
Music Education under Threat

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ABSTRACT Leicester-Shire Arts in Education has long had both a national and international reputation for providing high-quality music education to young people. Last year, its future seemed in jeopardy as a result of County Council spending cuts. This article provides a historical background to the service, and describes how a campaign developed to defend the provision. The campaign has achieved some success, but the service has been reduced and its longer term future remains uncertain. Continued public spending cuts, and a perception that arts education is a luxury, not a necessity, do not bode well for the future.

Introduction

When I was seven years old I began to learn the violin with tuition provided at my school by the Leicester-Shire [1] Arts in Education Service. This experience was very different to anything else I did at school. Two years later I joined the Junior Strings Ensemble, which involved me catching a bus each Saturday morning to Leicester to play with other young musicians like myself from across Leicester City and Leicestershire. Over the years, the support of Leicester-Shire Arts has helped me make progress, and I now perform with the Leicester-Shire Schools Symphony Orchestra. As a consequence, I have had the opportunity to perform at places such as the Birmingham Symphony Hall, as well as venues less close to home, including Paris and Leipzig. Music, for me, has often provided a distraction from an education system driven by targets and results.

Last year I was horrified to find out that this service may be significantly reduced due to County Council spending cuts. In this article I describe how Leicester-Shire Arts has developed over 60 years into the service I have had the benefit of experiencing. I then describe the campaign to defend the service and some of the successes it achieved. Although the worst of the cuts were prevented, a question mark still lingers over the future of the service.

History

For over sixty years, Leicester-Shire Arts in Education has been providing excellence for young people of all backgrounds in the performing arts. The 'County School of Music', as it was originally known, founded by Eric Pinkett OBE in 1948, was built on the principle that 'children everywhere should be given the chance to play instruments'. Music, however, did not appear to be a priority in post-war Britain, as both funding and support remained scarce.

Despite the initial difficulties, the service had by the early fifties grown in size, and had gained an international reputation with its European tours (tours which still continue today with the Leicester-Shire Schools Symphony Orchestra [LSSO] and Symphonic Wind Band [SWB]). The LSSO has worked with the likes of Sir Michael Tippett, André Previn, Sir Arthur Bliss and Sir Malcolm Arnold – just a few of the famous names in classical music that have either conducted or composed for the orchestra. Pinkett's orchestra has also been cited as the inspiration behind not only subsequent county youth orchestras, but also the National Youth Orchestra.

In 1976, the service expanded to include Dance (which had previously been sponsored by the Royal Ballet School) and Drama branches, both of which also became considerable successes in their own right.

Current Provision

Leicester-Shire Arts in Education grew considerably from its limited beginnings, and now caters for over 10,000 students. Around 6,000 students in 200 schools receive instrumental tuition, and various performance groups meet to rehearse on week nights and Saturday mornings. These range from ballet to bhangra; from a symphony orchestra to a steel pan ensemble – all reflecting Leicester's diverse population. The groups are involved in around 80 public performances a year, including the annual Christmas concerts held at Leicester's De Montfort Hall.

The LSSO remains the jewel in Leicestershire's crown, and developed a number of feeder orchestras for younger children to progress through, usually from the age of eight. Students are encouraged to play less popular instruments (such as the viola) through subsidised orchestra membership and tuition, and some instruments are available for free loan (a bassoon, for example, would otherwise cost upwards of £2000 to purchase).

Students are given the opportunity to achieve excellence through taking part in national competitions, going on the annual European tours, and performing in top concert halls. Every year, a number of Leicester-Shire Arts students go on to study at the music colleges, and indeed numerous international professional orchestras feature ex-LSSO members.

However, benefits extend far beyond music-making: Agnes Cameron, 16, said: 'I've played in Leicester-Shire Arts now for over 8 years; over that time I've met so many wonderful people; played so much amazing music and grown up a

lot'. The value of the service isn't only recognised by the students however; *The Observer* declared: 'Financial backing, musical instruments, professional advice and tuition are being proffered constantly and enthusiastically. The result is that the County sends out students well equipped to become top professional musicians; its scientists and engineers have an inestimably valuable cultural awareness; and often it has launched a pupil on a career who might otherwise have foundered by the way'.

Provision under Threat: the impact of the cuts

However, the future for Leicester-Shire Arts in Education is looking increasingly uncertain, as it becomes another victim in the drive for cuts. Although initially a free service, 68% of its budget now comes from parents and schools: orchestra membership, for example, costs around £70 per term (though those on Job Seeker's Allowance and other benefits can receive subsidies). Instrumental music tuition is much more expensive, and this can be a prohibitive expense to those on lower incomes. The remainder of the £2.9 million budget is funded by the Government (21%), and council grants (9%). In 2010 Leicestershire County Council announced plans to cut funding by £420,000, with further cuts of £85,000 from government funding. The impact on dance and drama services was immediate and these have already been axed, affecting around 3,500 young people. Since May 2011 the service has been rebranded as Leicester-Shire Schools Music Service, reflecting the demise of Dance and Drama. The County Council's website currently (June 2011) announces that dance and drama services are no longer 'financially viable' and goes on to state:

As it was recognised that many of the Drama [and Dance] programmes could be 'bought in' by schools, the exit strategy for the closure of the service includes support and help for the Drama [and Dance] staff to set up on a freelance/small business basis after their redundancy on April 30th 2011, to offer their services to schools and parents for the benefit of the children and young people of Leicestershire and Leicester City.

The impact on Leicestershire's music provision looked to be equally serious. When the cuts were announced it looked as though several of the performance groups would be disbanded and opportunities for groups to meet and rehearse would be reduced. Many of the service's instrumental teachers would lose their jobs and be expected to become self-employed in the same way that Dance and Drama staff were being 'supported and helped' to become freelance. The service was effectively being privatised.

Campaigning against the Cuts

Leicestershire's proposals for music education immediately met with opposition. Within hours of announcing the proposals, Facebook groups were set up by

those wishing to protest the cuts. The most popular, 'Save Leicestershire Arts in Education' has provided a forum for nearly 600 people who felt passionately that the service should be saved, and the 'Keep funding for Leicestershire Arts in Education!' online petition secured nearly 700 signatures.

The Facebook group is largely made up of members and ex-members of the Leicester-Shire Arts in Education groups, many of whom now play in professional orchestras or teach music themselves. Comments on the group page are often genuinely heartfelt, personal accounts not only of the years that people have enjoyed during their time at Leicester-Shire Arts, but also the significance it has had on their later lives; 'confidence' being the most referred to benefit gained. This group, perhaps above anything else, is a testament to the enormous impact that the service has on hundreds of people's lives, and subsequently the passion they feel in wanting to save it.

In December of 2010, a rally took place in Leicester City centre, again using Facebook to build support. Organised by the students themselves, the protest was well attended, and received backing from local campaign group 'Leicestershire Against The Cuts', and both the Leicester and Leicestershire branches of the National Union of Teachers. The NUT described the cuts to the service as being 'incredibly short-sighted'. As well as speeches, leafleting and petition signing, the rally also featured a string quartet from members of the LSSO, who stoically played through a movement from Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony in the snow!

The campaign coincided with, and was greatly influenced by, the student protest movement over tuition fees. At a time of great anger and disillusionment, politically charged students finally felt they were not only being heard but also being taken seriously as bodies able to effect change. The local media was drawn towards the issue of the Leicester-Shire Arts cuts, often setting them against the background of the 'jilted generation' who were already facing the prospect of sky-high tuition fees and a loss of Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). Students not even old enough to be able to vote were being interviewed for radio shows, newspaper articles and even news features on the television, as the campaign quickly developed with a momentum that no one had anticipated. The campaign also demonstrated the importance of social networking sites in modern-day activism, as a fast way to rally together support and access masses of people in the age of the 'Twitter Revolution'.

The campaign immediately brought a reaction from the local authority. Although it is impossible to make direct links between the campaign and Council decisions, it was the case that the Council stepped back from its 'worst-case' cuts scenario and began to consult more widely about the future of the service. For those involved in the campaign there was a real sense of securing a result.

Music Education: wider issues

Part of the background to the campaign to save Leicestershire's music provision was a national report into music education, commissioned by Michael Gove. The Report was produced by Darren Henley, Managing Director of Classic FM. The report recognises the very unequal access young people have to quality music education. The Report states (somewhat reminiscent of Pinkett) that 'every child should receive a strong, knowledge based cultural education and should have the opportunity to learn and play a musical instrument and to sing'. Henley suggests a 'Wider Opportunities' scheme in order to achieve this. At first, the review appears to set out progressive and positive ideas, highlighting the importance of music in the National Curriculum, and also the need to alter the current inconsistency in the quality of music education nationally.

However, on closer inspection there are a number of serious concerns about the Henley Review's recommendations. For example, the 'Wider Opportunities' scheme put forward by Henley may be less favourable than some current provision. The central idea of the review is that funding is to be 'salami sliced' between schools, rather than centralised on institutions of excellence in local authorities. There are some references to local authority provision, but these are not clear. As local authorities' role is reduced, their ability to provide the types of opportunities provided by Leicester-Shire Arts must be under question. The Review recommends that 'All children at Key Stage 2 should have the opportunity to learn an instrument through whole class ensemble teaching'. This is commendable if young people receive a high-quality experience with access to appropriate instruments and tuition. However, there is every chance this will be at the expense of the opportunities provided at a local authority level, such as those provided by Leicester-Shire Arts, in which case there is no clear benefit.

The Review also recommends that music education should remain as a statutory requirement as part of the National Curriculum (recommendation 9), but the Government's response indicates that this will be assessed in light of the wider review of the National Curriculum. It is not clear, therefore, whether music and other performance-based subjects, will have a significant place in the National Curriculum. Certainly, the emphasis on 'core subjects', and Michael Gove's claim to reduce curriculum proscription, runs the risk of performance-based subjects continuing to be marginalised.

However, perhaps the biggest concern is based on Henley's recommendations not being costed – 'At no time during the course of undertaking this Review have I been working to a budget', Henley stated. This may be understandable at one level, but in a context of deep spending cuts there must be a real concern that the Coalition's cuts will undermine any potential improvements. High-quality music education, such as that provided by Leicester-Shire Arts, can be costly, and as the experience in Leicestershire County Council shows, there is a real danger that it is seen as an unaffordable 'luxury' when cuts are being considered.

Future Possibilities

At the time of writing, the longer-term future of Leicester-Shire Arts in Education remains uncertain. The Council has scaled back from its original proposals, and has introduced a 'restructuring' of the service. The local authority is closing down the Knighton Fields Centre, historically the home of Leicester-Shire Arts in Education, and is basing more provision around the County. The LSSO will continue, but several of the feeder orchestras are also being reorganised. It would be foolish to believe that any of these changes are being brought about to improve the service, although the Service Director claims these are not part of a 'cost-cutting exercise'. To many observers it looks as if the changes are desperately trying to make the best of a very bad lot. There must therefore be serious concerns about the longer-term future of the service. It feels as though it is being broken up and its outstanding quality is being threatened. The danger is that once this is lost, it can never be replaced. It has taken 60 years to build the service. Unless people are willing to defend music education (in Leicestershire, or elsewhere) then it may take considerably less time to destroy it.

I have been part of Leicester-Shire Arts for almost all my school career. I feel strongly that those following me should have access to the same fantastic experiences I have had.

Note

- [1] This spelling reflects that Leicester-Shire Arts is a service jointly provided by Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council. The spending cuts discussed in this article were a decision of the County Council.

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