

Speaker 1:

You're listening to Meditations On. I'm David Baile, Chief Executive Officer of the International Society for the Performing Arts. This special episode of Meditations On is the second in a three part series recorded in front of a live audience at ISPA's 2023 Congress in New York City. We invited Ilter Ibrahimof, Artistic Director of Canada's Fall for Dance North Festival, to speak with three emerging arts leaders who have each in their own way, broken with convention and challenged the world to embrace an expanded notion of what is possible in the arts. This episode of Meditations On is sponsored by AMS Planning and Research. AMS helps the arts, culture and entertainment sectors adapt and change to realize ventures that are effective, resilient, and vital. Meditations On will be featured on AMS's [artsintelligence.com](#), alongside important industry data, observations and best practices. Learn more about AMS at [ams-online.com](#).

Speaker 2:

Toks Dada is a classical music curator and head of classical music at Southbank Center in London since December 2020. He holds a Master's in Arts Management and Bachelor of Music degree from the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. And in July 2020, was appointed an honorary associate of the college. Toks is passionate about finding new approaches within classical music and ways to attract new audiences and engage young people. At Southbank Center, he puts the audience at the heart of what he does and spends most of his time thinking about how to close the gap between them and the art form he's so passionate about. With programs focusing on diversifying the choice of presentations and creative partnerships, he has already made significant changes to encourage a wider definition of classical music and who it serves. As the economic and logistical challenges continue to grow for venue based arts organizations, he's here to encourage us to take a fresh look at the critical tools that are at our disposal, to be more intentional about our curatorial practices, communications with our audience, collaborations with other artistic institutions, and ultimately, to keep our passion a workable reality.

Toks Dada:

Thank you, Ilter. Thanks everyone. So during the summer of 2020, I began to rather publicly question, does classical music need to innovate in order to survive? The conversation of the moment very much was centered around immediate recovery for obvious reasons, but I felt really strongly that to safeguard the future of classical music, we needed to think differently about what we do. And to do this, we would need to challenge ourselves and ask ourselves difficult questions. Now, during that time, classical music did demonstrate to a certain extent that it can adapt, albeit out of necessity. But as we move into this next phase, I feel really strongly that we must urgently acknowledge that the justification to evolve this art form stretches far beyond the events of that moment. And for me, arts venues, with their kind of unique position within the artistic ecology, are a crucial part of that evolution and actually can really lead that evolution.

So today, this is my meditation on arts venues as agents of change. I'll be talking about five tools that we all have, but we can look at with a fresh perspective. And because this is not just a time for reflection, but for action, as was referenced in the opening of this Congress. As we meditate together, I'm going to pose a series of provocations to help us all consider how we might move towards this urgently needed evolution.

So the first tool, if you like, that I want to talk about is leadership. I think in any conversation about the future, we have to start by asking ourselves whether the right people are contributing to the conversation because it's those people, those with a seat at the table who are responsible for dreaming and leading us into the future, it's those people that I think are any organization's greatest asset.

Two years ago, Southbank Center in the UK decided to do things differently. Shortly after I was writing what I was writing, and as I say, I began to really publicly question the future of classical music. Shortly after that, Southbank Center appointed me as their head of classical music. And at the age of 33, I'm the youngest person in a senior curatorial role in classical music in the UK. But within classical music, I stand alone, as a young leader. And I think one of the reasons for this is that when I look back over my kind of 12 year journey thus far, and think back to how I started, the number of young people in their twenties who were able to study for a degree, found a company and sit on the board of a major arts organization, a few and far between. I mean, that's that not the kind of traditional route for your average 20-year-old.

And I think it's absolutely right and appropriate that those that are younger than the rest are able to demonstrate that they are as qualified to do these roles as their 40 or 50 year old counterparts, I think, that's absolutely right. But I also think that if we want more young people to have a seat at the table or better still occupy leadership positions, then do we as a sector need to find a different way. So first provocation. As leaders, what are the sensible tangible pathways for young people to contribute or lead conversations within your organizations? In what ways can you provide training or mentorship? What would it look like if every CEO or senior leader that's listening to this podcast committed to mentoring a young person for six months? Or if every senior of artistic leader that's listening to this podcast was able to welcome a young person to shadow them for a whole season?

There are many organizations in other creative industries that continue to thrive on the vision of young leadership. So not simply we're going to kind of have them in and shadow us, but we are the kind of older people. So we've got the wisdom and we know best, but actually really embracing young leadership. I mean, I look at industries such as fashion and technology. Balmain, the fashion house, the creative director started when he was 25. So there were all of these industries that really thrive on young leadership, and I just think what would the future of classical music or the arts more broadly look like if we also followed a similar approach? So the first provocation is really about leadership.

The second tool, if you like, is about the curation of the program. And I think any company that's attracting new people to classical music or indeed any art form, does so for the benefit of that entire art form. And the curation of the program is the most direct way that we can attract new people. But I have to admit, as a sector, classical music is at times guilty of taking a very academic approach to how we curate. As an audience member, you have to have a certain amount of inherent knowledge to understand what we're offering you. And as a result, the way that we talk about the program to audiences is also rather academic. For those people that are already engaged with what we do, fine, that approach has resonance. But what can we do for those people who are not currently engaged, but for whom we still have a responsibility to serve?

For my first season at Southbank Center, which we just launched in September, just gone, we've absolutely taken an audience focused approach. We've built a couple of new programming strands to really intentionally speak to people, as I say, who I feel really strongly we are there to serve. So to give some examples, contemporary audiences who are hungry for work, for repertoire that's written in the present day, that addresses themes that speak to a modern world. We're really guilty of this in classical music because we have this 400 or 500 year back catalog, if you like, and we too often default to that back catalog. So I felt really strongly that we should be offering something for our more contemporary audiences, for families who want to open the ears of their young children to the world of classical music. And also to people who have not experienced classical music before, but want to engage with it as part of an experience that doesn't feel alien to them, but feels more like the other experiences that they have in their day-to-day life.

So when we launched the season, we actually launched with an opening festival, which brought all of these new programming strands from the fringes where you would perhaps expect some of these

initiatives to be, but to the forefront of the program so you could move around all of our spaces for that entire weekend, moving between these different forms of content. We had some traditional content as well, of course. But what was clear to us was that if you curate with intent with the audience in mind, the audience will come.

We had about 10,000 people during that weekend, but the big story for me was that almost a third of those were first timers, and these were not people who already came to the center, but maybe they came to other art forms, some of those existed as well. But almost a third were people that were completely new to the center. And for me that was really telling, which is that, as I say, if we program with intent, we program experiences that resonate with people, then people will come. So my provocation there really is that, I guess to remind us that we exist to serve as many people as possible.

So let's challenge ourselves. Who are the people that you and your organizations are not currently engaging with and what can you offer them? And this is quite an uncomfortable question for many curators because it means that the experience might look or feel very different to what we as insiders are used to. As far as I'm concerned, if that's the case, then even better because we're not programming for ourselves, we're programming for the people that we're trying to reach. And by taking that approach, we're trying to bring those people who are, I guess, currently sat on the outside, onto the inside.

The third tool, and I think actually this is one of the most important tools when we talk about evolving our work, is partnerships. I think as we evolve our work at Southbank Center, partnerships continue to be increasingly important. And I think classical music as a whole is really good at forming partnerships. People, every season we've got this resident artist or this associate ensemble or this new card. People are really good at forming partnerships. I think where we're less good as a sector is reevaluating those partnerships or even stepping away from those partnerships when needed. Just to give a couple of examples of how we have evolved our partnerships at Southbank Center, the typical partnership model in classical music is the resident orchestra. So full size symphony orchestra based in your venue, performing a number of engagements a year, but really speaking to the classical music tradition.

And when I started, we had four resident orchestras who really represented that tradition, but we also had a second group actually on a second tier, second tier down, of associate orchestras. And what was interesting for me was that those orchestras very much represented the difference in classical music. So ensembles such as Aurora, a chamber orchestra who bring other art form elements into their presentation of classical music to make it more accessible. Ensembles such as Chineke!, who champion diversity, they're actually Europe's first orchestra of majority black and ethnically diverse musicians. And so for the first time in, well decades, I think about 50 or 60 years, we've decided to refresh our resident orchestra group and we brought Aurora and Chineke! into that group of resident orchestras. And in doing so, I think our message to the outside world was really clear, which is that all of those versions of classical music are equally important.

So this is not about saying yes, so we do care about diversity, but that ensemble's going to be an associate ensemble because really we care about the great classical music tradition a bit more than we care about diversity. Actually, what we were saying was that all of these things are of equal importance. We also announced a new cohort of resident artists at the time, a group of individual artists who were really pushing the boundaries of classical music. And as part of this, as I mentioned at the beginning as a venue, because we occupy that rather unique position within the ecology, we were able to foster lots of new artistic collaborations between our resident orchestras and our resident artists. And these were collaborations that just wouldn't have existed before.

So as an example, Chineke!, who I just mentioned, one of our new resident orchestras collaborating with the cellist Abel Selaoe, the South African cellist who mixes western classical music with music from his

homeland of South Africa. And crucially, when it comes to the resident artists, we only commit to them one year at a time, providing us the opportunity to ask those perhaps uncomfortable questions. How is it going? Is this still working for you? Are we still aligned? How many of us ask those questions on a regular basis? Probably not often enough.

And then lastly, in terms of our partnerships, beyond the titles we've been forming some other really important relationships with ensembles that really reflects what classical music is today. And just to name a few, to give you a sense of how we've refreshed the program, Manchester Collective, a young forward-thinking ensemble with whom we've presented various and contemporary classical projects such as one in our opening weekend festival, which I mentioned, called Weather, which was an immersive visual and sound installation that inspired by the climate change agenda. So as I said, those contemporary audiences that really want an experience that feels like is saying something about the world today. The Multi-Story Orchestra, this is an orchestra usually based in a car park in London. They're not based in a concert hall, so they don't have that cultural baggage, if you like, I guess. And with them, we've presented a whole series of experiences for families, enabling children to unpack the music through interactive participatory activities.

And also Power Orchestra, an ensemble of artists who produce the most fantastic spectacles and fantastic experiences. And again, during that festival, we worked with them to bring in their project called The Anatomy of the Orchestra. And the whole idea was that as a child, you could explore the anatomy of the orchestra. So the orchestra was spread out across open public spaces, and you could move amongst the ensemble and tune in and zone in on different parts of the ensemble. And I think Power Orchestra are really fantastic because they really show what an orchestra can be in the 21st century, that an orchestra doesn't have to conform to that kind of 19th century, well, 17th to 19th century tradition. And also Power Orchestra just happened to be the world's first integrated ensemble of professionally disabled and non-disabled musicians. I think what they do is fantastic. And you can see that with these partnerships, we are really trying to tell a different story about what classical music is.

But I should also make clear that all of the investment in these new partnerships doesn't mean that the work that we were creating before with our existing partners is less important. What we're trying to say is that all of this is equally important. So my provocation to the venue leaders that are listening to this podcast, if it wasn't already clear, when it comes to your existing partnerships, how many of you are continuing to manage partnerships that perhaps need a refresh, but you're continuing to manage those partnerships because that's what you've always done? What if you started to ask those difficult questions about your partnerships? What is working, what isn't working? And are you and your partners still aligned? And if the answer to that last question is no, then can you have that difficult conversation and change direction?

And to all of the leaders listening to this podcast who perhaps work outside of venues, can you be bold enough to challenge your partner venues? Can you be bold enough and identify those audiences who that venue is not serving and really push them and work with them to serve those people and move towards this evolution that I've talked about?

The fourth tool that I want to touch on is about the venue itself, the space. I think for arts venues, you've got a great tool there, which is the space. But when it comes to classical music, the traditional approach often boxes us in quite literally. So typically we focus on the concert hall space and almost think of any activity that's not in that space as secondary. So what's in the concert hall is the kind of core program if you like and what's outside of that is secondary. And we think of the venue in which we're based as the kind of sole destination for our program.

And at Southbank, we've been really challenging that approach when it comes to the role of the venue. As I mentioned with the projects that we've produced with ensemble chairs such as Power Orchestra,

we're really spilling out of the concert hall into our spaces and actually enables us to be much more flexible because you could never present the anatomy of the orchestra project in the way that we did in the concert hall. So using those spaces allows us to be flexible and create different kinds of experiences.

And then the other part of that, which I mentioned, which was that we think of the venue as the kind of sole destination. And I think it's very easy to make the assumption that the product is what we're offering people, what we're programming is the only barrier. And I think it's important to remember that even if the product speaks to people, sometimes the environment is a challenge for people and physically crossing over the threshold actually might be the biggest barrier for some people. So again, at Southbank we've started to really challenge the role of the venue when it comes to classical music. And we're actually working with a couple of organizations so that we can take culture to people rather than expecting those people to come to culture.

So again, Aurora, one of our new resident orchestras, we're working with them, an electronic music venue where the younger people who we want to engage with already go. They're already there, they're already engaged. They attend other things that are not classical music, but by creating a classical music experience in a format that we think will be appealing to that audience, and crucially by, even though that activity is happening offsite by selling the tickets, basically to that activity, we can then continue a longer term conversation with those people. So I think this idea that everything has to happen in our space, I think we could think beyond that. Of course, the majority of our program does happen on site in our space because we can absolutely curate that experience for the audience end to end. But as I say, I think there's an argument that couple of the events that any institution is programming per year should be taking place outside of your four walls to reach the people that you're not currently reaching.

And then lastly, just in terms of space, it would be remiss to not briefly talk about the whole digital space. A lot of classical music ensembles pivoted to online during 2020 because they couldn't perform in physical spaces. And there's been much conversation since then about what should a more consistent streamed offer look like and should we continue to stream, et cetera, et cetera. The merits of that are really clear. So I'm not going to go into that. But for me, what's really interesting is that actually what we're doing is we're using digital technology as a channel for the physical experience. And I kind of question that in terms of the future, and I wonder whether actually what we should be doing is integrating some of those digital technologies into the physical experience to enhance it, to create a different kind of experience.

There's a project later this season where we are collaborating with BBC Concert Orchestra, who are kind of more popular orchestra based in London, CBBC, which is essentially a children's TV network, and Beano Productions who are the producers of The Beano Comic, which is a comic for kids, for those of you that are unfamiliar. And with them, we're bringing to life the comic of the Beano inside the concert hall, live music on stage. And we're using digital technology to recreate some of the elements of the comic in the concert hall. So as a kid, it will feel like you're walking into the comic. So a provocation in terms of space, can you start to reevaluate the role of your physical venue. When it comes to your approach of your onsite work rather than thinking of yourself as an arts venue, can you think of yourself as a venue based arts organization? And I think there's a subtle difference.

So not that you're being led by your venue, but actually you're being led by your mission and your venue is one of the ways in which you can deliver on that mission, but you're not limited to that venue when it comes to delivering that mission. And when it comes to growing the audience, should we look at the traditional venue as perhaps the ultimate eventual destination rather than the kind of singular only immediate destination. And given that there is now your less of a necessity for streamed content because we are back to producing physical experiences, what does it mean in terms of the approach that we take to utilizing digital technology in our programming?

And then my last tool, communication. So when you've done all of that, how are you talking about this? How are you packaging it for the audience? It's often said that attracting new people is the easy part, but keeping them is the hard part, especially for many organizations when producing these new forms of content are one-offs. They don't have the resources to commit to, say, for instance, a family series for the duration of the whole season. And if we agree that actually producing different forms of content for different people is important, then a single organization can't do that alone and work in isolation. We will all be too familiar with a scenario where we walk into a venue and we're presented with a program that in theory is one program, but there are different strands of work and work produced by different resident or touring companies are all fragmented and siloed in different boxes. And when it comes to growing the audience, I think that's a challenging approach to take.

At Southbank Center, we flipped that. It's one of the first things that I did when I arrived two years ago. We now have one singular joined up audience loyalty model. So of course, we still talk about the program with these narratives, with these stories in these strands, but as an audience member, you can pick and mix. So regardless of the strand of the work, what series it sits in, which orchestra or company has produced it, the audience member can pick and mix. So they can pick a piano recital, and ask me of the orchestra with Power Orchestra, and a symphonic concert with one of our resident symphony orchestras, for instance. And they can pick a mix and they can create their own package. But what this means is that we as the venue and our various orchestral partners can work together and pool our efforts in producing strands of content that actually create a much more consistent offer so that we no longer have to do it alone, but we can work in collaboration.

So my provocation in terms of communication, what are the opportunities for you to jointly program with others as part of a joined up model that genuinely grows the audience across an entire strand of work rather than, and we've all seen this, rather than being protective over an audience and thinking, well, actually, this audience belongs to us as an institution alone.

So to conclude, I think it's really, really important that we continue to ask ourselves these difficult questions. And if we do, then I really think that we can all become agents of change. As I've talked about, the tools are actually already at our disposal. All I'm saying is that we should just question how we're utilizing those tools. And if we, as arts venues and those working with arts venues can utilize this moment now, as we enter this new phase, I think we'll find that the future that we all keep talking about, well, the substance of the future is actually already here. Thank you.

Speaker 1:

Meditations On is presented by ISPA. This live episode was recorded at ISPA's 2023 Congress in New York City. It was produced by Johnny Spence, with Live Audio Engineering by Rich Johnson. Our theme music is by Johnny Spence. Special thanks to Toks Dada and Ilter Ibrahimof, and to the America Society for hosting the recording session. You can listen to this episode as well as other ISPA media content on ISPA streams. To learn more about ISPA, please visit our website, [www.ispa.org](http://www.ispa.org), and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.