ROYAL BIRMINGHAM CONSERVATOIRE

Part of Birmingham City University

ARCO South Africa:
Research Report
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Royal Birmingham Conservatoire
(Birmingham City University)

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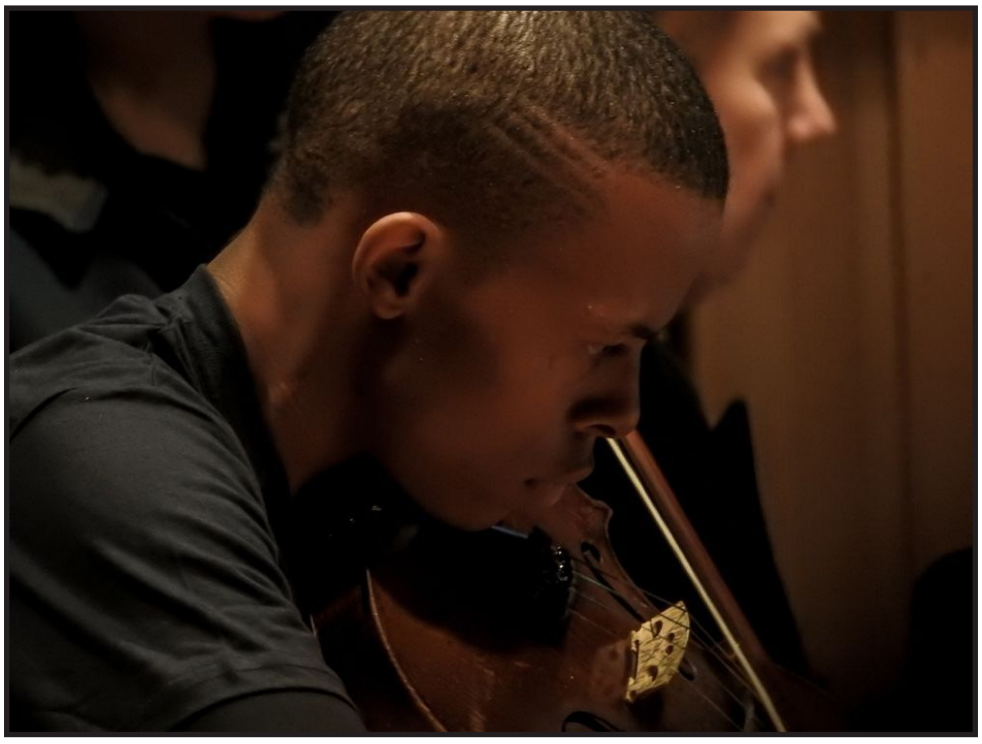
CONTENTS



FORWARD

As string players and educators, it has always been crucially important to evaluate our processes. We interrogate our own approaches constantly. How should we share our knowledge with the next generation of musicians? How do we shape musical practice as a whole, through teaching? How does music education, as we practice it, impact the wider world our students are growing up into?

These questions are particularly important for ARCO, and particularly important at this point in history. ARCO is a program which shares knowledge across cultures; which invites students to reconsider their own practices as teachers and players; which addresses countless larger questions.

As a partnership between Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, a European institution, and the Morris Isaacson Centre for Music, an African organisation, ARCO must address racial issues that have become especially visible in recent years. And, as a distance-learning organisation, it must address the successes and difficulties of teaching music through the online platforms that have become a daily part of our lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report has been in the making for some years, but it is timely precisely because it addresses those very issues. In its key findings, it deals with the challenges of this kind of partnership; the way students and teachers interact across cultures and cyberspace; and the broader social contexts in which ARCO operates.

More importantly, the research discussed in this report is only a starting point. Its findings have both compelled and inspired how ARCO's teaching staff confront these issues.

-Julian Lloyd Webber
September 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report comes at a pivotal time not only for ARCO, as the project begins to develop new partnerships in Africa and Asia, but for the music education field more generally. As a field, music education has had to confront the issues of equitable cultural exchange and distance learning perhaps more than ever before in the last eighteen months. ARCO has a history of navigating these challenges, so it is hoped that this research might have two overriding purposes. First, we hope to critically examine pedagogical practice within ARCO, providing principles that can help drive its expansion. Second, we hope to share how the teachers and young people involved in ARCO have created meaningful knowledge from which music education as a whole can benefit.

The study was commissioned by ARCO and Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (RBC) in 2018, and took place during the 2018–19 academic year. The objective of this project was to explore and uncover some of the key issues that arise within this cross-continental string teaching programme between RBC and the Morris Isaacson Centre for Music (MICM). It explores the challenges faced, how they are navigated, and how they can help direct future practice. Three areas of reflection were identified:

1. Challenges of partnership working
2. Interactions between teachers & students
3. Sensitivity to broader social and cultural circumstances

Discussion of these themes points to recommendations for how ARCO and other music education programs like it might address important, current issues.

A note on the use of quotations and photographs in this report:

To protect their identities, all research participants have been given pseudonyms. We use the participants' actual words, with minor editions for clarity. The photographs used in this report are from the ARCO library, and should not be seen in any way to correspond to any quoted participant.

INTRODUCTION

ARCO was established in 2015 by RBC Head of Strings Louise Lansdown. Lansdown, who is from South Africa, sought to create an opportunity for RBC students to immerse themselves in pedagogy, while giving young string students at MICM access to additional cultural perspectives. ARCO students (aged 7–19) receive weekly lessons from current RBC students, alongside their normal weekly instrumental tuition at MICM. Students' lessons from RBC student-teachers take place via online video conferencing software.

ARCO also supports the training of South African strings teachers at MICM. The project has hosted music festivals in Soweto and live-streaming masterclasses and concerts from RBC. It has financed exchange visits, sourced funding instruments and bows, and enabled further study for ARCO students both in South Africa and the UK.

Additionally, ARCO is at the centre of string pedagogy training at RBC. String students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, receive extensive, instrument-specific weekly training. The project also includes work placements for students, hosts independent projects, and allows fourth-year undergraduates to undertake a Further Pedagogy elective module.

ARCO is in the process of expanding its reach not only with within South Africa but globally, and in February 2021 it began a similar project in Chennai, India with the Sunshine Orchestra. It is therefore a pivotal time to critically reflect on its aims and practices. This research has helped identify challenges and important areas of reflection as the program grows.

The research and writing of this report were completed by a team of four Birmingham City University staff. The principal investigator, Dr Kirsty Devaney, was a research assistant at The Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in the School of Education and composition tutor at RBC, and has recently been appointed as a lecturer in music and music education at the University of Wolverhampton. Data were collected through interviews with five RBC and three MICM ARCO teachers, and through five observations of online teaching. Data collection was facilitated by Alistair Rutherford, who worked for ARCO as a research assistant. Co-authors of this report include Lansdown and Daniel Galbreath, another researcher based at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

1) Music Education in South Africa

Since ARCO brings together teachers and students from European and African institutions, it is important to contextualise its operations in terms of South Africa's complex history of racial, social and political tensions. These tensions have influenced education, music, and culture more broadly in the country. The policy of apartheid (meaning 'separateness', lasting between 1948 and 1994) segregated the South African population into four ethnic groups: 'black, white, coloured and Indian' (Bosch, 2014: 903). The 1953 Education Act brought these segregations into education by forcing 'racial separation' in schools (Oehrle, 1990: 5), with music and arts in schools often being 'denied to the Black majority' (Villiers, 2015: 315). While this dynamic has, by and large, changed in recent decades, this deprivation of opportunity in arts education is recent enough to still compel ongoing evaluation for projects like ARCO. It is, in part, this need for evaluation that motivates this research.

A key question in this evaluation process is whether there are lingering notions of cultural superiority, or whether a program reinforces vestigial notions of cultural colonialism. This issue has been discussed by historians in often stark terms. Although perceptions of colonialism often concentrate on the idea of owning 'physical spaces and bodies', Odora-Hoppers and Richards (2011) suggest that second-generation colonialism can occur through controlling the 'mind' (in Grange, 2016). This form of colonialism was present in the

early history of the European presence in South Africa. European education systems were implemented in South Africa in an attempt to educate and 'civilise' native populations (Akrofi and Flolu, 2007; Ramogale, 2019). Specifically, the teaching of Western classical music played a critical role in cultural assimilation during the late nineteenth century (Lucia, 1986) with traditional music of South African being viewed as 'low-culture entertainment' (Stolp, 2018: 219). This 'symbolic castration' (Odora-Hoppers, 2001) of African and indigenous culture (Vandeyar, 2019: 2), reinforced the idea of 'West is best' (Stolp, 2018: 231).

This harshly drawn hierarchy between musical cultures underwent significant changes in the late twentieth century. In the final decades of the century, the South African schooling system was transformed (Villiers, 2015: 316) and Eurocentrism was challenged in an effort to place 'South Africa, Southern Africa and Africa at the centre' (Heleta, 2016: 1) of education. Many music teachers viewed this as a chance to embrace 'multicultural content' (Villiers, 2015: 315). This transformation faced issues, however. Concerns were raised regarding the lack of training and resources to enable this process (Oehrle, 1990; Villiers, 2015). As a result, many scholars argue that much classroom music education continues to rely on Western approaches (Villiers, 2015: 318), and that beliefs around the higher value of Western culture continue the 'denigration and decimation of indigenous knowledges' (Grange, 2016).

The lingering effects of cultural colonialism therefore require a high level of critical examination. In a project as multidimensional as ARCO, this means remaining open to repertoire choices, examining how musical knowledge is shared among collaborators, and interrogating assumptions and biases. These issues can be sensitive and have significant personal impacts on different stakeholders. Therefore, the complex socio-historical context in which ARCO operates not only urgently invites critical research; it compels that that research rely on a methodology that prioritises the voices of participants. Deeply personal exchanges of knowledge and artistry can only be understood through personal narratives.

2) Instrumental Teaching

A key site of these personal exchanges was, naturally, in one-to-one lessons, which were rich sites of research interrogation. All of the UK ARCO string teachers who took part in this research were beginner instrumental teachers. While approaches to pedagogical training in UK conservatoires are growing and changing, many beginning instrumental continue teachers rely on replicating how they were taught (Mills and Smith, 2003), meaning that they may lack opportunities to reflect on their practice (Blair, 2008). They therefore often reproduce their own teachers' 'master-apprentice' approach with their own students (Jørgensen, 2000: 68; Rostvall and West, 2003). In an effort to disrupt these norms, RBC and ARCO aim to strike a balance between providing beginner teachers with space to reflect with peers and master teachers and applying their pedagogical knowledge through first-hand experience.

Student voice

A further dimension of one-on-one teaching that is worth exploring is that of "student voice." The input of a student in their own learning process is important, especially when the one-on-one lesson is a site of cultural exchange, as in ARCO. Research has discussed how student voice can be lacking in instrumental lessons (e.g. Creech and Gaunt, 2012). For instance, instrumental music teachers do not always allow enough time for students to ask questions (Kupers, Dijk and Geert, 2014: 378) and may interrupt students when speaking (Rostvall and West, 2003: 220). Often, students might only speak when answering practical questions (Rostvall and West, 2003: 219-20). Scholars like Paulo Freire (2003: 72) have even argued that this top-down model of teaching presumes the student to know 'nothing,' attributing to the teacher the responsibility of 'filling'' (ibid.) students with desirable knowledge.

There is clearly, therefore, considerable potential for a power imbalance in the cultural exchanges occurring during ARCO lessons, recalling concerns surrounding colonialism cited earlier. These concerns are not abundantly present in the data of this research project. Yet they offer compelling prompts for reflection on the part of ARCO teachers, and proactively help to guide how ARCO chooses to pursue its pedagogical objectives.

Online instrumental teaching

An additional facet of one-on-one teaching that ARCO participants must navigate is online teaching. While online teaching holds considerable potential for cross-continental knowledge-exchange and partnerships, it also poses certain difficulties. Researchers have found that online instrumental teaching can feel more 'intensive' (Brändström, Wiklund and Lundström, 2012: 448) and different from face-to-face teaching (Savage, 2017). These difficulties are compounded by the potential for technology to fail (Kruse et al. 2013), and by delays resulting from software and internet connections, which make playing together and rhythm work particularly challenging (Brändström, Wiklund and Lundström, 2012: 448). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, online instrumental teaching was rare and under-researched (Creech and Gaunt, 2012; Brändström, Wiklund and Lundström, 2012). However, there has since been an explosion of resources, guidance, and research being published about online learning.

Nevertheless, despite the increased prevalence and success of online teaching, many researchers maintain the importance of a 'blended' approach, involving a combination of face-to-face and online teaching (Lancaster, 2012). While ARCO maintains such a blended approach, the various challenges of one-on-one teaching can be compounded by the vagaries of online teaching, as will become clear. Indeed, the online nature of much ARCO teaching makes it a uniquely compelling site for research interrogation

A Comment on "Victory Narratives":

In light of the socio-cultural tensions already discussed, and of the need for practice-research to be healthily critical, it is important to take a moment to reflect on what Kenny and Christophersen (2018) call 'victory narratives.' Education programmes have been known to promote only positive stories, highlighting the transformations outcomes and achievement that emerge from their programmes while 'ignoring what musical cultures, expertise, and knowledge already exist within these settings prior to the intervention' (p.3). These claims of 'social transformation' (p.255) have been increasingly challenged in recent years, with some commentators claiming that they reinforce 'inequalities and social injustices' (Spruce, 2017: 730) and promote 'salvationist' and 'missionary' discourses (p.725) which aim to 'save' those less fortunate (Barleet et al., 2014). In light of these concerns, Bradley (2012) observes that 'there are important differences between helping and rescuing' (p.685), and Barleet et al. (2014) propose that members of a community should be viewed as 'capable agents' and 'partners' (in Harrop-Allin, 2017: 237) when developing projects. Given the concerns discussed above, these researchers' admonitions to form agentive partnerships lay important groundwork for a successful pedagogical approach.

KEY FINDINGS

Through the reflections of ARCO participants and researchers, three key themes emerged. Each problematises and examines different facets of the ARCO programme, and each interacts with the contextualising ideas outlined above.

Theme 1: Challenges of partnership working

Within ARCO, there are two main partners working to support students' musical learning. Each student received regular in-person lessons from their teacher at MICM, alongside online lessons from their RBC student-teacher.

Each students' teachers had to negotiate their roles over time. There were a variety of takes on this notion of 'partnership': some student-teachers perceived their role as 'independent' or 'additional' to their South African counterparts, while others believed their position to be that of an 'assistant' or a 'shadow' to the work already taking place. At the same time, some of the south African teachers initially expressed reticence or concerns about possible encroachment on their teaching. One South African teacher even believed that ARCO had their own goals rather than contributing to the teaching in an integrated approach.

Side Note:

Rationale for the dividing of responsibilities was sometimes guided by what teachers felt was easier to teach online

Without clearly defined roles, conflict and challenges can arise (Rolle et al., 2018). Conflict was touched on in the data, especially when participants reflected on the early stages of the project. Participants admitted that they experienced 'challenges' within partnerships:

> **South African teacher:** It became a challenge having to share students with different teachers…we had to put two totally different teaching styles together and make it work, and that is a big challenge.

Some of the UK teachers felt apprehensive of 'stepping on toes' (RBC2, RBC3) and undermining the South African teachers.

Communication was, unsurprisingly, at the heart of some of the challenges experienced within partnership:

> **South African teacher:** I haven't spoken to [the UK teacher] in a very long time but I know he does some very good work.

In particular, language barriers created obstacles:

> **South African teacher:** My Tuesdays are a very long day. Easier if we just maybe once in a while Skype…I'm not English. So the way you write something, I might not understand it [in] the way you are trying to get it across.

These challenges and tensions were often part of a period of discovery and exploration. Since ARCO is taking a relatively novel approach to string teaching, it was necessary for teachers to negotiate and renegotiate roles over time. Ultimately, the primary concern of teachers was to ensure a coherent experience for their student. One solution that teaching pairs devised was to divide responsibilities more clearly. For instance, one teacher might deal with repertoire while another focuses on etudes, scales, and arpeggios. Another approach teachers took to these partnerships was to discuss the progress of their students in regular meetings. As each teachers' role settled into place, they could better collaborate in educating their student.

> **UK Teacher:** I think at the start I was trying to do exactly the same as the other teacher would be doing…I know what my role more is now.

And, as with tensions in teaching partnerships, solutions to those tensions revolved around communication:

> **South African:** I'm loving the new teachers too because we communicate very well…Every time they [students] come out of ARCO they're not confused because they're learning the same things that I'm teaching them so it's actually working very nicely.

These examples highlight the importance of ongoing communication to allow partnerships to be successful and ensure that goals are 'set together' (UK teacher) over time.

Theme 2: Interactions between teachers & students

Another area of rich exchanges and interactions was the relationship between teachers and students. The RBC student-teachers' interactions with their students were of particular interest, since they were contending with online video-based teaching and were, by and large, novice teachers.

Using video conferencing software entailed unpredictable sound quality and time delays. One outcome of these challenges was a limitation to the amount of dialogue that was possible between students and teachers. It was often necessary for the teacher to prompt the student to offer their thoughts, asking them technical questions about the music. Often, these questions were necessarily "closed," only requiring a short answer.

A key way through which RBC student-teachers interacted with their students was by responding to their playing through ongoing brief comments. Persson (1996: 226) somewhat pejoratively calls this approach a 'never-ending flow of hints, tips and suggestions' (Persson, 1996: 226) being delivered from the UK teachers to the students, with phrases such as: 'another useful thing is…', or 'the trick is…', and 'what I do first is…'. Yet this use of short prompts was an important way through which teachers built a language of interaction with students. Creating a way to interact with students was especially important when many of them adhered to a cultural tradition of not speaking without being spoken to.

Many of the RBC student-teachers drew from their own experiences within master-apprentice teaching models. From this experience, they drew pointers for their students. These included advice on how to practice – ways to learn arpeggios, playing through phrases slowly, or playing scales with an electronic tuner. Interestingly, these 'tips' were often very personalised and based on their own experiences of being a string student.

Theme 3: Sensitivity to broader social and cultural circumstances

Given the historical context in which ARCO operates, it is unsurprising that some challenges and tensions were present in interactions between participants. Although Western classical music is already taught at MICM alongside traditional South African music, questions arose about the appropriateness of a scheme like ARCO. One South African teacher expressed how Western classical instruments were viewed as 'foreign to our culture,' while another teacher questioned the cultural relevance of the repertoire selection:

> **South African teacher:** [The] pieces for the kids…seemed to them culturally irrelevant, or even wrong for the kids to play some of the stuff – Irish pieces or German pieces, all of that

However, the same teacher further reflected that music does not have to be culturally bound:

> **South African teacher:** 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 practice a craft.

This pair of quotations demonstrates the complexity of musical cultural exchanges, where repertoire can have cross-cultural meaning and act as a source of exchange, while still representing the culture from which it comes. In light of recent education developments to decolonise the curriculum and to readdress the 'national South African identity' (Villiers, 2015: 315) by moving away from dominant Western ideologies, a music education programme such as ARCO that prioritises Western classical music can benefit from understanding this duality and embracing the potential for exchanges of different kinds.

Side Note:

Since the research, ARCO have started tdo include traditional music from South Africa in their festivals.

This data, collected when ARCO was a younger organization, demonstrate a need for a this more integrated approach, combining Western classical music and traditional music from South Africa.

> **South African teacher:** We've got two cultures meeting….You can bring your own music from [the] UK and we can do our own African music.

This was something that the UK teachers also seemed interested learning more about:

> **UK teacher:** He [ARCO student] has this whole other understanding of music. There is a whole other music tradition, which he is incredibly proficient in, which I have absolutely no idea about.

Teachers' awareness of the scope for musical-cultural exchanges has yielded significant changes already in how ARCO approaches repertoire (see the side note, above).

A perhaps more contentious issue that arose in some data was anxiety over possible assumptions that the white UK student-teachers were more skilled than their Black South African colleagues:

> **South African teacher:** [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 - the kids for some reason kind of felt that the ARCO teachers knew what they were doing better than we [South African teachers].

Similarly, one of the UK teachers, originally from in South Africa, reflected on what she called the 'saviour complex':

> **RBC2:** I think there is a danger sometimes of UK teachers thinking that – getting a bit of a saviour complex when it comes to doing outreach work.

The comments above point towards areas of potential bias, cultural tensions, and racial assumptions. More than many other issues, this one requires constant reflexive consideration and self-management on the part of an organization like ARCO.

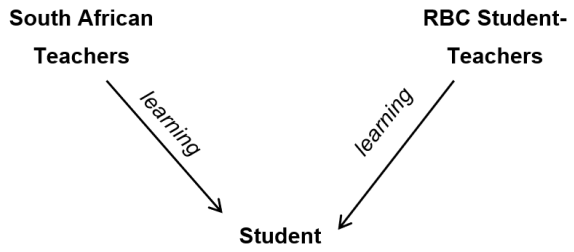
Side Note:

In 2020 ARCO hosted a series of online seminars to discuss race and music-making.

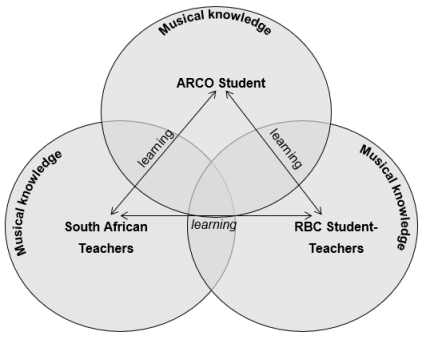
A NEW MODEL OF PARTNERSHIP

There were a number of challenges and obstacles to successful partnership working within ARCO at the time of this research. Rolle et al. (2018) and Nenadic (2018) advocate that, in response to difficulties such as these, a positive and productive model is one in which learning takes place in all directions, between teachers, musicians and pupils.

Many factors, including geographical distance, use of technology, language barriers, and culture differences, contributed to the challenges of partnership work within ARCO, and at times collaboration and communication between teachers was limited, as illustrated in here:



However, the data also showed how mutual understanding and 'shared expectations' (Christophersen and Kenny, 2018) began to develop over time. There was a sense that, through a more joined up approach and regular communication, there could be a greater understanding of the wider musical skillsets involved in ARCO, and that learning could take place in all directions, as illustrated in figure 3:



(Adapted from Nenadic, 2018)

In recognising and valuing the diversity of musical skills and knowledge bases within these partnership, opportunities increase for learning in all directions. By ensuring that all forms of music and music-making become 'knowledge worth having' (Bradley, 2012: 669), agency and voice can become more evenly distributed, helping ensure that all partners can collaborate in creating a new music-educational space.

Recommendations

As observed in the findings, there are indications that a more integrated approach is beginning to materialise, offering a platform through which to learn from each other. In particular, communication has improved in recent years. Teachers have become even more focused on supporting their students with sensitivity and strong relationships.

Ongoing critical self-evaluation on pedagogy also continues (Schön, 1983; Vandeyar, 2019) within ARCO. In recognising the place of ARCO within the culturally vibrant and hybridized country of South Africa, it has become essential to embrace the rich complexity and diversity in which ARCO operates, helping all stakeholders to negotiate their roles.

In response to the outcomes of this research, a number of guiding principles have emerged:

1. Communication should be regular and formalised, ensuring that clear roles and shared goals are negotiated and renegotiated over the course of the programme.
2. Student voice should be emphasized, and student-centred approaches to teaching and learning prioritized.
3. Teachers and practitioners should reflect on past and present cultural, political and social contexts together in a safe space in order to avoid or resolve potential conflicts.
4. Diverse musical ideas, repertoires, and histories should be encouraged and promoted.

Further research within ARCO can delve more deeply into how a program can be, and has been, built upon these guiding principles.

End note

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the ARCO teachers and students who took part in this project, and the support of Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and Birmingham City University.

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