widen and diversify our audience.

‘In the difficult and often divisive 21st Century, it is vital that the arts promote cohesion, inclusion, and a welcome for all our communities. Austerity has enforced cut backs to community services, making it harder for disadvantaged groups and individuals to take advantage of the cultural offers that are available for them. Our Community Partnerships project is a response to these challenges, offering not only new and enhanced offers, but also personal contact, ease of access and a culture of supportive engagement.’

Dominic Gray, Projects Director, Opera North

The main strands of our Community Partnerships project were:

**Encore** – a scheme for community groups and organisations. We aimed to build meaningful and sustainable relationships with our members, who received benefits including free or subsidised tickets for both opera and Howard Assembly Room performances, and opportunities to access bespoke events such as pre-show talks, taster performances and celebratory events.

‘Encore is a fantastic scheme which opens up the theatre to marginalised groups who would usually be excluded from such events. It is an absolute pleasure and delight to see the emotional wellbeing of attendees improve so much after experiencing a performance, and for this to continue for days and weeks after the event. It has a direct and immediate positive impact on the emotional wellbeing and integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds.’

Staff member, Meeting Point – supports refugees and asylum seekers

**Community Partners** – a strand which allowed us to work intensively with six groups and organisations every year. Our Community Partners had opportunities to host taster performances and workshops in their own venues, to come on backstage tours, to access personalised benefits and to attend regular meetings at Opera North to help plan and evaluate their work.

‘Many of our participants had never been to a theatre before and the vast majority had never been to an opera. Their involvement in the project has made them more confident in their understanding of opera and less intimidated by the idea of live performance. There is also a strong feeling that, despite the disadvantages many of them face, opera is relevant and accessible.’

Staff member, Space2 – an arts charity which works in disadvantaged areas of Leeds, 15/16 Community Partner

**Tasters** – a programme of taster workshops, performances and events for the people with whom we worked. These introduced our work to groups in an enjoyable, interactive way and built excitement about, and knowledge of, our forthcoming productions.

‘I think by holding a performance in a building they were familiar with, the world of performances and art was opened up to them and it legitimised their attendance at such events in less familiar venues. These are people who often feel excluded from public life, and the outreach convinced them of the opposite, that they are included and important.’

Staff Member, City of Sanctuary - which aims to build a culture of welcome for people seeking sanctuary - following a performance of ‘An Introduction to... Billy Budd’ in their own venue

**Bravo** – a scheme for individuals with barriers to engaging with us. Members were given opportunities to access insight events, such as workshops and rehearsal visits, ahead of trips to see performances.

‘I lost my husband, it will be five years next month. The Bravo Club has made a big difference in my life - if I didn’t come here I would be at a loss.’

Bravo Club member

**Access** – a strand which enabled us to evolve Opera North’s range of accessible opportunities, for example signed, captioned and audio described performances, and to develop the audience for these opportunities:

‘It was my first time at the theatre. I watched the signed performance of Carousel. I never go out, I don’t have any friends. I am deaf and live alone. The evening was very special. I enjoyed watching the dancers and following the story. I would love to go again – I had never imagined I would go to the theatre – I never knew they did signed performances. Thank you so much for inviting me.’

Client, Leeds Hearing and Sight Loss Service

The Community Partnerships team has also collaborated with other Leeds-based arts organisations (including Leeds Playhouse, Slung Low, and Theatre Company Blah Blah Blah) on projects and opportunities for local people; and has led on Opera North’s successful mission to become a place of sanctuary for refugees and asylum seekers.

---

Left: Pop-up performance at Emmaus café.
Centre: La traviata, 2014.
Key statistics

11,000+

attendances at performances since the project began

‘I am writing to express my gratitude for the chance to see Macbeth by Opera North and to experience fantastic music, outstanding performances and an overall great evening of culture. The work you do with the communities in Leeds is very much appreciated and I hope you are able to carry on bringing the amazing world of music and performance into the lives of peoples to whom that world is out of reach.’

Client, RETAS - Refugee Education Training Advice Service

1,800+

tickets provided to groups and organisations that work with refugees and asylum seekers

‘An elderly Iranian lady with virtually no English... hugged and kissed me to show her appreciation and a man who had come in to see us for the first time that afternoon, completely destitute, came along with the refugee who is hosting him: he said, with a big smile on his face, “There is life”, which seemed to sum up the evening. Whilst Violetta’s tale may have ended in tragedy, the opera was inspiring for us all.’

Volunteer, DASH - which supports asylum seekers in Huddersfield - after bringing a group to see La traviata

3,500+

attendances at workshops, taster performances and events

‘... a young woman who came to both the taster performance and full production of The Elixir of Love still talks about the performances. She had issues with low self-confidence and anxiety but now she feels more inclined to go out and involve her friends and family when the opportunity arises to go to performances.’

Client, GIPSIL - which works with disadvantaged children, young people and families

120

community groups and organisations have taken part in the Encore scheme

‘Thank you! From all at Mill Hill Conversation Club. Your Encore tickets have been so very much appreciated. “A life line”.’

Volunteer, The Conversation Club - an English conversation club for refugees and asylum seekers

Top: Behind the scenes touch tour for Madama Butterfly.
Middle: Summer Party, 2018.
Bottom: Meeting Point visit to the Opera North Costume Department.
In a 2017 Opera North artist survey conducted by Annabel Jackson Associates, 100% of respondents said that the Community Partnerships project ‘added to their feeling of pride in the Company’, and after a performance of The Marriage of Figaro, which was attended by over 200 Encore participants, some of the performers who were involved were particularly struck by the different atmosphere in the auditorium:

‘I noticed an engaged and excited audience reaction, particularly towards the humour of the piece. When audiences react with such uninhibited laughter, it becomes a real dialogue between the stage and the stalls and circles. That changes the cast’s split-second timings... which really helps to keep that vital spontaneity alive. It’s also rewarding for us in the orchestra pit to be part of that connection with the audience - it’s one of the main reasons we all do it!’

Annette Saunders, Assistant Head of Music, Opera North

---

80% of Encore members reported an increase in the wellbeing of their clients because of their involvement in the project*

‘It was a lovely evening – I don’t go out much and I felt lifted and relaxed. All my problems drifted away – it was not like TV, it was two hours to relax, concentrate and forget my worries.’

Client, Leeds Together Women Project - which supports women offenders and women at risk of offending

24 community groups and organisations have spent a year as an Opera North Community Partner

‘Thank you for bringing opera to Seacroft. We loved the workshops.’

Client, LS14 Trust - a not-for-profit organisation which supports people in Seacroft

97% of Encore members reported that their clients are more willing to try new things because of their involvement in the project*

‘The Encore scheme certainly has had a positive impact on my health and wellbeing. I wouldn’t normally afford the opera but you have literally the feel-good factor feeling afterwards. I come out afterwards singing the songs!’

Client, Feel Good Factor – which aims to improve the health of some of the most vulnerable people in Leeds

80% of Encore members reported an increase in confidence in their clients because of their involvement in the project*

‘I think people felt that they had given something a go that they would never have dreamt of doing, something that they had felt excluded from previously, and that was out of their world. They felt brave for giving it a go, enjoyed the event and the welcome that they received.’

Staff member, Burmantofts Senior Action - which supports older people in the inner-city area of Burmantofts

97% of Encore members reported an increase in the wellbeing of their clients because of their involvement in the project*

‘... thank you so much for the tickets to last night’s fantastic performance of The Barber of Seville. None of (the group) had been to the opera, and some had never seen inside the Grand Theatre. Everyone who attended had a great evening and enjoyed the show. Having seen people last night and their positive reaction to something new just reconfirmed my belief in what a great programme Encore is.’

Client, Zest Health for Life – which works to improve local community health
Impact – a case study

In 2017 Opera North commissioned Annabel Jackson Associates to write about the impact of our Community Partnerships project. They conducted face-to-face interviews with eight participants from Encore member - and 15/16 Community Partner - Making Space, which is a befriending and peer support service for people who have experienced mental health issues. They found that being involved in the project had an effect on:

**Their views of opera and live music**

‘I have liked classical music for some time but I had only been to two performances. I felt that opera wasn’t for me, that it was upper class. But it isn’t. It is for everybody.’

‘I thought opera was for posh people. When you see opera on the television everyone is all dressed up. But it isn’t like that at all. Some people are dressed up and some people are not, but you are not judged by what you wear.’

‘You expect operas to be tragic. But I am giggling at some of it. They are so funny and clever. That is genius. It is sad that people assume opera is only aimed at wealthy people with a lot of education. It isn’t. I wish more people from working class backgrounds could go and see that opera is there for everyone. It can be clever, funny, tragic - all in half an hour.’

**Wellbeing**

‘When I went to see opera live I absolutely loved it. I am absolutely besotted with opera. It helps with my agoraphobia because now you have somewhere you really want to go.’

‘I get lost in the performance. It’s all so magical that I am transported somewhere else. We often say that you should leave your problems on those steps. You can pick them up on the way out.’

‘Life is more interesting. I feel happier afterwards. Afterwards I can do a bit of shopping. It gives you the energy to look around town.’

**Appreciation of opera**

‘I appreciate what goes into each show, especially the singing. They don’t use microphones. To be able to project across a theatre like the Grand is amazing.’

‘A man in his 40s told us he is still training. Opera is not just a job singing; it is a life vocation. They can act and speak other languages. They are all round talented.’

‘If your life is not in a good place it helps to be in beautiful surroundings. You look and remember there are beautiful things in the world.’
Long term effect
Interviewees said that being involved in the Opera North project made them:

Happier:
‘It is almost like a permanent feeling now. I feel better until the next performance then I get another boost. I would be mortified to miss something.’

Feel valued:
‘You are developing friendships with the staff. They are genuinely pleased to see you. It blows my mind how they treat us so well. They treat you as someone special, which feels very good.’

More resilient:
‘As you come out, you feel elated. You have escaped from all the horrible things going on in life. Opera lifts you up for a while. It is a lovely feeling. It helps to know you can go again and have the same feeling.’

More adventurous:
‘I have seen things at the Howard Assembly Room that I didn’t expect to like and have loved them. It has opened up a way of thinking and a new avenue of life. I am not biased about different things. I would give anything a try now.’

More positive about big organisations:
‘Opera North has made me aware that big companies do have a caring side, when they don’t need to be doing this, which is lovely.’

More comfortable going to Opera North performances:
‘Coming to the opera you are treated the same as anyone else. The staff have become friends. I feel very comfortable coming because I will see people I recognise.’

Finally...
A staff member from Making Space said:
‘Opera is very important to our group. It brings people together and gives them something to focus on. They look forward to it for weeks before and then talk about it for weeks after. They are so effervescent when they come out of a show.’

And of the Opera North Community Partnerships project:
‘...it brings people out of their shell. It directly reduces social isolation.’

The report concludes:
‘If you listen carefully to these stories you will hear a special need for opera and live music. Far from opera being for the rich, you will hear that people especially need opera when they are anxious or depressed, trapped at home through illness or disability, and feeling socially isolated or unconfident. This need is amply demonstrated by the extremely high level of attendance that these Community Partners and Encore groups maintain.’

We are extremely grateful to Paul Hamlyn Foundation for their generous support of this project. It has meant so much to everyone closely associated with Opera North and, as you will have read, to the many people who have participated too.

Thanks are due to the team at Opera North, especially everyone in the External Affairs, Education and Howard Assembly Room teams, as well as the freelance singers, musicians and artists we work with, for contributing their skills, talents, enthusiasm and time to this groundbreaking project.

As an organisation we are humbled to work in the same city as so many groups and organisations that tirelessly improve and strengthen the lives of everyone in Leeds. They have embraced this project and gone out of their way to make it a success, despite often having limited resources.

Finally, thank you to the thousands of individuals who have taken part in this project over the last five years, and who have been so generous about spending their time with us. We look forward to seeing much more of you in the coming years!

Madeleine Thorne
Head of Community Partnerships, Opera North

For more information about Opera North’s Community Partnerships work please contact Madeleine Thorne on madeleine.thorne@operanorth.co.uk or 0113 223 3505

Thank you

‘Music lifts my soul and improves my mental health more than any tablet!’

Encore member

Photographic Credits
Tom Arber (An Introduction to Billy Budd at Sawan Vihar, cover; Summer Party 2015, pp2-3; Summer Party 2018, p4; Behind the Scenes touch tour, p4; Summer Party with Community Choir, p5); Brian Slater (Pop-up performance at Emmaus cafe, p3); Richard H Smith (La Traviata, 2014, p3); Rowland Thomas (Meeting Point visit, p4); Alastair Mui (Caruso, 2015, p5); Justin Slee (Summer Party, 2017, p6; Peer Support Services Backstage Tour, p6); Jonny Walton (Christmas at Twilight rehearsal, p7); Robert Workman (L’elisir d’amore, 2016, p7).

This work was funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation through the Paul Hamlyn Club Awards, made in 2013 to mark the Foundation’s 25th anniversary.

© Opera North 2018

opernorth.co.uk