

# Organising Music

*Theory, Practice, Performance*

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*Edited by*

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## 17 Managing artistic work in the real world

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*Gail Greig and Davide Nicolini*

### **Introduction**

Singer Joni Mitchell once described the unique nature of music-making by contrasting singing with painting:

That's one thing that's always, like, been a difference between, like, the performing arts, and being a painter, you know. A painter does a painting, and he paints it, and that's it, you know. He has the joy of creating it, it hangs on a wall, and somebody buys it, and maybe somebody buys it again, or maybe nobody buys it and it sits up in a loft somewhere until he dies. But he never, you know, nobody ever, nobody ever said to Van Gogh, 'Paint a Starry Night again, man!' You know? He painted it and that was it. (Joni Mitchell, *Miles of Aisles*, 1974)

While all artistic work involves creating products, the exact nature of which is largely unknown at the outset, the objects of performance art and music are particular in that they are produced anew every time: each is a unique piece of work – a 'prototype' – that emerges from the place and time of its making. In music-making, then, the 'how it is done' cannot be untangled from its outcome. What Joni Mitchell omitted to point out, however, is that another fundamental characteristic of music-making is that such creation is a collaborative endeavour: apart from rare exceptions, the production of music involves bringing together a range of people and materials, usually in recognisable types of venue. In these circumstances, different strands of work need to be drawn together, as unfamiliar clusters – or knots (Engeström, 2008; Engeström et al., 1999) – of people and materials form and disband, in the effort to produce the final performance. When new ways of working are introduced, there is thus uncertainty both about how this will be coordinated and the music produced, rendering both the process and the product unpredictable and emergent. In this sense, music-making is a case – possibly the archetype – of an increasingly familiar form of collaborative working in temporary groupings across a range of sectors and areas of work (Engeström, 2008; Marchington et al., 2005). Studying music-making thus offers an opportunity to illuminate some of the challenges that all managers encounter, or are likely to

encounter soon, in the brave new world where projects, temporary teams and virtual collaboration are becoming increasingly ‘the way we do things here’.

In this chapter we explore the challenges of coordinating and organising this new form of work by examining the take-up of a new way of music-making by a well-established orchestral organisation. While our immediate goal is to shed light on a new form of music-making, our aim is to derive lessons that can be applied to a wider range of phenomena. We do so by drawing on cultural historical activity theory, an approach that we argue is particularly useful to account for and understand such work and how it may be organised. We base our discussion around an example of this work, as told through Jane’s story of ‘Orchestrating a flash mob’ (Chapter 18, pp. 262–9). Readers may find it helpful at this point to read Jane’s story and watch the example of musical work we draw upon via the web link provided in that chapter.

### **Organising co-configured musical work**

When a musical instrument is played it produces sound, which is inherently fleeting and intangible; therefore, music-making produces perhaps the ultimate intangible artistic object (Boesch, 1997). When this is done through live musical performance, input from a range of people in a variety of roles, in addition to the musicians themselves, is needed. These people use a variety of instruments, equipment and other means in their work to produce that final intangible object: the performed musical sound. In order to succeed in this venture, each strand of work must be carefully coordinated, woven together to fabricate the final product (Weeks, 1990). This complex and sometimes painstaking work, which – in common with the music-making it seeks to coordinate and organise – is unknown at the outset, is just the type of work done by managers in many areas of work.

Although challenging, the demands of this type of work are relatively predictable within regular performance situations – for example, when orchestral music is performed in concert halls, or rock or folk music is performed at gigs in different types of public venue, from pubs to theatres. In these circumstances, those involved are all accustomed to producing a live performance in similar settings, which they achieve within a relatively short time and without too much trouble. This is their normal work, drawing on established practices carried out many times before. Although each performance is unique, there are established ways of dealing with this, in common with other areas of artistic work such as television and film (Bechky, 2006).

But increasingly, new forms of artistic work are emerging as performances become less ‘staged’, ostensibly, and audience members become more involved in interactive art works. This is beginning to happen in theatre (audiences becoming active participants on theatre sets as the action unfolds) and literature (stories being written by numerous people, picking the storyline up where the previous person stopped), but is less the case for music, where audience participation is both more and less evident. While music audiences participate in some forms of musical performance (e.g. singing along at a rock or folk concert, clapping in time to music, etc.), they do not tend to be involved in the actual music that is produced in that moment. This is particularly the case for classical music, where the distinction between performers and audience is well established and highly conventionalised. So involving audiences becomes an additional challenge in this musical genre. Therefore, it is perhaps no surprise to find an emergent trend towards creating ephemeral musical experiences, which rely on audience participation by interrupting the flow of day-to-day life.

An example of this type of musical experience is ‘flash mob’ musical events. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a flash mob is ‘a public gathering of complete strangers, organized via the internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again’. Flash mobs like the orchestral flash concert at the airport featured in [Chapter 18](#) (pp. 262–9) were invented in 2003 by Bill Wasik (2006). While flash mobs are usually understood in terms of group conformity and desire to blend (Wasik, 2006; Duran, 2006) or longing for new forms of sociality (Walker, 2013), here we take the creation of such fleeting musical experiences as representative of a more general and newly emergent form of working, theorised by Victor and Boynton (1998), known as co-configuration. A key feature of co-configuration working is that customers, products or services and producers need to come together as a relational grouping for the final product of work to emerge. This frequently involves collaboration between organisations and individuals, and a good deal of coordination among different parties (Nicolini et al., 2012). In the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO) flash mob, which takes place in an airport, we see the travelling public becoming involved with members of three organised forms of work – air travel/airport, orchestral music and theatre – as they all come together to co-configure a collective experience. Although in this case surprise and improvisation are central elements of its success, the performance is not entirely ‘done in the moment’. On the contrary, this event required patient, persistent and concerted preparation, effort and co-configuring together a variety of people, things and organisations.

### **Theorising co-configured musical work through cultural historical activity theory**

Three concepts from cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) are particularly useful to conceptualise and analyse the work of co-configuration and the co-configuration of work. These are ‘activity’, ‘object of work/activity’ and ‘contradictions’. We introduce these next and then illustrate their analytical power through discussion of the flash mob in [Chapter 18](#) (pp. 262–9). Our tenet is that they are helpful for understanding not only the case of the RSNO flash mob but also an increasing variety of other organisational/work situations that share similar characteristics (Blackler, 1993; Engeström, 1987; 2000; 2008; Engeström et al., 1999; Nicolini, 2011; Greig et al., 2012).

#### *Activity*

The concept of activity (Leont’ev, 1974) captures the collective nature of work. In music and other forms of artistic work the final product is realised through combined collections of knowledgeable actions, enacted by people engaged in that work, using a variety of material and non-material tools to mediate their actions (Blackler, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, whether making something material like concert programmes, arranging travel for performers or performing to make the intangible sounds themselves, musical work involves a range of people through whose cumulative work the final product is made. These actions become meaningful as activity when those involved are working towards a range of mutual goals, which coalesce around what is known as the object of work (or object of activity).

#### *Object of work or activity*

The concept of the object of work (Engeström and Blackler, 2005) allows us to understand what people seek to achieve through collaborative efforts in co-configured work, and – at least to some extent – why they participate in it. Work involves engaging in purposeful, future-oriented activity to meet a range of human needs (Nicolini, 2011; Engeström, 1999). Those needs are conceptualised by those doing the work as an ‘object’, which may be tangible or intangible but holds the imaginings and ideas towards which people direct their efforts (Chaiklin, 2011). Thus, the object of work becomes the carrier of the purposeful goals and actions of all of those involved in the work (Axel, 1997), as people seek to transform something involving a need from one state to

another (Blackler and Regan, 2009). As they work towards a shared object, those involved fulfil the objective of their work (as distinct from the object), which is manifested through the outcome of the work. In producing the outcome, those involved fulfil (to a greater or lesser degree) the range of needs they sought to meet through the collectively constructed object of work (Engeström, 1999).

Taking the object of work as its central focus, CHAT allows us to see how complex and fleeting arrangements of people and things emerge in collaborative work. By directing our attention to the ongoing construction of objects of work, we are free to be able to see the changing mix of people – and the things they use – as they work towards their mutual purpose. Therefore, we can avoid the need to classify all of those involved at the outset, or to decide which form of organising we are seeing (e.g. hierarchy, market, single organisation, etc.).

Also, since the concept of activity allows us to view the ongoing actions of whoever is involved as a collective achievement – as they work towards their mutual purposeful ‘object’ – CHAT allows us to conceptualise the actions of individuals and those who are involved in larger organisational units as collective. They become part of the overall, ongoing working. People may not share a view of the exact nature of the object of work, or the needs they seek to meet, but their mutual interest and motivation is sufficient to keep them involved (Blackler and Regan, 2006; Greig et al., 2012). For example, a musician may wish simultaneously to make a beautiful sound and to stir emotions in large audiences (the object) in order to establish reputation and critical esteem among other players (the objective). A music producer involved in the same performance may wish to bring highly acclaimed music to large audiences (the object) and to amass a large sum of money in the process (the objective). Both are involved in the same ongoing episode of activity, kept together by their mutual goals coalescing around a shared object of work (making music).

So although objects of work may be contested and negotiated, they hold disparate groupings together. They are partly given, drawing on established practices and ways of knowing, and partly created: new or different ways of doing things emerge as people work towards a mutual but perhaps ambiguous purpose (Miettinen and Virkkunen, 2005; Griffin and Cole, 1984). Objects are therefore dynamic, constructed through the interplay of ongoing conscious efforts of those involved, which produce insights about the intentions of those involved in frequently difficult collaborative ventures (Nardi, 1996; Blackler and Regan, 2009). These are frequently not harmonious, and give rise to tensions or contradictions between older and newer objects of work.

*Tensions or contradictions*

As the example in the [last section](#) illustrates, because objects bring together and organise a variety of elements – such as people with their ideas, objects with their affordances, rules and regulations and their limitations, traditions and their established ways of doing – activities are customarily characterised by issues, problems and tensions, known within CHAT as ‘contradictions’. A typical example is the tension between the simultaneous aims of making beautiful music that stirs people’s emotions and earning money by doing so, but contradictions can also be more mundane, such as the desire to bring music outdoors ‘among people’ and the problem that musical instruments do not like rain. Contradictions become especially consequential when different people involved in activity hold seemingly contradictory aims. This often happens when older, established ways of meeting previously identified needs clash with newer ways of tackling current emergent needs (Blackler and Regan, 2009). In most cases, contradictions do not split people apart – quite the opposite: they become generative of changes within the ongoing construction of the object. For example, the contradiction between playing outdoors and rain can prompt new ideas on where to play or trigger the search for new waterproof instruments. Similarly, the contrast between old ways of doing things and new needs generates invention and innovation. Contradictions are therefore potentially transformative, allowing the activity to ‘expand’ as people transform both the object of work and, potentially, their own actions or practices (Blackler and Regan, 2009; Engeström et al., 2003).

In sum, the concepts of activity, object and contradiction constitute a helpful perspective to theorise collaborative, co-configured forms of working, since the exact composition of those involved as work progresses is unknown at the outset, and is not restricted to the boundaries of established organisations. As work progresses towards an as yet uncertain and more or less intangible product, like a new piece of music or new way of performing that music, people and things will become involved to meet emergent needs. These may be people from within one organisation or from several, but this is not what determines their involvement. Rather, they become part of the work through their ability to contribute towards the mutual object. The inevitable contradictions that emerge from bringing together these different elements in turn become creative opportunities through which the remit of the activity is expanded and the individual and organisations involved learn new ways of doing things.

In the next paragraphs we will use these concepts to re-read the story of the flash mob at Glasgow International Airport told by Jane Donald in

**Chapter 18** (pp. 262–9). Our main goal is to clarify the concept of activity, object and contradiction and suggest that these and other notions from CHAT are especially useful to shed light on new and emergent forms of work and collaborations.

### **Reading the RSNO flash mob story through the lens of activity theory**

Like so many others, the story of the RSNO flash mob starts with several characters in search of a story that could bring them together; or, less poetically, a number of organisations with separate ambitions, aspirations and goals, and a sense that joining forces with others will help, but no idea of how this may happen. In work contexts it is not unusual to hear the sentence: ‘We have a lot in common: we should do something together!’ Yes, but what? According to activity theory the histories that individuals and organisations carry with them set them on different paths, endow them with different interests and produce different world outlooks that often keep them apart. Collaboration requires the ability to overcome or accommodate this inherent multiplicity of views and interests. The traditional response in management studies is ‘we need a plan’ or ‘we need a common goal’ or ‘we need a vision’. Activity theory suggests looking at the problem the other way around. Collaboration emerges around the identification and construction of a common object of work – something concrete that we can do together and that can hold and contain each party’s different desires, expectations and goals. In fact, it is not unusual that collaborations are triggered by the emergence of a joint object of work without the need for previous planning, sharing or envisioning. The object channels pre-existing aspirations and desires and keeps them together, providing the reason and the motivation to collaborate. As the saying goes: ‘Find me an object, and I will bring the world together’.

We can see this clearly in the flash mob case. Glasgow International Airport wanted to promote itself as ‘Scotland’s destination airport’; the RSNO wanted to enhance its profile as a national Scottish cultural organisation (something not trivial in times of potential budget cuts) and to promote the value of symphonic sound versus the thin sound we are increasingly exposed to through media and the MP3 invasion; and, finally, the orchestra was not insensitive to the promise of free or subsidised travel. Everyone sensed that forming some sort of alliance could bring mutual benefits. But what could realistically bring together organisations as different as an airport and an orchestra? Enter the idea of the flash mob. The idea is travelling from elsewhere: Jane has heard about it talking to a music colleague – she recalls hearing something about an orchestral ‘flash

mob' in a train station in Norway (or was it in Denmark?); the detail is irrelevant. The idea of the flash mob does not make a difference because of its innovativeness, or because of who has introduced it into the scene or where it was done before. We all live surrounded by new ideas and we hear about new things like this all the time. So the nature of the idea in itself explains little. What makes a difference in this case is that the idea of a flash mob 'captures' both the imagination and, more importantly, the interests and aspirations of the different organisations involved. The flash mob promises to tie the different expectations together by foreshadowing outcomes that will satisfy the goals and needs of all the participants. In other words, the idea of a flash mob works as an attractor that organises the different interests in play so that they can live together for a while.

### *From idea to activity*

The problem, of course, is that at this stage the 'flash mob' is just an idea. The challenge, which is how the issue presents itself to the manager, is how to make this idea happen and how to overcome the inevitable impediments that derive from the unique histories, different ways of working, divergent goals and distinct practical constraints of the different organisations involved.

From the perspective of the manager telling the story, the task is thus how to configure a 'system' that can produce this 'something' called a flash mob (from other perspectives, the story could be told very differently). The elements are all there. The challenge is now to co-configure them.

The first step is to bring together the different subjects involved. Enrolling the orchestra is not easy. Classical musicians are by definition the custodians of a rich tradition that they contribute to keeping alive. This makes them inherently conservative, albeit for a very good reason. Will they accept playing in the lobby of an airport? Will playing in such non-artistic space diminish their standing and the value of the tradition for which they stand? Musicians also have contracts and need to be allowed to work out of hours. Will the RSNO board of directors agree? Will they find a way? Finally, the Airport Operating Committee needs to be brought on board (pun intended) and tied together with the other elements.

Every time a new subject is brought on board, the idea of a flash mob takes more shape, if nothing else, in terms of what cannot be done. As a problem space, the flash mob becomes increasingly defined and delimited. Co-configuration and definition of the object go hand in hand.

Please note that from the perspective utilised here, the work of bringing all these collective subjects together and keeping them that way is shared

between the manager and the idea of the flash mob. The manager alone (without the idea of a flash mob) would be powerless and would never have been able to reconcile these disparate subjects and convince them to work together. The object of work is what provides a reason and a motivation for the collaboration; we can probably conceive the flash mob without a manager that runs it but we can hardly imagine the collaboration without the flash mob (or another comparable object).

### *Making the flash mob happen*

As we have seen above, according to activity theory, any activity – including flash mobs – is made possible by the coming together of a number of elements. These include the subjects, which provide agency and dictate the point of view for the story; the physical and symbolic mediating instruments, which include tools, signs, ideas and words used to make the object happen; and rules, regulations, norms and conventions that enable and simultaneously constrain actions and interactions of constructing the object. Activities like the flash mob also imply a certain way of dividing work (who does what, who is responsible for whom, who has authority) and a community – that is, a set of interactions among the people involved in the activity as opposed to those who are not (but need to be taken into consideration – for example, musicians from other orchestras).

For the flash mob to happen all these elements have to be aligned together – a task of considerable difficulty as we have not one but two organisations involved. Each step towards aligning these elements is necessarily creative and generative. In order for the activity to capture the attention of the public, the right piece of music needs to be chosen. *Bolero* is the right, but not necessarily the obvious, choice (the piece is very well loved and known, particularly in the UK, but many others could have been chosen). In order to disguise the players so that the flash mob achieves its ‘surprise effect’ the musicians will pose as travellers (they could equally have feigned to be security staff or cleaners). At each step, the object of work – the nature of this thing called ‘flash mob’ – becomes increasingly defined. The traffic between the object and the activity, however, is two way. On the one hand, the collaborative activity emerges around the object – the people and the way they are organised, the rules and tools to be used (such as the airport security protocols or the use of a musical score) – and the position and identity each member will assume depends on the object of work and how it is shaped. On the other, the object ‘flash mob’ is also the result of the interests of the community that gathers around it (Miettinen and Virkkunen, 2005). In fact, every time a

new subject is brought on board the very nature of the flash mob changes (for example, see how the nature of event changes with the arrival of Brian from the National Theatre of Scotland). The object is, in this sense, socially constructed through the negotiation of the different interests represented in the community, which in this case involves air travel and orchestral interests. It is also partly given and partly emergent; that is, both projective and objective (instantiated in and through the product and services that are the outcomes of the activity) and thus capable of 'biting back' (Engeström and Blackler, 2005). It is not the case that 'anything goes' in a flash mob, or in an airport or in a real classical orchestra. And the flash mob could have unexpected consequences, either good or bad.

### *Tensions, contradictions and expansion*

As we have seen, the flash mob operates simultaneously as a powerful motivator that keeps energy going, an attractor that keeps interests aligned and a problem space that continually presents challenges that require invention and creation. The music has to be altered; the flash mob has to be choreographed; a new technique for rehearsing must be invented (the airport space is reproduced in theory); and marketing assistants need to pose as airline staff.

The reality of the flash mob takes shape incrementally at the intersection of all these activities and negotiations. But all is not smooth. Bringing such disparate elements together also produces tensions and contradictions, both in the existing organisations and in the new co-configuration: the new setting conflicts with the established identity of the musicians, who become anxious and nervous; the airport regulations constrain filming to ensure that no security personnel are included; the sound produced by the orchestra conflicts with the allowed decibels. Although we are not given all the details in Jane's brief account, we can imagine that these tensions produced discussions, conflicts and possibly – at times – confrontations. However, they do not constitute barriers to collaborative working. On the contrary, they constitute opportunities for innovation and what activity theorists call 'expansive' learning (Engeström, 1987). In fact, when surfaced, these contradictions require the introduction of some form of change that translates into an expansion (shift) in the object of work and in all the other elements of the activity. The constraints introduced by the fact that the flash mob takes place in a fully operating airport trigger the idea of using the digital screens to broadcast the orchestra brand. The learning is reciprocal: the airport learns to expand the use of one of its artefacts, while the orchestra manager learns how difficult it can be to have to brand a space

(using the logo) with minimal preparation. Both the flash mob and the elements are subject to this changing movement that makes them different subsequently. Humans are not immune from the expansive movement either. The musicians have to learn to play while walking rather than sitting, pulling their rolling hand luggage rather than having both hands on their instruments and following the order of play of the piece rather than in their usual positions in relation to other instrumental players. At the end of the experience they will be different musicians than when they started, with an enhanced set of capabilities. Victor, the player turned conductor, finds himself becoming a 'leader that leads from the front'. Most importantly, both organisations expand the repertoire of what is considered possible: the flash mob demonstrates that the orchestra can perform in unusual places outside the safe boundaries of an auditorium; the airport discovers that other things can take place in the concourse apart from checking in passengers. The flash mob expands the organisational capabilities, making new things possible in future.

The outcome of the flash mob itself contains generative contradictions. While the performance reaches most of its goals (the public enjoys it; the event is captured on film and circulates widely on the internet; the specialised media pick up the news and amplify the message) the musicians are not totally happy with the sound. Other lessons are learned that will in turn modify the next flash mob of this orchestra or, in all probability, how the next orchestra will do a flash mob. In sum, the contradictions stemming from the complex nature of the object constitute an inexhaustible source of change, which keeps the whole in constant motion. The shifting, contradictory and ever-changing nature of the object is not an evil to be resisted but rather a reality that needs to be reckoned with and an opportunity to be exploited.

### **Concluding remarks**

The poet Elias Canetti once suggested that people often have a goal that is there before they can find words for it. Cultural historical activity theory suggests that this is true of most human activities. Objects of work are what bring and often hold people together, give them motive and reasons to work together, and allow them to turn tensions and conflict into generative opportunities (Nicolini et al., 2012). In other words, the mutuality performed by these objects is not a harmonious matter, having little to do with the idea of a perfect fusion of intents, goals and community sharing that underpins many other models of collaboration. Provided the pull of the object is strong enough, and its capacity to hold diverging

views together is bigger than the centrifugal forces, the divergence does not result in chaos and disorder but rather in innovation and learning.

Our interpretation of the RSNO flash mob at Glasgow International Airport shows that concepts like object and contradiction are especially suited to shed light on new forms of work based on the principle of co-configuring different groups, tools, ideas and histories. However, the case also suggests lessons for management, which follow from the same principle: if the nature of work changes, so should the way it is managed.

First, when managers want to encourage people or organisations to collaborate they should ensure that the object of the joint work is sufficiently robust, appealing or engaging. No amount of team building can substitute for the need of participants to believe that the pursuit of the object of work will allow them to reach their own goals, and that this is only possible if they collaborate with others (who must also be allowed to achieve their own goals). In collaborating, either everyone wins or all lose.

Second, the idea and case discussed here indicate that while good management requires being on top of things, this does not necessarily translate into the idea that managers must try to control and plan everything. In fact, the contrary is true. Determination and focus, two characteristics often associated with effective management, must co-exist with the realisation that the object of work will inevitably change as you go along, and that contradictions will emerge at some point. Instead of viewing these as a loss of control, or a problem to be eradicated, contradictions need to be embraced. No manager achieves everything s/he initially sets out to do, and no collaboration succeeds at the expense of other participants. This means that managers need to be ready to accommodate unforeseen tensions between colleagues and areas of expertise, and between their own area of normal working and that of others. This also means that contradictions and difficulties must not be labelled as, or confused with, 'resistance to change' (see [Chapter 5](#)) and stamped out accordingly. Tensions and contradictions can constitute powerful seeds and drivers for change. Managers are advised to embrace these where possible and to look for ways that their practice might alter for the better (even though it may not look that way at the time).

Finally, our case and discussion highlight the need for those involved in managing music to distinguish between different forms of music-making, as each requires different sets of skills and managerial tools. Our discussion of the flash mob, and the way in which it differed from the RSNO's customary practice, suggests that organising music-making can be ordered along a continuum that ranges between two extremes, from more to less routine and from more to less bureaucratised. At one

extreme, we can find highly structured, ordered and bureaucratised forms of organising music, such as those exemplified by large, stable orchestras. These organisations share several characteristics with other modern forms of work like offices or factories: a stable location, a set rhythm of work, a well-defined division of labour and hierarchy, stable employment relations based on technical qualifications and a distinction between (and tensions among) professional and managerial authority. At the opposite extreme, we find highly improvisational, emergent forms of music-making (see [Chapter 16](#)), from street performance to spontaneous jam sessions in cafés, restaurants or public spaces. These pre-date the creation of the modern music industry and exist in parallel. In these forms of music-making, the location is transitory, the division of labour negotiated on an ad-hoc basis, no stable employment relations exist, and participation is based on skills and capacity to contribute (rather than on technical qualifications). In between, we find intermediate forms like the flash mob, but also one-off concerts or festivals. Although in all cases the outcome of the activity is the creation of sounds for the benefit of an audience (which in extreme cases can be composed of the performers themselves), the object of the collective work, and the goals and constraints that these different forms hold together, are vastly different. Managing music will mean very different things in such diverse circumstances. What this means can be the object of further, very exciting and very relevant future research.

### **Application questions**

- What activities, objects of activity/work and tensions/contradictions are discernable in the situation?
- How do things proceed such that objects of activity are both contested and hold together somewhat disparate groupings?
- How do contradictions function to allow the activity to expand?
- How are people enrolled into the activity?
- How is the activity co-configured (and changed) over time?
- How can leaders in the situation be sufficiently 'on top' of things without over-controlling them?

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# Orchestrating a flash mob: reach and reputation

*Jane Donald and Gail Greig*

## **Introduction**

Jane Donald is Director of External Relations at the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO). Her professional career has been spent working in marketing and PR for arts organisations, including Glasgow Concert Halls, the Celtic Connections festival and the Theatre Royal in Glasgow. Jane has experience of organising a range of musical events to maximise audience reach and engagement, reflecting the social remit of the publicly funded national arts organisations in which she has spent most of her working life. One such initiative involved the RSNO and a performance of an orchestral ‘flash mob’, undertaken in collaboration with colleagues at Glasgow International Airport. This section tells the story of how the flash mob came to be, and what happened when the orchestra visited the airport.

## **Marketing the RSNO**

The RSNO is one of five Scottish nationally funded arts organisations, with a cultural remit including raising the profile of Scotland among international audiences and bringing music to as wide a range of Scottish people as possible. It is a complex organisation, with the seventy-nine musicians who constitute its heart in the form of the orchestra playing on stage. Organising a performing orchestra requires significant work, which is the responsibility of a range of people with a variety of roles. These include the RSNO board, the chief executive, the music director, concert and programme planning, learning and engagement, marketing, communications development and finance, as well as a host of other technical and support roles.

Each year, the RSNO gives a variety of performances of different types of classical music, from popular favourites to less well-known critically acclaimed pieces, and music that enables young people and hard-to-reach

audiences engage with the classical genre. Organising events to showcase particular musical styles to the relevant audiences is central to performing this wide-ranging repertoire. Raising and maintaining the RSNO's profile as a national Scottish cultural organisation is an important part of ensuring that classical music reaches the range of possible audiences, both at home and abroad. This challenging responsibility is central to the work of the RSNO's marketing and development team, who need to achieve maximum effect with minimum budget. Therefore, opportunities to support the RSNO remit through publicity and sponsorship, in partnership with other suitable organisations, are most welcome.

The following sets out how collaboration with Glasgow International Airport, around a mutual desire to raise Scotland's cultural profile and to represent the country on the international stage, resulted in some unusual marketing and international publicity for the RSNO in its efforts to bring classical music to a wide-ranging audience.

### **Publicity through collaboration**

The RSNO had professional contact with the PR manager at Glasgow International Airport. He was running an initiative to promote the airport as 'Scotland's destination airport' by showcasing Scottish culture to enhance the experience of passengers spending time at the airport. The initiative would take the form of a festival and was entitled 'Best of Scotland'. As Scotland's national classical music organisation, he wanted the RSNO to contribute to the event. In return, the RSNO could expect free advertising and publicity at the airport (worth a considerable amount, given the RSNO's small marketing budget). This seemed like a good reciprocal collaborative opportunity, so thoughts turned to what the orchestra might do at the airport.

### **Ideas – orchestral music in public places: the flash mob**

An airport is not the typical setting for orchestral music: spaces are designated for particular functions, some are more accessible than others, and everyone is trying to go somewhere else. So how to present classical orchestral music in this setting? Run-of-the-mill suggestions in situations where space is limited are to provide soloists or small groups of players, much like a chamber orchestra. As they discussed this, the RSNO team realised it would be important to present a symphonic sound, as this is what marks the RSNO out from other performing classical music forms. So, how might the collective orchestral sound be produced in a constrained place like an airport? And which pieces of

music would be suitable? Classical music pieces are often quite long, but air travel involves relatively limited time and a range of required travel tasks.

The team started to talk about the possibility of creating an orchestral flash mob. According to *Brewer's Dictionary of Modern Phrase and Fable* (2009), a flash mob is 'a phenomenon of the early twenty-first century consisting of a crowd that suddenly assembles in a place, engages briefly in a coordinated and apparently gratuitous activity (e.g. a pillow fight) and then as suddenly disperses'. This sounded like the perfect solution: a (seemingly) spontaneous, short, live, collective performance for no apparent reason, apart from bringing pleasure – could the RSNO perform a flash mob at the airport?

### **Planning a flash mob**

The logistics of organising the flash mob were challenging. The first step was to articulate plans internally: not an inconsiderable task. Players would need their instruments, many of which are large and difficult to conceal. Some – like cellos – feature spikes to rest upon. This presented a headache in the sharp-resistant security culture of a modern airport. Even a conductor's baton was problematic from this perspective.

Of course, in addition to players and instruments, the right piece of music was needed. Choosing music to perform is a serious issue for an orchestra: it needs to suit the occasion and audience; not damage the orchestra's reputation among the classical music fraternity and fans; and be capable of being tailored to the time slot (perhaps not as originally written), thus requiring the services of the orchestral librarian to produce a suitable score for the players/instruments/time available.

These challenges required the involvement of colleagues on the RSNO board (including the player directors – two members of the orchestra who are elected to represent the players on the board, of which no one in management is a director member) in programming, concert planning and the library. After much discussion, agreement to perform a flash mob was reached by the board and the necessary number of players by doing this on a 'contracted day', so that players were not committed to work other than for the RSNO on that day, and the costs were already incurred by the RSNO. Player directors appreciated the idea of the free advertising at the airport, as they understood the possibility of reaching a wider audience than their core supporters, together with possible assistance with other costs through associated airlines.

### **Securing airport ‘buy-in’**

While the approach to the RSNO came from the airport PR manager, the broader agreement of the Airport Operating Committee was needed. This involved addressing issues that were of no consequence to the orchestra but were significant for the various organisations involved at the airport. For example, the decibel level of the music needed to be measured for check-in staff health and safety, and normal everyday objects like the conductor’s baton and the cello spike presented serious security issues for the airport. In addition, although seeking to enhance the passenger experience at the airport, there was an imperative not to disrupt the already complex process of air travel: passenger flows at different times of day had to be identified to decide when and where the flash mob could be performed.

These challenges – obvious to airport staff – contrasted directly with those for the orchestra. For example, passenger flows and player contracted days had to be aligned to agree when and where to stage the flash mob. This required careful, patient attention to detail by both RSNO and airport personnel to address contrasting challenges sufficiently so that the Airport Operating Committee could agree to the flash mob.

### **Organising the flash mob**

After securing RSNO and airport agreement, the next obvious question was: How do you do a flash mob? No one involved had any experience of this sort of ostensibly impromptu performance, but the communications manager at the RSNO had a contact at the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS), who was experienced at flash mobs: ‘He was great because . . . he just knew – he had a whole event plan of things that we had not thought about’. He explained that successful ‘mobs’ formed suddenly, performed and then melted away, so performers had to be in situ before the performance. A narrative of ‘The RSNO Goes On Tour’ was established, providing ‘cover’ for being at the airport.

Now attention turned to more practical, central details. First, music: if flash mobs begin small, build quickly, reach a peak and then melt away quickly, appropriate music was needed. They settled upon Ravel’s *Bolero*, which was ideal – even though it was a ‘popular classic’, seen by some as potentially damaging to the RSNO’s reputation. Starting with one player (drum), the music gradually builds to involve many more players – giving the full orchestral sound – and then fades again as it ends. *Bolero* therefore allowed for a shorter period of loudness than some pieces (in accordance with airport needs), and the orchestra’s librarian was able to provide a

short score of about five minutes (although the airport stipulated no more than four minutes).

Second, choreography: clearly the players would be performing in a way that was quite different from how they normally played, since they would not be seated, nor in normal concert dress nor necessarily with a musical score. Knowing where to be and how to do this was crucial – this required choreography and rehearsal to perform ‘The RSNO Goes On Tour’. The NTS expert and members of the RSNO team gathered at the airport at night to work out the logistics for staging the performance, then using their measurements to mark out the RSNO hall to rehearse ‘staging’ the flash mob with participating players.

Performing the flash mob required players, other RSNO people and airport personnel either to do things that were entirely new to them or to do familiar things in unfamiliar ways. For example, two marketing assistants from the airport marketing team played airline staff at ‘assigned Madrid flight’ check-in desks. Those responsible for putting flights on the departures noticeboard had to include a ‘fake’ Madrid flight with other actual flights and agree this with others at the airport. Hiding places for large instruments had to be found in advance, so they could just be brought out as the players needed them. This meant that the NTS expert – who knew nothing about the musical aspect – needed a running order of which instruments were needed when, in order to choreograph this (somewhat unusual, for him) performance. Players practised playing music while walking (not sitting), pulling their rolling hand luggage with them (rather than having both hands on their instruments) in the check-in hall (not concert platform), dressed in normal clothes (not evening dress), not in their usual positions in relation to one another’s instruments (but in the order of play of the piece).

Rehearsing the music back at the RSNO performance space initially made the sound level seem louder than the airport’s agreed decibel level (what would the acoustics be at the airport on the day?). Victor – the ‘conductor’ – was also a player. He worked with Richard (RSNO Planning Department) and Charlie (RSNO Concert Manager – responsible for stage managing normal concerts/performances, who had also been a player) to provide the NTS expert with the musical detail he needed to choreograph and direct what would be something of a theatrical performance. Well-respected among the players, Victor and Charlie understood the challenges and could persuade players to perform in such unfamiliar ways, while an outsider would probably not have been so successful.

Those from the RSNO became anxious, but there was a sense that they were ‘all in this together’, and when one person flagged, another provided positive support. In particular the players were nervous, since this was

totally out of their comfort zone of performing orchestral music in usual settings. The NTS expert had advised them to be very confident and exaggerated in what they were doing to make the necessary impact on the day, and Victor helped greatly with this: he led from the front by being entirely positive, conducting in an exaggerated way as advised, and predicting everyone would love it.

If executing the flash mob was challenging for the RSNO, their need to make the performance as widely available as possible through social media and the internet was particularly problematic for the Airport Operating Committee. The performance was being professionally filmed from four vantage points. This presented a serious problem for the airport, in case security personnel were inadvertently captured by any of the four cameras. Initially, the Airport Operating Committee refused permission for filming, but the airport PR manager reassured them by providing camera angles, and similar. Players' luggage had brown card labels bearing the RSNO logo, Facebook and Twitter addresses to enable members of the public to feel they were 'in on the secret' as the flash mob got underway. This enabled the event to be not only filmed but also posted on YouTube and managed via social media – both notoriously difficult for orchestral performances.

In addition to filming the flash mob, the agreed free advertising at the airport came – unexpectedly, at the last minute – in the form of 'reciprocal branding'. At the height of the flash mob preparations at the airport, the airport PR manager told Jane: 'I can get you just about every digital screen in the airport for the day, but we're on a tight timescale – you'll have to send me everything by Monday!' Airport screens are often well above eye level, so the RSNO needed simple but high-impact visuals with few details. Given the (very) short timescale, Jane opted for the RSNO logo, colours and a somewhat contrived but simple image to make the most of this high-profile advertising opportunity throughout the airport complex; it would be almost impossible for travelling passengers to miss. This was captured on the flash mob film and actually remained in place for three weeks, thereby providing the RSNO with the opportunity to reach a wide, diverse group of people travelling through the international airport.

### **On the day – the performance**

The tour bus arrives at the airport with forty-five players with their (smaller) instruments, who go to 'check in' for their 'Madrid flight' dressed normally for travel. They form two queues in front of the two designated check-in desks (in the order that they will play/according to the size of their instruments – some of the larger but still portable ones at the back). 'The

conductor' checks in first, and is asked: 'Do you have any sharp objects in your hand luggage?' He takes out his conductor's baton and the performance begins. A single drummer plays the opening bars of Ravel's *Bolero*. The music builds as players emerge, some materialising with their large, less portable instruments as if from nowhere, and crowds begin to gather as they realise something is happening. For four to five minutes, Glasgow International Airport is transformed by orchestral music. People stop to pay attention – some bemused, others' expressions turning from incredulous to happy. People take out their smartphones or cameras to record the scene, to share or play back later. Just as Victor predicted, the audience response is overwhelmingly positive: 'It was amazing, and there were little kids who just went, "It was the nicest thing". I felt so proud.'

(Share the experience – watch the flash mob at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bttnBn5UMZ4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bttnBn5UMZ4))

### **After the event – reviews and outcomes**

The filming captured the event well, and although Jane had hoped it could be uploaded to YouTube immediately, the digital format meant that the film-maker needed the afternoon to prepare the upload to the web. Meantime, passengers posted their own films of the event and commented on it, and shared it via Twitter. This was an exciting development for the RSNO marketing and communications team: 'My colleague, who does our social media – getting social media to do anything big for an orchestra is always hard – she was so excited, she texted me: "We are trending in Glasgow!"'

The story was covered on Classic FM radio and in various newspapers, although timing could have been better in terms of cultural news – it was competing with the Edinburgh Festival. Nonetheless, the novelty of the event captured people's imaginations: 'Robert [RSNO Communications Manager] put as the strapline on the press release: "RSNO get out of their concert zone", and in some ways it was a really great pun, because that is exactly what we were doing – we were asking them to get into a situation that was unfamiliar.'

As a flash mob, the event was a success. The performance was very well received and was, and continues to be, viewed by many over the internet. The airport was also happy with it: 'they would have us back every week!' For the RSNO, there were mixed outcomes. In terms of reaching a wide and diverse audience the flash mob was extremely successful, as the social media presence and reaction demonstrated. This helped the RSNO in one key performance area, given their status as a nationally funded cultural organisation. They were also praised by their funder for working with

another nationally funded cultural organisation through their collaboration with the NTS – Robert’s link with the expert from the NTS served them well beyond the performance of the flash mob. But in terms of reputation, the picture was mixed. Bringing classical music to a wider audience and working with others was good for their reputation to some extent, but in musical terms there were some challenges about the sound quality. The choice of music was a matter of some debate, and although the players did a marvellous job, the sound quality on the day was not of the usual concert standard. Acoustics, player placement in relation to one another (and one another’s instruments), the physical nature of the performance and background noise all combined to make the sound quality less than perfect. This was a point of learning among the RSNO, for whom sound is so important and usually tightly controlled. So while the film was a huge success, the soundtrack received mixed reviews internally.

Nevertheless, as a whole, the flash mob was a highly successful means of bringing orchestral music to people in an unusual and frequently stressful setting. It appeared to enhance the quality of their experience on that day. People said it made them feel emotional and happy – as evidenced by their expressions. Music performed in these ways seems to elicit such reaction, and the number of classical music flash mobs has increased since the RSNO was brave enough to step ‘out of their concert zone’ to bring such pleasure to so many, working with colleagues to orchestrate a flash mob at the airport.

### **Key lessons**

- Collaboration on several fronts is one way of moving outside the norms of performance (see [Chapters 2 and 14](#)).
- The interplay between cultural and commercial activities can be worked to the advantage of both (see [Chapters 10 and 12](#)).
- The overlap of established practices, and the tensions between them, can be a source of innovation (see [Chapter 17](#)).

### **Discussion questions**

- How can risk-taking and innovation be enabled in musical settings?
- How might some of the dangers with risk-taking be ameliorated?
- What lessons might be learned from this example about the connections and planning needed for ‘apparently spontaneous’ performances?

For more information, visit:

[www.rsno.org.uk](http://www.rsno.org.uk)