Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education

Episode 6: Youth Voice Transcript

[Intro music]

Yusef Sacoor: Hello! You're listening to 'Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education', a Music Mark podcast where we discuss inspiring projects, hot topics, and key challenges circulating around music-based work with young people. And if you're enjoying the intro, outro and transition music for this episode, make a note that it's from Able Orchestra, a youth ensemble and musical project allowing music-making on equal terms, specifically supporting those who are neurodivergent and people with disabilities.

Hello and welcome to Episode Six of Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education. This week, Aimee and I were joined by the fabulous creative freelancer and Sound Connections Wired4Music Associate, Yasmine Dankwah, Laura Fullwood, Youth Leadership Coordinator at Orchestras For All, and the Executive Director, Nick Thorne, as we talk through all things youth voice and youth leadership. Enjoy the show!

Aimee Christodoulou: Welcome to Episode Six of Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education. Today we're gonna be speaking about youth voice and we've got some fantastic guests for you to hear from. We're just gonna dive straight in. Can I ask everyone please to introduce yourself, tell us your name, your role, a little bit about your background and the organisation that you work for.

Laura Fullwood: My name is Laura Fullwood, my pronouns are she, her, and I am the current Youth Leadership Coordinator at Orchestras for All. In my role, I get to work with all of the amazing young people who participate in our NOFA and Modulo programmes, that's our National Orchestras for All programme and Modulo, and I get to get them involved in all sorts of ways in the charity, as many ways as possible really.

A bit of background about myself, I have played music for a very long time and just love music generally growing up with a lot of my dad's music, and throughout university I've done a lot of work with young people through volunteering and working in SEND schools, so this role was really the perfect combination of working in a musical environment and working with young people. At Orchestras for All we really champion youth voice and youth leadership. So we have our very own youth leadership programme, which I oversee, and we just try and get all of our young people involved in as many ways as possible in the organisation, from having them on our trustee board, in our core team, and then even on our very own youth board.

Yasmine Dankwah: I'm Yasmine and I'm currently a freelancer, but I came up through Sound Connections' Wired4Music Associate program. In terms of my role during this programme, it

was an 18-month trainee development programme specifically for young people who are involved with like Sound Connections' Wired4Music programme, but also young people who were just interested in music education in general. So I had like established a relationship with Sound Connections prior to that role, in terms of a sort of ethos in centering young people in the decisions and the programmes that they run. So my first involvement with Sound Connections was through their like Inclusive Practice in Action conference, where they had a workforce and they were looking for young people to be event producers on that, and that was in 2022. And I have just been a leech and stuck around ever since and it's been really cool!

In terms of my background I have always been interested in like increasing accessibility into the arts, especially someone from like a working-class background, and also going to a school that was very STEM heavy. So being a part of Sound Connections, their ethos in making music and just creativity as accessible as possible for young people is really cool and really nice. And again, it's been nice to be a part of an organisation that, sort of, similar to Orchestras for All, finds different ways to create pathways into the music education sector. So I think almost half of the work staff that we have currently, are all under the age of 30, two of whom had come up through the Wired4Music programme. And then the Wired4Music Associate programme was just another way to get into working for Sound Connections, but just in a freelance space.I go back sometimes and do some work for them when they call me up. But yeah, that's me.

Aimee Christodoulou: Thanks, Yasmine, that sounds fab. And last but not least, Nick.

Nick Thorne: My name's Nick Thorne and my pronouns are he, him and I'm currently Executive Director of Orchestras for All and I'm also the National Youth Music Organisation co-rep with one of my colleagues, Elen, who was an alumni of our programmes as well. I came to music through health reasons. So I struggled with asthma as a kid and kept on going into hospital and my mum and doctor really encouraged me to kind of take up a wind instrument, and bit of an X Factor story, kind of took up the clarinet and stopped going into hospital. So, kind of have a burning passion for the wider health benefits of music making. Went on to study music at university at Southampton and then stayed in the South West, I worked for Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and their education team, having the pleasure of working all over the South West from Cornwall right across to Brighton and up to Bristol. And then I joined National Youth Orchestra and set up their Inspire programme, which was again all about kind of broadening out who National Youth Orchestra stand for and who they support, mostly targeting state school musicians and musicians that are underrepresented in our sector. And then joined Orchestra's for All in January 2020, and I'll tell you a bit more about that later in episode.

Yusef Sacoor: Thank you so much, guys. Three amazing stories of both the power of music and empowering people through it. So with that, I wanted to ask the young people in the room, which feels like an incredibly rude inference to make to the rest of us. But starting with Yasmine, you kind of alluded a little bit to your journey with Sound Connections and the route that you took through it. I was wondering how you got there and maybe if you could explain a bit about what your freelance work is now, and how Sound Connections' work with young people led you to the point where you are now.

Yasmine Dankwah: In terms of my journey of finding out about Sound Connections, it was through sort of a newsletter that they have. So they've got a monthly newsletter for people who are involved in Wired4Music, which is their sort of like "the child organisation". So Sound Connections is like the parent, they've got like a subsect for 16 to 25 year olds. And at the time I had left another job in the music advocacy space, specifically for black music executives I'd

been doing online. And I was just eager to continue that advocacy journey in terms of looking at it from the context of how do we improve access for young people who want to get into the creative industries. There's so many statistics now about how it is hard, the percentage of working class people within the creative industry space, extremely low. So how do I look for an organisation that sort of aligns with that? But also, just understands how important like creativity is in terms of in the education space, not only in but also outside of it. So yeah, there had been a job opportunity again to be involved as a freelancer in the Inclusive Practice and Action Conference that we had in 2022. And I think it was the first time they had run this sort of like workforce programme. So I applied to be a writer on it, and yeah, essentially it was just, it was a nice way to get to know about the organisation through their main sort of conference, which was really cool. And then after that, I got an email from the programme administrator at the time who'd asked me to like cover for her because I think she saw something in me and was like, I can trust this person. And I think that's something really lovely and beautiful about someone being able to see the potential in someone even if it is a cover role.

So I'd come back and covered a few times and then again saw the opening for the Wired4Music Associate programme pop up. And again, that was really interesting because one interview was like really lovely and it just felt like a chat and it was very centered in what we wanted to learn, and what we skills we wanted to develop. So, just a bit of background about the Wired4Music Associates programme, which I think is like being rerun again this year, so anyone who is 25 to 30, I think, can apply. So it's really exciting. So yeah, it's a trainee programme, essentially upskilling young people who want to go into the music or creative industry consultancy space and work with our insight team in order to have the skills to do that. So we look at like facilitation, how do we go into a room and speak to like young people or like organisationally to running programmes for young people and collect data from that. It's usually just like having an interview, having a little conversation about the programme and how it's working and running. We looked at like project management, had the opportunity to create our own action projects which I'll get into a bit later and even lead panels on the conference that we had yearly so that was really nice. And in terms of how this kind of experience prepped me, one I forgot to say it was initially supposed to be six months but they extended it to 18 again like from some of the research I've done like sometimes six months isn't enough time to sort of develop your skills and progress forward into the next step, so that's really useful.

In terms of how it's like prepped me into being a freelancer, I guess it's having the skills that that I didn't necessarily have and was afraid to like use, so like facilitating, that scared me. I was like 'Talking to young people in a space, I don't know if I can do that, but I am a young person, so it shouldn't be that scary!' You know what I mean? Those little things and being able to say, I have these hard skills, in going to different spaces has been really nice. So I also freelance for a different charity, also a youth charity called Charlie Waller, and again, those skills have been so transferable. And that sort of emphasis in, this is what youth voice is, this is co-production and this is how we do it and being able to take those skills from an organisation that champions that and take it into other spaces who are doing similar work has been really lovely and cool.

Yusef Sacoor: I's really nice to hear that sort of journey of being empowered and trusted, and then how that's gone on to directly influence your ability to do that for other young people as well. And I wanted to know, Laura, if you've had a similar experience?

Laura Fullwood: So my experience with OFA is a bit different. So, my first interaction with Orchestras For All was over 10 years ago now, so quite a while back in 2014 when I took part in the National Orchestras For All programme. I was nominated by my music class teacher at the

time and I travelled up to Leeds with a classmate of mine. We joined the orchestra for a week, did lots of rehearsing, lots of practising and then at the end of the week we performed at Leeds Arena in front of family and friends. So at the time it was the biggest venue I'd ever played in it was such an amazing experience and that was my first interaction with Orchestras for All. I then went on to join their Modulo programme which is our schools based programme. So I went with my other classmates in my music school and we travelled to the West Midlands event, got to play with a lot of other local schools, got to play with a lot of different instruments, and we actually learnt a lot as a class about ensemble making. Again, Modulo was another great experience. School then got really busy, so I got stuck into all the different plays and the performances that we did within school. I did my GCSEs, my A-Levels, and I went on to university as well, and I didn't actually come back in contact with Orchestras For All until 2022 when I applied and was successful for a six-week internship.

I was a programme coordinator for six weeks and I supported the exact programmes that I've been in all of those years ago, so helping support the delivery of those and doing lots of travel bits. So that was really fun. Really enjoyed my time and felt that it was really fulfilling as well. But I had to go back to university. So I went back, did all my classes, finished my degree and then kind of full circle moment, there was an opportunity for me to apply for this role. And I did so, I did the interview and then I was hired and I've been with Orchestras for All since July 2024 and now I still work with all the young people that are in these programmes, just giving them a lot more ownership in the programmes in all the different areas of our charity and just helping them shout out and give that youth voice a space. So yeah, that's my journey with the organisation.

Yusef Sacoor: Do think that your journey with the organisation would have been much harder if they hadn't created those routes for you?

Laura Fullwood: Yes, definitely. I think it's so difficult to know what is out there. So I think it was really a blessing that my teacher had nominated me for that and that she knew about the programme, and that just really kickstarted everything from there. I learned about the other programmes that Orchestras for All offers and I was kind of in the loop then. I had emails so I could keep in touch about other kind of events that they were doing, some of the fundraising and that's how I found out about the internship and the full-time opportunities. I think without that it would have been a lot different.

Yusef Sacoor: Really fabulous to hear. I mean, this nicely segues into asking Nick, why? Why did you do all of these things? I mean, it seems like we may have semi answered this, but what spurred you as an organisation to go, we need to make this available for the young people we work with, and we need to empower them?

Nick Thorne: Yeah, I think youth leadership and youth voice have always been part of Orchestras for All and we're quite a young organisation, young charity, so set up in 2011. And it started with kind of co-creating music with young people. So we had professional composers come in and they worked with the National Orchestra for All, all hundred young people in the National Orchestra, to create compositions and create music. So the music we were playing on the platform was actually written by the young people that were part of the orchestra. So Laura, I'm sure you played some of the music that you kind of co-created with composers as well, which was really great. I joined the organisation in January 2020, as I said, and it was my first role as executive director of a charity. And two months in, the global pandemic hit in March 2020, when kind of everything changed for all of us. And I guess all eyes kind of turned on me a little bit of kind of like, ‘Oh, you're the executive director, you need to kind of decide what

happens now.' And I didn't know the answers. Like, I don't think anyone kind of knew all the answers at that time. And we had lots of conversations about, what do young people need at the moment.?Like, we're here to support young people. And no one knew at that time, you know, March 2020 was such a dark time for all of us. And we were having crisis trustee meetings, as I think lots of charities were. And one of the really obvious things was that we were trying to work out what young people needed, and it was all adults sat around that table thinking, what do young people need? And it was like, we need to go and talk to young people. And through multiple conversations that turned into appointing two young trustees, who are just trustees, we don't call them young trustees, just to try and define it for this conversation. They're alumni of our programmes that joined our board and they're still on our board to this day and one of them is co-chair of the board as well, Joelle, she's absolutely phenomenal young person that's now working out there in the world and bringing her skill set and also knowledge of coming through our programmes and kind of finding that there wasn't a place for her in the sector and Orchestra's for All came along and kind of provided that space for her.

And I guess I'm trying to define how we approach youth leadership and youth voice and also how I think about it in my role as well, because the chief exec or the executive director of any organisation, they hold all the power. They do hold all the power and they hold all the responsibility for organisations. And it's about kind of thinking about new structures and new ways of working because there's so many structures that are in place that like, that's just how... that's what a board should look like or that's what a structure of an organisation should look like. So it's trying to dismantle that a little bit. And I think how I'm starting to think about it now is that we can share out that power, that power within the organisation. So Laura, you can have full ownership of the Youth Leadership Programme. Our programme manager that runs the orchestra can have full ownership, full power of the orchestra that they run. But responsibility is slightly separate. So I still have the responsibility that the organisation is going in the right direction and that we are financially stable and oversee things in terms of responsibility. But the power sharing, we try and disseminate as much as possible. And I guess there's so many kind of topics within what I've just shared as well, and one of the things was about training young people to be on a board.

So I know there's some really great programs about supporting people to join the boards or like programmes for under 25s of how to be a board member. And we had some really interesting discussions as a team and trustees of, what does training for a trustee look like and feel like? And that turned into, I think it's more about the culture of making sure that everyone can share their opinion and challenge what's going on and be heard, be valued, be listened to, rather than, you need to join this year-long programme to mould you into what a trustee should look like. So yeah, we've thought a lot about how to share information, even communicate, not just communicating verbally, communicating through written form, because some people feel more comfortable writing things down. So we're having lots of different ways of approaching, ways of communicating in board meetings or team meetings or, you know, we do a lot of our work online because we're a national organisation. So yes, screens off, cameras off, mics off. Communicate how you'd like to do that.

And the very first meeting that Beth and Joelle, our first trustees joined, was quite a pivotal moment. And we had to do something very boring. We had to change our constitution to allow them to join our board, because we had to increase the number of trustees from nine to 10. Very dull, very boring. The only thing I changed in the constitution was we wanted 10 trustees instead of nine. So the very first item in that trustee meeting that they joined, I said, here's the

constitution, I've just changed nine to 10. That's all I've done. Is everyone happy to approve this? Wonderful. That's perfect. And Joelle raised her hand and said, can I just say something about this? I've read through the constitution and within the document, it says trustees, he and she, and shouldn't it just say they as well? And it was the mic drop moment of, amazing, there's a young person in the room that feels really confident and really comfortable to talk about inclusion and diversity in this way. And from that moment onwards, their voice was equally valued. There was a click moment where everyone felt like, okay, they can bring a different perspective to these conversations we're having. And it's kind of built from there.

Aimee Christodoulou: Thanks, Nick. It's great to hear about how, as an organisation, you're thinking about where young people fit in to the structure of your organisation, beyond just perhaps one-off programmes, but actually how are you bringing them into those important conversations and into how you make decisions. I imagine there's lots of different models that different organisations can use to incorporate youth voice into the work that they do. So I was just wondering how the three of you embed youth voice into the structure of your own organisations, whether that's, I know, Wired4Music with Sound Connections, Yasmine, you do lots of excellent conferences that really centre young people, whether it's getting young people involved on your advisory boards, in your trustee meetings, we want to hear about all the different ways that organisations can truly embed youth voice into all the work that they do.

Yasmine Dankwah: I, firstly, I want to say, big up Nick, just being like open in terms of the integration of like young people within boards as well. And the importance of training, cause I know they can be very intimidating spaces and it's so important I think to have the people that you are sort of stakeholders for being involved in the driving of what the organisation should look like and having those perspectives in the room, because, it's weird because there's so many youth organisations that don't have that. But yeah, and Sound Connections, in terms of board level, we have two young trustees who have often been involved with Sound Connections, whether it be through Sound Connections directly or through the Wired4Music programme, often steering the ship. So one of my colleagues, so Shakira also did the Wired4Music Associate Programme, was on the board in 2020. And that's been really pivotal in her sort of understanding of the values of the organisation. So that's one level at the top. And then in terms of youth voice regarding training, there was again the Wired4Music Associate Program, which was new and was like a pilot scheme.

We also have in the Wired4Music space, so that's more for 16 to 25 year olds. We used to run like loads of workshops for young people who wanted to like sort of develop in terms of their artistry. But we also have Generate, which is a funding scheme for young people, I think it's 18 to 25, who wanna again develop their artistry. So they apply for funding which I know can be quite like 'Ah, money how do I... I didn't even consider this', that sort of thing, but T, who's our young people's programmes manager's really open and really like just give it a try and see how it goes, you know I mean, it's very open. And it's also open to having one-to-one conversations with young people prior to applying so yeah, that's money to develop their artistry which is a lower funding, I think it's like £300 and then £1000 for young people who want to create work for the community. So that could be like leading workshops, I think that sort of thing. So that's another aspect of it. And then we also have our performances. The Wired Up event strands that we have, where we invite organisations who work with young people to platform and showcase their work at Rich Mix on the Rich Mix stage. And that's quite a significant and really nice venue, really good to have on a like performance credit CV, that sort of thing. And then, I think I mentioned this already, the Wired4Music programme has been a really nice gateway for a lot of the young

people to come in and up into and work for the organisation. So I mentioned Tee, Tee was a Wired4Music member. Jasmine does like used to be our communications person, but now works on the Insight team, was also a Wired4Music member. And then we have Perry and like Laura as well, all young people within the organisation working and having their voices and ideas heard and valued. And I think it is that level of trust that was established through that programme essentially that allowed like some of young people to go in and just feel like, 'Okay, I can have a direct impact because I've been through the system as it were, and I know what like sort of what works and what doesn't.' So yeah, I think we include youth voice in various ways at various different levels, but it's always at the heart of what we do because if our work is to support young people, then why not incorporate it at various levels, whether it be through like just an access, one-off program to getting directly involved.

Aimee Christodoulou: Laura, would you like to add to that in terms of how Orchestras for All embed youth voice into the structure of your organisation?

Laura Fullwood: Yeah, of course. So at Orchestras for All we have our kind of very own youth leadership programme or pathway. Through this programme we have multiple different roles and opportunities in which the young people who attend our programmes can be a part of our organisation and be a part of that youth voice. And with each of these roles we have a really clear progression pathway where people can move from one role to the next and get involved in lots of different activities, and there are also really clear responsibilities and ownership points within those roles as well. So this is something that we've developed over quite a while and it's still developing to this day and we're creating new opportunities all the time. So I would say the first example of one of these opportunities would be our Young Leaders role and we offer this during our Nova Residentials for our elder members of the orchestra, so 17 and up, who would like to take on a bit more responsibility during the week and a bit more ownership. And one of the ways in which they do that, for example, is organising our recital evening, which they did in our most recent residential. So we've just kicked off the start of the season for our Nova National Orchestras for All programme, and we have a new cohort of young leaders and they organised our first recital evening for the season and they did absolutely amazing. They smashed it out the park, and I think they're also really proud and really happy to have had that kind of ownership. So that's one of the first ways in which we embed youth leadership in our organisation.

We then have our ambassador programme, which is our first paid position, and this is for alumni members who have been through our Modulo and National Orchestras for All programme, have graduated but would like to come back to continue supporting our events. They get ownership in their role as well and they can choose what area of the charity or the organisation they'd like to specialise in or explore a bit more. And they can change throughout their role if they'd like to. If they'd like to look at wellbeing for one event and then comms for another, they can absolutely do that. It's totally their choice and they get a lot of flexibility within this. And they also set personalised goals. If they have kind of skills that they want to develop or things that they want to learn about, whether that's on the day or for the whole season, they can do that as well. So that's our second one. And again, we've just recruited a new cohort of ambassadors for this season, a new seven ambassadors. That's really exciting and we'll be working closely with them over the season.

We then have our youth board and we have 15 young people aged 14 to 25. So some are current members, some are alumni who volunteer to be on our youth board and on the board they are there to represent and be the voice for all of the young people who attend our programmes. And

Nick spoke earlier about music co-creation and our youth board most recently have helped select the music repertoire for this current season. We had a massive, massive list of pieces of music that all of the young people wanted to play, so all of the members of the NOFA and the Modulo programmes gave their thoughts and we had a massive list, and the youth board then shortlisted this down and then selected about four or five pieces that we're going to play in the upcoming season. So that's one of the ways that we get their youth voice and youth leadership in as well. But we've also got a member of our youth board, Christian Dews, who was a member, is now an alumni, but he's also just composed a piece of music specifically for the National Orchestras for All programme. So he's done that for us this season. So it's amazing to see how he's grown from a member to an alum and now a composer for us, and he's actually studying at Trinity College doing composing as well. So that's such a fabulous achievement and we've loved just seeing him grow over the years.

Yusef Sacoor: That's an incredible journey, incredible journey.

Laura Fullwood: Yeah, it is amazing and the young people at our Nova Programme loved having him come back and playing his piece of music. It was like a real connection, especially for some of the peers that he's got who are still in the orchestra. It was such a lovely moment. He came and he visited during the residential a couple of weeks back and it was really fun to see him.

After the Youth Board then, we have our Young Trustee positions. So as Nick said, we now have three Young Trustees. So this role is open to alumni aged 18 to 25 and they get to join our Board of Trustees and they get exposed to all of the governance and all of the hidden aspects that go into running a charity organisation. It's really great to have them on the Board and they love giving all of their different ideas, and they bring some amazing ideas and thoughts to the Board so it's a real privilege to have them there. And then finally, we have the Youth Leadership Coordinator role, which is my role at the moment. And again, this is open to alumni. So I'm an alumni of the Modulo and the NOFA program and it is a full-time paid position within the core team. So I work alongside Nick, all of our programme coordinators, comms team, all the members in our core team. And I have a lot of ownership in my role as well. So as I've said, I'm responsible for overseeing all of our youth leadership projects and all of our youth voice projects and I get complete ownership in that. They're all my projects and I'm really grateful to have such trust and such ownership in this role as well. But I also get to work in another aspect of the charity that I'm interested in. So for me, that is finance. It's not for everyone, but I got a lot of responsibility at the start of my role and say, yeah, this is where I want to help out as well. So it's all about facilitating the opportunities that I've just spoken about, creating new ones, and just really shading from the rooftops about what we do in youth leadership. Kind of like speaking on this podcast today.

And then the final thing that I will say is, as well as these opportunities, we also like to include our young people on our recruitment panels. So they really are included from the start to finish. You know, they're on our interview panels, giving their opinions and their thoughts on the candidates that we choose. And they are included in that final selection of candidates. So that's for our trustee and our core team positions as well, so they get to choose them at the start and then hopefully work with them later down their line once they're really into their role. So, this is the way that we do it. It's really important that we have young people in every aspect of our work and we have youth voice and we listen to that youth voice and utilise that as well. As I say, it's been developed over quite a long time. We don't have all the answers and we're always learning and developing the programme and we're open to learning and developing and what works for us at the moment may not work for other organisations. I know this is quite a lot of things that

we do. So it's definitely not copy and paste. But if anyone who is listening to this is inspired by any of these things that we do and would like to give them a go in their organisation, I would advise you to give it a go and do so. Some things will go wrong, but lots more will go right with young people's voices in the room. So give it a go.

[Transition music]

Yusef Sacoor:

Wow, I mean, it's an incredibly comprehensive program that you've got, and it's amazing, all the way from practical roles to creative roles that you're offering young people chances across the board. What it kind of makes me think about is how you make sure those opportunities are equitable. I know Yasmine earlier alluded to sort of race and class barriers in creative industries, which we know far too much about and there's some pretty depressing statistics out there in regards to the arts specifically. And I was wondering how you make sure that these opportunities are equitable and you don't necessarily get the same kind of young people, regardless of confidence, et cetera, et cetera, background, social economics, into places where they can be given a voice or leadership?

Nick Thorne: Really, really, really great question. And I feel like, this is a topic that I'm so passionate about. And I think part of that is being a white man running a charity, running an organisation and making sure that underrepresented voices are heard and listened to and voiced, and that, kind of power and responsibility thing is I'm always conscious of it, making sure that it's not just people coming to me saying, 'can we do this thing?' And me going, 'no, you can't do that thing.' It's like, what right have I got to do that? I hope that I'm kind of providing an environment and a culture that enables everyone's voices to be heard. Especially amplifying those underrepresented voices. I get asked so much to talk on podcasts or at conferences or in networking meetings and the invitation always comes to me, interestingly, as CEO, and I wonder if that's kind of another structure that we need to think about breaking down. I think my comms colleagues are probably sick of me saying, 'I wonder if a young person could do that.' Like every time we get asked something, 'I wonder if a young person could do that.' Do want to speak at this conference? 'I wonder if a young person could do that.' Because listening and hearing their stories is so valuable and kind of hearing what, what they've come up against. And now we've started to be invited to conferences that they're saying, 'Your young people are quite good at talking about music education. Would they be up for coming to talk at this thing?' So there's some really interesting kind of changing culture that we're finding with that.

And I was going to pick up a few examples of kind of really great moments that we've had. Like as Laura said, it hasn't all gone right. We've done some things wrong, but I think you kind of take risks and yeah, and more things go right than go wrong. We redesigned our branding, so one of the things we did in the pandemic was redesign our branding. As I said, we're quite a small, young charity. And our previous branding, I think, was designed on Paint! Like it was very simplistic because we were really, you know, a really small charity. And we kind of took a moment in the pandemic to be like, oh, I wonder if we can kind of see how the organisation can look. And that was kind of evolving as we were appointing those young trustees and we thought, wonder if project could be for them to think about the designing of the charity. So while we weren't able to go out and play music and it wasn't legally allowed to leave the house for more than an hour a day, we kind of took on that project. And our first youth board worked with a designer to look at branding and design projects across the country, across the world, see what they liked, see what they didn't like. They rebranded the charity and working with a specialist

designer that gave them a space where they could kind of be heard, be listened to. And they wear their t-shirts with huge pride now because they put it together and they designed it. And our branding is very colourful because they wanted to show the diversity of our groups and our ensembles. The charity's called Orchestras for All, they wanted the 'For All' to be bigger than Orchestras because they wanted it to be more about inclusion and we do most of that work through music making. There's brackets around our, musical brackets, around our logo as well, and they wanted, again, that to show that we're all here together and everyone's got a voice and everyone can be heard. Within the charity, that was that was definitely a really powerful moment. Also within the trustee and some of our subcommittees that we have, we have trustees, youth board members and team members. And some of the most powerful moments in those is where young people from our programme say, 'could we do this thing?' And then one of their peers who's on our board of trustees says, 'We should think about capacity, we should think about resources' or like brings those kind of broader perspectives. And again, instead of me going yes or no to ideas that are thrown out there to the world. It's actually all of us having a really kind of healthy conversation around what's possible. Yeah, and they're real, real gem moments for me.

My final point on this is kind of young people often kind of get siloed as you're just a young person. So we're just going to talk to you because you're a young person and that's what you can bring. But they're the best, we've got an alumni who's studying cybersecurity and knows everything there is to know about cybersecurity. Like you start talking to him about cybersecurity and he's able to advise us as a charity on cybersecurity and he's 18. He's on our youth board and he's working with us on that topic when he joins us at projects. The point I made about diversity and inclusion, you know, using pronouns, young people are far more confident and comfortable talking about diversity and inclusion. I think some adults find that topic trickier than young people. So they're able to kind of get to the point a lot easier sometimes. Adults skip around subjects and then a young person goes in and goes, 'do you mean this?' And usually just gets to the point much, much quicker.

Yusef Sacoor: Yeah. Young people sometimes know how to cut through a lot better and put it far more succinctly than we do with our diplomatic adult language. I can definitely see that from my own experience with working with young people.

Yasmine, you also earlier sort of touched on talking about your background and how Sound Connections really fostered an environment where you felt like you can progress, and whilst also, again, referencing slightly depressing wider statistics on what our cultural community looks like, or at least the people within jobs and roles within it. I was wondering why you think that Sound Connections did that for you in a way that maybe other organisations wouldn't have?

Yasmine Dankwah: I think there's multiple reasons. Firstly, it's the sort of open access nature of the organisation and the programmes they offer. You don't need to be a specific grade or there isn't like a barrier to entry that I wouldn't have had because I don't have like, I don't know, a background in music or marketing or whatever. So it made it feel a lot more approachable to go like, 'Hi, this is me, this is who I am. I would like to meet you and develop a relationship with you and the people in this organisation.' Because if you don't have access to like, back in my school, I didn't have opportunities to study, I mean, there's opportunities to study music, but there wasn't like any free instrumental lessons or anything, so it made it hard to be like, 'this is something I'm really passionate about, but we literally can't afford it.' Secondly, the diversity of the core staff. We've got loads of people with different backgrounds and experiences and quite few like people with like colour on the boards as well. So it's like, okay, cool, the music industry

looks like this in London and these are the young people that we are supporting and that's directly reflected in the core of our organisation as well. So it made things a lot more like, okay, cool, this is like really lovely and I can see myself sort of fitting in here. And then it's also the openness to discuss gaps and where we're falling short. Sound Connections has a history of trying stuff out and yes, it might not have gone right immediately, but over time, things have changed to ensure the core team looks the way that it does, or we're offering programmes that do support young people and are helpful, and in different facets as well.

Also, I think it is the level of trust in having conversations that are difficult or not addressed. So, like I mentioned Shakira, so Shakira was another like Wired4Music Associate and she did this really cool documentary about neurodiversity and music. We speak about neurodiversity a lot and its facets but we often didn't speak about it in the context of music and in the music education sector as well. So it was nice for Shakira to be trusted in making this documentary by the team in order to address the struggles of being neurodivergent, but in an intersectional way as well. So I'm also neurodivergent, I've got dyslexia and ADHD. And again, there was support from the team and having a conversation and them acknowledging, like, okay, we don't know a lot about this, but we're willing to learn and shape a programme around you and your needs. And then that being reflected in Shakira's output of making the documentary. It always feels like there's a growing intention despite an intention not being set. There's always an adaptability that makes sure that we feel safe, held and supported regardless of where we like are from. And, I think the root of why I felt comfortable to come back is because of the ability to open and have those conversations and feeling safe to do so. Because there have been times where I've gone to organisations, offered feedback, and it's felt so gaslighting and I was like 'I should have just been quiet! What's the point in having an evaluation if you don't want it?', you know what I mean?!

Yusef Sacoor: That maybe is the question to bring you in as well, Laura, is that the nature of youth leadership will mean that the cart following the horse sort of thing, you will automatically create more diverse and more equitable spaces if you empower all of the youth across the charity that you're working with or the organisation.

Laura Fullwood: Yeah, 100%. I mean, we work with a massive diverse range of young people. So we've got some amazing people to work with. So we really just do try and get them involved in as many ways as possible, really empower them. And then hopefully we'll invite other people to get even more involved and then just keeps multiplying and multiplying, hopefully.

Nick Thorne: With NOFA, so NOFA is for young people that are really passionate about music but they all face some kind of barrier to music making. For example, 35% of the orchestra are on free school meals, about 70% are in low deprivation areas in the country, 15% have physical health conditions or disabilities, about 35% neurodivergent, in terms of the broader diversity of the orchestra. We take a really tailored or have always taken really tailored individual person-centered approach to how we support the orchestra. And one thing that we have done is to create 'About me' profiles. So they're really short. They're about five questions that are kind of saying things like, what does success look like to you? What do you love? What's the biggest challenge for you as well? And then two questions about support, like what can we as a charity do to support you? And also what can you do to support yourself? And we've done that with the orchestra for a number of years. And now we've started to it with our freelance team, with our management team, and with our trustees. We had an away day last year, a couple of years ago maybe, and we had probably about six topics that we were trying to do across the day, and the first topic was to do these about me profiles as a team and say, what do we love? What's the

biggest challenge? What support I need and what support I need from everyone else. And it was the most powerful conversation I've ever had with a team. Everyone really opened up, showed their vulnerabilities. I think it only works if everyone does it, like myself as well. Everyone struggles, especially with everything going on in the world at the moment. Everyone's got stuff going on in their lives. Everyone's got a way that works for them. Some people are visual learners, some people like listening to things. I listen to things in my dog walk. I listen to podcasts all the time. So that's kind of my space where I kind of cut myself off from the world and listen to conversations like this.

I think taking that really tailored individual person-centered approach, finding out what works for people, what doesn't work for people. Sometimes those conversations have been tricky and some people have found them really hard to do, to kind of dig into what is their challenge and how we can support them. But I think the more we've done it, the kind of more ingrained into our culture it's been, and the easier the conversations are. All we're trying to do is find ways to support each other and kind of get the best out of each other. It's been really powerful and we've kind of set up different ways of working with each other after those conversations as well.

[Transition music]

Aimee Christodoulou: You briefly touched on some of the benefits of incorporating youth voice into your work, things like hearing a fresh perspective and young people perhaps understanding other issues from a different light. I'm interested in hearing a little bit more about that. What are some of the benefits of involving young people in the leadership side of running an organisation?

Laura Fullwood: I think for us, it really improves our work. The programmes that we run, we run for the young people. We want them to benefit from them and we want them to enjoy themselves whilst they're on the programmes. So to us, it only makes sense to involve these members and alumni from the programmes who have been through these programmes into our leadership so we can get their feedback and their ideas, and through that we can continue involving and improving our programmes. They give so much amazing feedback about the programmes that they've been on and then we work on that for the next residential that we go to. So, we've just had the spring residential and yesterday I caught up with the youth board and we spoke about how they felt about the residential, what things they'd like to change for next time. We brought to them some of the ideas that we've been thinking of and they bounce back and gave us even more ideas. So it really just helps us improve our work and help our programmes that we then deliver to them and they can enjoy. That fresh perspective that you spoke about, they really open our eyes so much to all of the new ideas and new developments that they have. And so many times, especially in the youth board, I'll bring them an issue that I've been kind of mulling over for quite a while. And they'll just come up with so many different solutions and they'll solve it. And they've just got such bright ideas and new perspectives. So that's something that is really beneficial as an organisation and as a team.

And then, you're providing so many new opportunities for these young people. Not only do we provide the opportunities of our programmes, which help them develop personally, musically, socially, but then these additional opportunities expand on that even further. So we're helping them in our programmes, but we're also helping them to gain knowledge and experience about how a charity organisation works. And it's really, it's nice for us to do that. And it's really fulfilling as an organisation as well to know that you're helping your young people in as many different ways as possible. So we're supporting their growth during our programmes, but then we're

continuing to support them outside of those programmes as well. There's so many benefits from an organisation but those are just the first couple that spring to mind.

Aimee Christodoulou: That's fantastic. Thank you for sharing those. Yasmine, I'm going to come to you next. Why should organisations get young people involved?

Yasmine Dankwah: I think just seconding everything Laura has said, and even jumping off of that, especially if it's the organisation working to support and centre young people, young people are very much the experts of their own experiences and needs. So to not have them in the conversation with regards to programmes or opportunities or like the next steps that would benefit them feels a bit, it feels a bit disingenuous, because you can't speak to the needs or the specific needs of like a young person. Like, as organisations, we work with young people from like very diverse backgrounds with very different lived experiences. So being able to sort of bring those in a space and be open to having that and also confident enough to listen and respond I think is so important in order to create those actionable steps.

I think about my experience with like Sound Connections as a whole and, for example, I co-led a training session with regards to co-production with Shakira, who I mentioned. Basically, this is me being a Shakira fan girl club, you know what mean? And together with the support of the sector support team, we came together to create like a system of what co-production looks like in our organisation and the root of it was allowing someone, regardless of what level they are on a team, experience, to come as they are, understand what their needs are and how they could be supported and what they felt needed to be developed throughout the period of a programme or just ways of working. So I think it always, for me, having young people in the room, especially being a young person myself, especially when it comes to working with, like centering young people and getting them involved, it's so important because again, like Laura said, it provides like a layer of opportunity and an insight into a route that they would never expected. I'm sure Laura probably didn't think, 'I'm going to be working for Orchestras for All', but like having her be involved in the programme influenced that trajectory and she felt able to come back as a result of her being listened to, understood and also being able to express herself in like many different facets.

Aimee Christodoulou: Did you want to add something in there, Nick?

Nick Thorne: Yeah, we have approached it using the Sound Connections Youth Voice manifesto document that Jen Raven put together and kind of always refer to the ladder of participation, which for those people that don't know, it's kind of, the bottom rungs are more about tokenistic youth voice and youth leadership and... maybe about manipulation. So, 'Great, Yasmine, you've said to do this, but I think we should do it like this' and then we'll go and do it my way rather than your way. And then the top rungs of the ladder are more about person-centred, like young person initiating ideas and then being evolved together or shared decision-making with adults. So I guess we try and make sure there's a diversity in all senses of the word diversity around tables and recruitment panels and Board Away Days. I think last year we had 35 people at our Board Away Day, which was our trustees, our youth board and our team all in a room together. And again, making sure that you facilitate it in the right way and you provide that culture and get some really incredible, you know, 35 people that are really passionate about the charity and get so many amazing things that come out of that.

And in terms of recruitment panels, we have made different decisions because young people have been involved on panels. I remember, I won't name names, but we were doing a trustee

interview process and on paper and in discussion, I and another person that's on our board thought this person was absolutely amazing and thought they should be appointed and they were absolutely brilliant. And the young people that were involved in the process said 'Absolutely not, they'd never be appointed in my eyes because they're saying, we're going to learn a lot from them, but they're not going to learn a lot from us.' It was a very one way thing of like, 'I'm an adult and I'm going to bring you lots of experience, but I don't need to learn anything from you.' And we didn't end up appointing that person. So yeah, if you make sure that they have a genuine voice and they're genuinely heard and listened to and valued, and you have flexibility and value their opinions and decision making as much as anyone else's, then you make the best answers and the best solutions for the charity that you're working for.

Yusef Sacoor: You might have already alluded to it, but I'd like to ask if you were speaking to an organisation just making their journey into youth leadership involving youth in their decision making, what would you say their first step should be? And I know you've already alluded to Sound Connections' resources, but if there are any other resources that you can point people to as well, that would be fabulous. So, Laura, I think you wanted to jump in anyway, so I'll start off with you.

Laura Fullwood: Yeah, I was actually going to just add on to the last point about, you know, an impact like that in a recruitment board. It is massive for these sorts of young people. It can be so fulfilling as well, having a proper impact on their peers, their friends, the alums, the future members, it is such fulfilling work. So I just wanted to add that on to the end. And Yasmine, when you were talking about inspiring people, you know, when I was younger I didn't think, I'm going to work for OFA, but I'm here now. And even in this role, I'm continuously being inspired as well. Seeing our trustees, our young trustees as well, it's inspired me in the future to, if one comes about to apply to be a young trustee for another organisation as well. So yeah, constantly being inspired. But in terms of resources, maybe I'll pass this on back to Nick...

Nick Thorne: Yeah, sounds good. I guess in terms of kind of starting this journey, we're currently developing at Orchestras for All. Our third programme of work is about sharing our practice and sharing our learnings, a lot through musical approaches through inclusive music making, and how we kind of provide safe, inclusive spaces for young people to develop musically. But we're also kind of considering youth leadership around that, how young people can have that voice within music making, but also through decision making, through governance structures. Hopefully, this time next year we'll have a bit more guidance and training available of us sharing that practice. But as Laura said earlier on, it's not a copy and paste situation. Like it's not gonna be, set up a youth board, set up an ambassador scheme, set up a youth leadership scheme and copy exactly what we've done. I think it's really, needs to be really tailored to the different organisations. So I'd recommend to kind of ask yourself some questions like, how would you ideally like to involve young people and youth leadership within your organisation? Where are you at with that journey now? Because lots of people are kind of trialing things and might have trialed stuff that we haven't talked about today. And where would you like to be? And kind of mapping out that journey.

Thinking about training for team members and trustees that are currently within your organisation. What support and training do they need? What kind of culture change do you need to put in place to enable that space for underrepresented voices to come in and be heard and listened to? Coming up with a bit of a plan, when do you want this work to happen? How do you want it to happen? Who do you want it to involve? I think having Laura come in and join the team, she's put in so many amazing structures of really specific job roles for our youth board

and our ambassadors, and again it's really person-centered. And having those structures definitely really helped.

In terms of other kind of recommendations of other organisations, shout out Sound Connections, shout out Yasmine doing absolutely phenomenal work in this space, you know, providing spaces, conferences, training for this work. I think Sound Connections has always been my number one person to recommend. Yeah, still doing amazing work in this space. I think there's so many amazing kind of music services and National Youth Music Organisations. I know the East Midlands Music Hub network have done a lot of great work in this space. National Youth Music Organisations like Open Up Music and National Youth Folk Ensemble, Music for Youth, too many to name really! But I guess slightly outside of the music education sector as well, there's some great organisations like Young Trustees Movement, that are trying to get more young people to join trustee boards. Less than 3% of trustees this country are under 30, so 97% of trustees are over 30. If we're talking about kind of representation and getting young people involved, that's a pretty stark statistic that hopefully we're doing something to make that change between us and Sound Connections and other people working in this space. Contact Theatre in Manchester as well, just kind of thinking about someone outside of the music world, doing really, really brilliant things. Even small things like their annual report is kind of headed up by young people, introducing the organisation in their annual report rather than their chair or chief exec. So yeah, so much brilliant work going on. And I think just have a look around your decision-making tables. See what's represented, see what's not represented and ask yourself some of those questions.

Yusef Sacoor: That’s fabulous to know. That leads us on to you, Yasmine, and any final words from you on how to best start your journey in this area or if you know of any great resources that you can turn people to.

Yasmine Dankwah: Just remember it's not something that happens overnight. If you're so used to a way of work, because I know capacity is a big thing, like in a lot of our training sessions, the biggest barrier to like creating something new is capacity, but comparing it to the grandeur of making this overnight change, it’s not going to happen overnight. So I think be patient with yourself, but also again, refer back to the questions that Nick said in terms of interrogating your organisation, where you are now, where you want to be, essentially, and how do you want like young people to be involved? Because I know there are some organisations that don't have young trustees, but they have youth advisory boards and they are paid for their time.

Because again, there's a thing in my mind that I'm trying to like grapple with, because often as a young trustee, especially when you have no experience, like you're volunteering your time in order to steer the organisation, so like weighing the pros and cons and the benefits of that and acknowledging what you're offering young people, if you are having like young trustees on your board, what opportunities are you offering them and what they can get out of that. So, acknowledging what you are able to handle is I think something that's really important because you don't want to promise young people the world. In a evaluation report, it's like, oh, you don't have enough youth voice, what are you going to do to change about itm like you don't want it to be like tokenistic or inauthentic you want it to be sustainable. So yeah, acknowledge where you are now, do some blue sky thinking, where do you want to be? And then go back from there, I think is really important.

In terms of resources, you've already mentioned the Youth Trustees Movement, which is really cool. I'd also look at the organisation A New Direction, because they do a lot of interrogating of

what youth voice is. And they also did a programme where they got young people to talk about youth voice, and they described youth voice as just voice, which I thought was really interesting because everyone has access to it. But I think in this stage, it's important to emphasise the youthness of it, personally, because it's so underserved. As Nick said, like if 3% of young people are in a boardroom, and there's so many organisations working for young people, like why is that? But yeah, my biggest resource would be A New Direction. They do some really cool stuff.

Yusef Sacoor: Thank you so much guys, Laura did you have anything else to add?

Laura Fullwood: I think everything's been said. I mean, there are so many amazing resources out there. Some of the ones that Nick mentioned, I was also going to say Young Trustees. I've looked into that myself, as I said, kind of being inspired to apply to be a young trustee in the future. So that's definitely something that I look into. But I think be open to trying new things. If you can give it a go, give it a go and try and put your all into it. Obviously you need to take a risk. It might work, it might not, but you just need to give it a go to find out what that is. Challenge people, challenge the structures that are in your organisation and challenge the way that things are done normally. Be the one to speak up and push for that change. I mean, we have an amazing youth board, I love our youth board now, they're all such amazing people that have volunteered to be on. But I believe when we first opened the youth board and we started recruiting, no one applied. That was, that could be classed as a fail, but we continued and now we have 15-16 amazing young people who are on our board and always come to our meetings and give amazing ideas. So, we took a risk there and it probably definitely felt like a wrong decision or a risk at the time, but it's worked out and we've persevered. So give it a go, take that risk and just, yeah, make the leap, I think.

Yusef Sacoor: Thank you so much guys. It's such a breadth of knowledge that you have and also to hear the careers that have been built from youth initiatives for you, Laura and Yasmine and how an organisation can tackle youth led and youth voice work across the board, from future careers to working with young people, and bringing them into decision making from the very start of their journey with your organisations. So thank you so much to all of you and we hope you tune in again next time!

[Outro music]

Yusef Sacoor: Well, we hope you enjoyed this month’s episode! We already knew how impactful empowering young people within an organisation can be on their lives, though it’s always nice to be reminded! But it’s also great to hear just how transformational it can be for the organisation itself – it’s ability to help improve the quality and breadth of services music educators can offer. So thanks again to all our guests, and don’t forget to head to the Music Mark website, where you can find show notes from each episode. Thanks for listening!