



EVOLUTION OF A PARTNERSHIP

Six years ago, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire head of strings **Louise Lansdown** established a partnership with a music centre in Soweto to launch the Arco project, providing in-person and online lessons for South African string students. Here she reflects on the importance of the scheme and on how it has developed

In 2015 I founded the Arco project at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (RBC) along with my colleagues and students. The *raison d'être* of the project was to support the string teaching programme at the Morris Isaacson Centre for Music (MICM) in Soweto, South Africa, while simultaneously giving valuable first-hand teaching experience to RBC string students. Arco meets these needs by allowing student teachers from RBC to provide weekly online one-to-one and ensemble lessons for young Sowetan string players (currently aged 7–19), complementing the weekly face-to-face lessons provided by South African MICM teachers.

The ultimate goal of Arco is for this cross-cultural collaboration to create opportunities for learning and growing for all involved. By teaching real students, RBC student teachers can

practise the skills learnt during intensive, specialised pedagogy training at the conservatoire. They also learn the many 'soft skills' that every good teacher develops: team building, communication and diplomacy. MICM teachers benefit from ongoing teacher training. They attend UK courses, and reflect on their own practice by mentoring RBC student teachers. Similarly, RBC staff get to see the results of their student teacher mentees' work, and help build a sense of community, shared initiative and empowerment. Most importantly, young string players from Soweto, a region affected by pervasive socio-economic difficulty, are given access to an international community of musicians, and to opportunities not available to them locally.

As Arco enters its seventh year of operation, these goals and opportunities are more important than ever before. As a result



An Arco group ensemble class at the Morris Isaacson Centre for Music (MICM) in Soweto, South Africa, in 2017

of the Covid-19 pandemic, online teaching and teacher training have become integral to string pedagogy. Additionally, mounting concerns over racial injustice and inequity have shed a harsh light on the prejudices that linger in every aspect of society. Prejudices and inequity can easily creep into music education, and projects like Arco have an especially clear responsibility to address them.

Arco operates in a complex socio-political context. Apartheid policy (1948–94) had a significant impact on music education in South Africa. Schools were racially segregated in 1953, and musical study was often denied to black students. When black students did eventually have the opportunity to receive an academic music education, it followed a ‘West is best’ rule: Western classical music was regarded as a worthy subject of study, while indigenous South African music was treated as inferior. Following apartheid, a newly centralised education system in the country strove to incorporate music from both Africa and India, but these efforts often drew on non-Western music in a limited, even tokenistic, way.

Since most of the RBC student teachers involved in Arco are European, it is easy to see how questions of healthy cultural exchange and cross-racial cooperation are important. To understand these issues better, and to reflect on how Arco can address them, RBC launched a research project in 2018. Through interviews and lesson observations, my colleagues and I explored the experience of working within Arco. This research, detailed fully in a 2021 report available at bit.ly/2ZHxcFl, offers some important findings on how teachers and pupils confronted the challenges of this transcontinental partnership.

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NEGOTIATING ROLES

One issue that teachers from both countries discussed was the challenge of establishing clear roles for members of each teaching team. When Arco was founded, student teachers became part of a partnership with South African students’ local teachers. One MICM teacher commented, ‘We had to put two totally different teaching styles together and make it work, and that is a big challenge.’ Different teams negotiated the situation in different ways. Sometimes, each teacher operated independently. Often, however, each teacher settled into instructing a distinct domain: one might teach repertoire while the other dealt with scales and etudes, for instance. An RBC student teacher worried that, ‘At the start I was trying to do exactly the same as the other teacher would be doing,’ but noted how their team met with success by establishing clearer, distinct teaching duties.

Even when teachers separated their responsibilities, a common approach had to be found. This sense of shared purpose took work and, most of all, communication, said one >



Arco co-founder Peggy Nolan gives an in-person cello lesson to Tlotlo Mncube



Cello student Tshegofatso Mfazi performs in the MICM courtyard

MICM teacher, who found that their partnership was successful 'because we communicate very well'. The young string students were 'learning the same things [from their RBC student teacher] that I'm teaching them so it's actually working very nicely'. This kind of cooperation is essential because it results in more efficient teaching. More importantly, though, it can ensure that students benefit from different perspectives, and that the student can see both perspectives as equal.

TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION

Relationships between teachers were not the only ones that required some careful negotiation. RBC student teachers and their South African students had to build trusting, successful relationships online through videoconferencing software. The research confirmed some unsurprising trends. Conversation across these media was difficult; audio quality was unpredictable; there were time lags. Student teachers found

COOPERATION ENSURES THAT STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES, AND THAT THEY CAN SEE BOTH PERSPECTIVES AS EQUAL

that they had to rely on questions with short answers, making more extensive dialogue difficult. These sometimes one-sided conversations ran the risk of short-changing students' own voices. Adding to this issue, many RBC student teachers relied on the master-apprentice instructional model that they themselves had experienced, a model that can further suppress student voices – yet in a project such as this, ensuring that students have a voice in their education is vitally important. Finding a way to foster dialogue became a key priority for Arco.

CULTURAL TENSIONS

The challenges faced by teachers expose a deeper issue. The blending of two cultures always presents difficulties. And the fact that Arco is operating as an educational project in post-apartheid South Africa means that cultural differences are especially important to notice and address. Differences, and even tensions, could be seen in all aspects of the Arco project. ▶

SINETHEMBA NGIBA – ARCO VIOLINIST, AGED 21

When Louise came up with the 'crazy' idea to bring together Soweto and Birmingham, I'm pretty sure she had no idea what a great impact it would have – an impact that goes beyond music; a life-changing impact.

I can still remember my first Skype lesson – I was super-anxious. You know that feeling when the roller coaster has reached its highest point and you're waiting for it to go down? It was exactly that. Just ten times more intense. I had so many questions: What will my teacher be like? Will she like me? It turned out I had absolutely nothing to worry about. The Skype lessons were an amazing experience. The thought of having someone all the way from Birmingham teaching me in Soweto seemed surreal.

My favourite Arco moment definitely has to be the first time the teachers came to South Africa in the summer of 2016. I could actually now touch and speak to my Arco teacher without any buffering in between. What bliss! The week went by so quickly it was hard to say goodbye. However, I believe that that week created an extramusical bond that can never be broken.

If someone had told me that one day I'd be playing the violin I would probably have laughed in their face. I really had no idea



Arco students Lesedi Radebe (left) and Sinethemba Ngiba (right)

'I really had no idea that I would play the violin and end up loving it so much'

that I would play the violin and end up loving it so much. If I were president, I'd make it compulsory for each citizen to play an instrument. But since I'm not, I always encourage my friends and family to learn.

Being a musician has taught me a lot of patience – the first time, you won't get it; but with practice you will.

I've also learnt to be responsible. It's my instrument so I have to take care of it. I need to make sure it's not in the sun. I need to make sure I practise. There are all the little things that need a certain level of responsibility. Lastly, Arco has taught me that there are no boundaries or limits to what you can do. If you really want something you should go after it regardless of what people say.

One South African teacher noted that Western classical instruments were sometimes viewed as ‘foreign to our culture’. Similarly, using Western repertoire in teaching posed issues of cultural relevancy. However, by the time the research report was written, Arco had already begun to address these sensitive issues. As one MICM teacher put it:

I always tell my students: ‘A story is a story – it doesn’t matter what culture or whatever. If your craft is to tell stories... you have to learn to tell that story.’ After all, we are not a cultural group; we are here to practise a craft. The kids play enough South African music in the centre, which I’m very proud of. We’ve done quite a lot of locally relevant music.

String playing is about more than technique or standard repertoire. It is, for this teacher, about telling stories, and students certainly benefit from the opportunity to tell their own musical stories. Teachers benefit, too, and while this research project progressed, Arco festivals began to incorporate more South African music, which UK student teachers learnt by rote.

One MICM teacher’s response to an interview question exposed a more fraught issue. They reflected on how, ‘When we first started Arco I found it was a bit of a racial thing and I know I wasn’t the only one having that same problem.’ This teacher observed that: ‘The kids for some reason kind of felt that the [UK-based] Arco teachers knew what they were doing better than we [South African teachers]’ – many of whom had had strong training as players and teachers. Countless assumptions and concerning biases are bound up in this observation. What is most important is how deep certain biases can run: students were reaching assumptions that one culture produced better teachers even without those assumptions being suggested or reinforced by their teachers.

Arco, like all music education programmes, draws heavily on cultural norms and practices such as repertoire, performance traditions and pedagogies. String students can be ‘taught’ certain beliefs with or without their teachers. It is up to projects like Arco and its teams of teachers to question any assumptions and create a real, meaningful partnership. What became clear from this research project is that the programme works best when knowledge and

NJABULO NXUMALO – ARCO DOUBLE BASSIST, AGED 21

My love of music started from a very young age. I was fortunate to grow up in a musical home, and while no one in my family is an instrumentalist, Kwela music has always been present in my life, for example in church. Louise Lansdown invited me to join the Arco project and have violin lessons online with a student from RBC in 2016. It was ultimately through Arco that I was able to switch from violin to double bass.

Being a student of the Arco project has given me many wonderful opportunities that have helped develop my playing and encouraged me to study music. In 2017, I was one of three students from MICM who travelled to Birmingham to watch the Cecil Aronowitz Viola Competition. It was the first time I had ever been on a flight and so far from home, but coming to visit RBC showed me the high standard of the string students there and inspired me to practise hard so that one day I might also be able to study at a conservatoire.

During my trip, I attended concerts given by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Birmingham Royal Ballet and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. During the CBSO concert, I was sitting by the double bass section and I felt the low resonance and warmth of the double bass sound in the orchestra. This ignited my love for the double bass, and when I returned to South Africa, I begged Louise for a double bass to be sent over so that I could start learning. To my absolute joy, a double bass was donated to the project and



Proud bassist
Njabulo Nxumalo

‘I have worked very hard and achieved many things that I am proud of’

I had my first lesson over Zoom in April 2018. My online teacher was a student at RBC at the time, Aisling Reilly, and she taught me all about orchestral and solo repertoire on the bass, as well as telling me what her classes were like as a music student. Arco has also given me the opportunity to have lessons with Tom Martin, Tony Alcock and many other inspiring musicians.

Even though I have been studying the double bass for only three and half years, I have worked very hard and achieved many things that I am proud of. I am principal double bassist of the Johannesburg Youth Orchestra (JYO), I have played with the Johannesburg Festival Orchestra, and I am now also principal double bassist of the Cape Town Philharmonic Youth Orchestra. I also won the JYO Concerto Competition, and I

would have performed the Capuzzi Double Bass Concerto with the orchestra but unfortunately the concert was cancelled because of the pandemic.

I am currently studying music at Stellenbosch University, fully supported by the Arco project, and am loving being able to be part of a community of musicians, to play in orchestras, to perform chamber music and so much more.

My dream would be to play in an orchestra professionally and to start a school of double bass in South Africa. Soweto can be a very tough place to be a young person, as there are many social problems in my community. I want to inspire young people in my community to go on to higher

education and to follow their dreams by providing them with the same great opportunities that I have received myself.



Clockwise from top left RBC student teacher Emily Dore and violin pupil Nontebeko Hlongwane; Arco co-founder Lucy Nolan and Njabulo Nxumalo (before he took up the bass); intense concentration from violin student Mbali Phato; fellow violin student Mabatho Xulu works on her bowing technique

THE ARCO RESEARCH PROJECT SHOWED HOW STRING TEACHERS CAN REFLECT ON THE CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS AND BIASES THEY BRING IN ORDER TO BECOME BETTER EDUCATORS

expertise can be exchanged in all directions, among equals. When knowledge and ideas flowed in only one direction, teaching was less coherent and diverse voices could become sidelined. But as teachers and student teachers uncovered ways to solve these problems, various perspectives mingled to give students a unique experience of learning to play stringed instruments.

The pandemic has meant that there has not been any opportunity for travel since 2019, forcing both UK- and South Africa-based teachers and students to work solely online. This enforced online existence has been a particular challenge for the Arco students as not all have had access to the internet or the financial means to purchase access during the various lockdowns. Arco has responded to this situation and tried wherever possible to provide financial means or the chance for students to connect online to continue lessons and participate in Arco concerts, Q&As and performance classes.

Connecting online with many brilliant South African musicians was a hallmark of 2020 Arco activities, in addition to building a library of music written by African and black composers. These online activities naturally encouraged student voices and greater interaction between students and teachers. Not being able to connect with one another face to face has been a challenge, but this has also helped to refine and condense our communication and teaching methods. Arco students have begun communicating more readily, and taking more responsibility for lessons and practice. An even greater value is now placed by some

students on their instrumental lessons and the role it plays in their lives. An appreciation of and curiosity about the rich and diverse cultural traditions in both countries is now a strength of Arco – one that enriches and informs pedagogy, but even more importantly, enhances the communication and process of working together in this long-term cross-continental collaboration.

We have expanded to include woodwind, brass and vocal students and teachers in the project, and are supporting three Arco students in full-time music education: two in the UK, at RBC and the Purcell School, and a third at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. We have also started a similar project with the Sunshine Orchestra based in Chennai, India.

These changes come at an important time. Music education has a role to play in bringing inclusiveness, equity and racial justice into education, and technology is enabling more far-reaching partnerships like Arco. The Arco research project has not only revealed some of the hurdles involved, but also showed how string teachers can reflect on the cultural assumptions and biases they bring in order to become better educators. Critical reflection – and making decisions to act on that reflection – can help ensure that music education as a field is not complacent, but instead helps to improve students' lives. Many more questions remain about how string pedagogy can contribute to this effort, making open, collaborative partnerships like Arco all the more important. ●

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