



Age of Artists

Interview with

Michael Spencer

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The interview was conducted by Dirk Dobiéy and Marija Skobe-Pilley on September 13th, 2015 in London.

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Introduction

Michael Spencer played for 14 years with the London Symphony Orchestra, before he decided to give up his career as a professional musician and become an education director at the Royal Opera House. In this job, he started to look at how he could give children a better understanding of arts, or the artistic processes. Nowadays, as a coach and consultant, he is basically doing the same thing. The difference being that he shares his experience primarily with adults in organizations and he has created a close connection to Japan and the people living there.

Interview

AoA: If you think back to the time when you were 'just' an artist actively playing and performing - what was your working process like?

Michael Spencer: Individually, there was a lot of personal practice and always some sort of restorative work on one's playing, keeping it up to date. Life in the orchestra was all embracing and it took you away from real life in many ways. It didn't seem like it at that time, but on reflection it really did exclude other things. You were expected to deliver at a high level all the time, and you were on tour a lot. When back in London you were probably working three sessions a day, from morning to night.

Basically, many orchestral players work on a freelance basis; players who are members of the LSO, LPO, RPO and Philharmonia are technically freelancers with few of the protections that would be afforded someone on a full-time contract. Many people don't realize this. The irony was that even though one was a freelance player there was little freedom or flexibility which this status normally affords. It was expected that, as a member of one of these organisations, their work always had priority. All manner of engagements would be squeezed into the diary, and you had to do pretty much all of it.

I had 14 years in the LSO and the first seven years were great, like a big party. A fantastic experience. But after a while, as one year started to replicate the next, I started to question if this really was the life I wanted. It was always going to be the same with little chance of things changing. Quite a sad comment on what is considered to be a creative organisation. So, as with many players in this situation, little by little one starts to become increasingly cynical and lose the initial enthusiasm you once felt. I was becoming increasingly discontented and needed to find some

other avenue to preserve my sanity. This is when the opportunity to become involved in education and outreach work appeared.

At that time, there was a big change underway in the UK that was driven by the Arts Council. They were concerned that arts organizations were failing to link effectively to communities, particularly through their education programmes. They didn't really specify what was meant by 'the community', but implicitly it was suggested that this meant children and schools. Simply, they said if arts organisations didn't evolve much more rigorous education programmes this would jeopardise future funding applications. So, understandably, people started to focus on how to develop the necessary skills to work in educational contexts.

The theatre was far more advanced in this arena. One of their great successes was Theatre in Education (TIE) which had started in the 60's. But as far as music was concerned organisations, especially orchestras, were a long way behind. They generally had a very basic delivery which was extremely boring. At that time, we learned quite a lot from theatre practice, and I because of my interest I quite rapidly became known as one of the leading players to participate in developing this work.

The debate continued as to what would be the most appropriate way of taking this initiative forwards, and there emerged one or two people who had experience both as professional musicians and classroom teachers. They started to give the work a more rigorous grounding and I worked alongside them.

We wanted to create something that was both appropriate for schools and supportive of teachers. Up until then school visits were largely comprised of players standing in front of bemused children with a presentation which went something like: "Here is a violin, it has four strings, it sounds like this...this is a piece by a famous composer called Mozart....it sounds like this..."

We started looking at how we could better engage with children and this really meant how to stimulate their curiosity. In brief, we did this by creating a methodology whereby we facilitated them to make their own music. But we gave this additional focus by basing it on the musical building blocks which go to make up a particular piece of music. In this way, the children had to deal with the same challenges faced by the composer.

I became more interested in education work to the point that it began to pull me away from the orchestra more and more. I started to run my own independent projects and after a little while I was approached to run the education work for the orchestra of the Royal Opera House. Subsequently I became one of its education directors and I had the wonderful opportunity to become involved with a lot of other disciplines: dance, visual arts, design, directing, the technical work backstage, planning, project management etc. It was fantastic. I had about four years of observing and collaborating with this rich source of creativity and was able to develop my own approach to education and access matters.

AoA: It was education for artists at that time?

Michael Spencer: Actually, it was intended to have a focus both outside the organisation and within it. However, although the intention was that artists should have the opportunity to develop their own skills, the reality was that there was never any real investment in rigorous training. As a result, I find that little has moved forwards in the UK over the past 10 - 15 years.

The opera house was an exception. At that time we took care to extend the skills of all artists who participated. For example, we set up a project for children with Asperger's syndrome. Every summer we selected twelve children and worked really intensively with them in a multimedia-based social context. But before we started the project we invited specialists to run a training programme for the performers taking part, exploring the realities

of autism and how they might adapt their personal practice to this new environment.

AoA: It was not a training about the artistic skills but more to enable them to be educators?

Michael Spencer: It was about how to merge together artistic skill with sound educational methodology and good facilitation practice. It's an incredibly dynamic situation and you have to know how to deal with its parameters. One of my favourite expressions is "the good thing about a plan is that it gives you something to ignore!"

AoA: So improvisation is very important?

Michael Spencer: Absolutely!

AoA: Referring to the orchestra - is it rough behind the curtain? How did you experience it?

Michael Spencer: What goes on offstage is not very nice - the knife in the back thing etc. There was a piece of research produced by the Federation of Entertainment Unions a few years ago, 'Creating without Conflict', which involved about 4000 people in the creative industries, and it showed that almost 75% of musicians surveyed reported being bullied at work. That is a staggering indictment.

AoA: So it's like the business world?

It is, but you wouldn't expect it in that sort of situation. It's really unpleasant, and the way it happens is that those with the power base attack people at their most vulnerable point, which is their playing. You have to be pretty tough to withstand it. It's horrifying to see what really goes on in what is otherwise considered, from the outside, to be an enlightened working environment.

AoA: What was the relationship between the musicians in the orchestra like? Which role played the conductor?

Michael Spencer: The music industry changed considerably throughout the 50's and the 60's. It was partly because of the way in which the recording industry started to expand so rapidly. Also, conductors became itinerants. They were always flying from one place to another, so they never really spent much time with one particular orchestra. There were some notable exceptions, but in the main they would appear for about two weeks maximum and then disappear again.

Another major influencing factor on orchestral life, which is well documented by the author and critic Norman Lebrecht, were the business practices of the organization "Columbia Artist Management" (CAMI) who wielded considerable influence on the music industry. They controlled all the big named artists and their fees in what became almost a global monopoly. One of the reasons orchestras struggle financially now is because of the sharp rise in fees demanded by solo artists and conductors assisted by CAMI. The orchestral players have to bear the brunt of this in the level of their own earnings. It changed the whole business model of music making and threw increasing pressure on the players as budgets became tighter.

Orchestras were now faced with a conveyor belt of conductors many of whom had probably just arrived from performing the same piece of music elsewhere in the world. Even your principal conductor might only be present for a maximum of three months each year, and that would be in instalments. So, the connection between orchestra and conductor became an arm's length relationship really. I think the genuine relationship, however, is between the orchestra and the audience. This is an important connection which has to be maintained because it has to remain intact regardless of who might appear on the rostrum. When you get music directors like Gergiev, for example, who flies in for a

day's rehearsal with an orchestra in the morning and then flies back home in the evening, it is difficult to imagine how this helps to develop a rapport which more than professionally distant.

And the role of a music director or principal conductor is not solely to direct the orchestra. He should be its public face and be prepared to make authentic connections outside of the organisation. So out of a sense of survival, orchestras have to develop their own sense of shared and independent identity. Still, you do get some exceptional conductors - and with them, it's a combination of reputation, integrity and good psychology that provokes a good interaction with the orchestra.

AoA: What can business learn from the artistic practice?

Michael Spencer: For me, the idea of taking the arts into business has suffered from being overly naive. For example, "Oh, let's bring musicians in. They know about listening and working (playing) together!" There is a 'Yes' to this, but there is also a huge 'No'. It's an oversimplistic approach which somehow trivialises the experience, and wraps it in a cloak of mystery bewildering for people who often have different tastes and levels of knowledge. There is a whole world of difference in what we mean by listening anyway, and how it plays into the bigger picture of communication.

For me, music is really a form of social technology which helps to promote and sustain interrelationships. When I first started to grapple with this it was on a creativity program for potential leaders. I was working with a range of different business people and I invited them to talk about a piece of music of their choice. It was fascinating to hear how they all talked about their selected piece in the same way: They talked about it emotionally. It's wonderful to do so, but if you only talk about music from an emotional standpoint it's difficult for others to empathise in the

same way because it stems from your own intimate and personal experiences. Other people will have different feelings.

When you look at music from the perspective of process it adds a new dimension: How do the parts work together? What are the fundamental elements? What is the structure? How do the players maintain an unspoken negotiation? It's a totally different way of assessing the experience.

Whenever I work with groups we bring out the essence of this by 'building something'. But in order to do this you have to have a sense of what the materials are with which you are working, and how you can use them to make something compelling.

AoA: Is it fair to say that you build on shared perception?

Michael Spencer: In workshops, we always work towards finding areas of similarity, but also it is extremely powerful to explore the differences. This gives us something upon which we can build.

Sometimes building a shared perception surfaces some interesting surprises. For example, in Japan they use the word 'waakushoppu', because there is no equivalent word for 'workshop' in Japanese. So, they use an imported word to describe a concept of interactive and shared learning which is also alien. But there is no real conceptual understanding of what a workshop is. For the Japanese, it was just a word. It has taken a Japanese professor 3 years to research and define the term before it started to become accepted terminology. There are other examples. For instance, there is no direct translation for the words 'individualism' or 'advocacy'. So, you can see that starting to build a shared perception can have many different starting points.

I find my work in Japan to be endlessly fascinating because of the way in which it exposes the differences and the similarities between cultures, many of which are not immediately obvious. For example, in general terms, the art forms with which we are most

familiar in the West are based on the idea of discourse; the back and forth of ideas and interrogation of concepts. This is because as a society we have a common Socratic background which is all to do with asking questions. You see it in the process of advocacy in our legal systems. In Japan, and Asia in general, they have a Confucian background which is more concerned with harmony and avoidance of conflict. When we work with Western art forms in an Asian context it is crucial that you understand the parameters for difference.

I think that the arts have a most extraordinary ability of acting as a lens on cultural difference. Actually, if you pull the different elements of music and music-making apart and examine how they function, for me, it suddenly becomes a lens on cultural difference. What are the dynamic structures that enable us to work together? Why does music exist in the first place? What purpose does it serve in different social groupings? What are the differences and what are the similarities? The history of music is fundamentally that of generating and supporting the identity of independent social and cultural groups.

AoA: Are we saying if you look through that lens and you turn it towards us that it can help us to build that social relationship?

Michael Spencer: Yes, exactly. But in the current context we need to have the courage to reevaluate why the Arts exist, particularly music, and revisit the purpose why they came into being in the first place, particularly in the context of social exchange.

Generally, we have a fixation on Western art forms which have, for many people, become just a form of elaborate decoration; Stephen Pinker talked about music being no more than 'cheesecake' - although neuroscience now gives us a completely different perspective. These opinions, which encourage a devaluation of the role of the Arts in society, act in a downward spiral which is, for

example, one of the reasons why funding is constantly under attack.

A lot of my thoughts around this came from the good fortune I had in forming deep links with Japan. I got this passion some time ago. It was strange how it came about. I had already visited Japan several times as a performer and found it fascinating. Then I reached a certain age which somehow served as a watershed for me. What things in life had I not achieved, but for which I still had the desire? Well, there were two things. I hadn't really learned a language, neither had I learned the piano. So, I first bought a piano and then my first Japanese textbook (laughing). Both have been a fascinating and challenging journey because they raised lots of interesting questions about lifelong learning and cultural difference.

If you look where most of the creative advancements have taken place over the past 3,000 years - technologically, sociologically, in the arts or whatever - they have tended to emerge in the West and not in Asia, particularly in the last 2000 years. I wonder if in some part this is to do with the written languages that predominate in these regions. In the West, we use alphabets with limited numbers of characters. We use the characters freely, and can accommodate new words and define concepts comparatively easily. You can't do that with Japanese. Their written language is based on Chinese, and they have to use a separate phonetic script called Katakana to assimilate words from other countries. For example, the Japanese for 'ice cream' is 'aisukureemu' (アイスクリーム). This is fine when you are dealing with physical objects, but as I mentioned earlier, it presents all sorts of challenges when you apply the same process of transliteration to conceptual thinking.

In some ways, the written Japanese language is quite restrictive. It's derived from Chinese characters, thousands of them, but they are quite specific in meaning. So, they don't have the same inbuilt flexibility in usage as the letters in European alphabets. Many

Japanese struggle to remember the characters, and personal experience has shown that it's often the case that although the meaning of a character is understood, there is much ambiguity about how it should be pronounced. Indeed, reading Japanese, even for the Japanese, sometimes seems to be a bit of a hit or miss affair. That is just so interesting.

It's because of this comparative inflexibility in the written language that I have wondered to what extent it has had an impact on creative thought. As we know from the electronics industry, whilst the Japanese are masters of replication and improvement, until comparatively recently they have not been drivers of genuine innovation to the same extent as elsewhere.

One of the particular challenging issues we face in workshops is how to deal with questions. Because of social and cultural mores, the process of asking questions in a Japanese context is particularly difficult. There are several complicated reasons for this, some of which I have mentioned earlier, and when you run a workshop you have to take this into account. One of the observations I make to participants is that in America, people say there is no such thing as a dumb question. In the UK we say "Oh yes there is!" but we still ask the question. In Japan however, people think "I've got lots of questions, but I'm not going to tell you what they are!" Without wanting to run the risk of oversimplifying things, this is largely because of a reluctance to take responsibility because the risk of failure implies a loss of face particularly amongst older generations. So, when I run a music project, although it's about handing over responsibility to the participants, in Japan there are also other matters that have to be taken into account

AoA: And taking responsibility starts with asking questions?

Michael Spencer: Yes, not being afraid to ask questions. And particular for Japan as I have just explained. Historically they

became a nation that looked very much inward during the Edo period (1603 - 1868). This has had a very long tail and it is readily acknowledged that this needs to change. The Olympics in 2020 are acting as a strong agent for this change. Questioning existing processes is very much a part of this. And it lies at the heart of the process of making music in which we have to work together, come up with ideas in an unfamiliar medium, handle complexity, deal with intangibles, to be able to reflect well and use judgement etc.

AoA: That action, reflection and the knowledge that you provide enables them to ask their questions or ask to ask them differently? Asking and understanding as a starting point for such a social engagement on a multicultural level?

Michael Spencer: Exactly.

AoA: If you are preparing a workshop would you think of a certain piece of music?

Michael Spencer: It changes all the time and it's one of the challenges for clients who are used to working within set processes. That's why you've got to take time to understand their world and their culture. Our challenge is persuading the companies we work with to give us that time.

AoA: What is the maximum amount of people you can do it with?

Michael Spencer: Oh, I've run projects with up to 500 people, but there are limitations around this. It is quite difficult to deal with the logistics of splitting them into groups and bringing it all together at the end. 30 is generally the optimum number of people. But before we can start work we need to take them on a journey in which they start to think of music in terms of being a process, rather than a skill or a service. We all understand music as a skill or a service, but we seldom think of music as a process, and we don't understand it as such.

I have also developed a triangular matrix of relationships with regard to learning which is curiosity, how one makes choices, and relationships. This brings us back full circle to where we discussed the idea about music being a tool for creating social relationships.

AoA: So, it's about the art form itself - music in your case. And the music is the catalyst in order to get to curiosity, choices, commitments and social relationships?

Michael Spencer: That's it. And generally speaking, I think there is now huge potential for the Arts where, in the middle of massive technological advance, we can reintroduce the value of creating authentic human to human exchange and genuine connections. Everyone talks about communication technology and how it's linking us better together. I would dispute that - it's not. It's confusing the hell out of people. It has actually been manipulated into a divisive tool which stimulates discord. This is why the cultivation and maintenance of good judgement processes is important, and something which lies at the core of my work.

AoA: What do you think about the notion of performance. I ask questions, I make choices, we create something and then we need to let it go somehow. You cannot control it anymore.

Michael Spencer: We are told increasingly that business is about the management of intangibles. There is perhaps nothing more intangible than making music. Musicians create meaning, and support the development of relationships by making air molecules move. And listeners have to rely on memory to recall the experience. Unlike a painting, music is not a tangible object. Participants take all these new concepts back into their businesses.

AoA: So their work result is the performance then?

Michael Spencer: Yes, exactly, but also understanding processes that underpin it. We provide the components and they take the decisions. Performance is part of the outcome, but of equal importance is the process of creation and rehearsal. This involves many things including risk taking, which brings into play trust and permission. These sit alongside curiosity, making choices and relationships.

People rarely see the orchestral rehearsal process and that's where a lot of things happen at many different levels. In performance, once the orchestra starts rolling, the conductor more often than not has to go with them. (laughing)