iOrchestra Audience Reactions:
Qualitative Feedback and Visitor Experience

Context

Among the evaluation tools used to assess the success of *iOrchestra*, was a 'reactions card' which was deployed across project strands in order to gain a qualitative understanding of the audience experience beyond the overall satisfaction and learning figures outlined in the Audience Journeys report. This short report on audience reactions draws primarily on this tool in order to offer a reflection of the artistic experience and assessment of visitors to the project. Taken in isolation, this is a well evidenced but necessarily rather unscientific document, which for the most part takes the sample of reaction cards as a whole. The more 'granular' analysis of the sample exists at the level of the data, but is unrevealing for reasons discussed below, and as such this report is most useful when read as a corollary to the Audience Journeys report.

Evaluation Tool

Cards were printed in the *iOrchestra* colour pallet, with a watermark of the *iOrchestra* logo and headed with the question, "How was your *iOrchestra* experience today?" and distributed at the exit points of *MusicLab*, installations and live concerts. The card was left blank and they were offered with writing-pens and felt-tips. Volunteers and staff encouraged a range of responses from single-word reactions, more extended prose, drawings and visitors responded with all of these reactions and a range in between. The cards also included an encouragement to 'Spread the word!' with details of the social media channels used by the project, the hashtag *#iOrchestra* and the project website.

In *MusicLab*, *Universe of Sound*, and at the Live Concerts, visible boards were prominently placed in order to display completed cards immediately. While front-of-house teams were empowered to remove anything obscene or gratuitously offensive, by design these boards were intended to offer unfiltered feedback and include a range of reactions.

Aims

During the planning of the project, and the design of the evaluation methodology, there were six key functions envisaged for this evaluation tool:

- to offer an immediate **feedback loop** for visitors by posing an open, unchallenging question, which could be interpreted by participants;
- to include the **voices of children and young people** within the feedback gathered, given that other tools involved the collection of personal data and thereby presented a child-protection problem if applied to minors;
- to model the core value of the project that there was no 'right' or 'wrong' response to the experience of an orchestra, and **to privilege the voices of participants** within the physical structure of the exhibitions;
- to be a form of offline social media, and to **encourage online participation** as a follow-up to in-person engagement;

to provide an **'early-warning' system** for visitor dissatisfaction or problems with project, which could be picked up by frontline staff;

- to gather **qualitative and personal responses** to the project as an artistic offering as a corollary to the measures of learning and audience demographics gathered by other tools.

Review of the success of assumptions and aims
This tool was only partially successful in meeting these aims, and as such offers some lessons for the construction of future projects and evaluation tools.

As a feedback loop, this tool was largely successful. The wording of the question achieved the requisite openness, whereas 'How did you feel?' or 'What did you think?' would have framed the experience as *primarily* emotional, or cerebral and thereby played into identified perceptual barriers to participation amongst constituencies unfamiliar with orchestral music. Take-up within both *MusicLab* and *Universe of Sound* was high, while at the Live Concerts it was significantly less so, where the necessary reflection time for respondents was pitted against the logistics of clearing a venue, and the desire of audience members to interact with each other rather than with the structures of the project.

This in turn raises a long-standing concern for arts outreach: whether the funding-imperatives to evaluate constantly and seek feedback are at odds with the desire to genuinely develop audiences and encourage an 'authentic' audience experience among new attendees. Arguably, until the Philharmonia expects its regular patrons in its core residencies to give snapshot responses to sophisticated concerts of orchestral repertoire, it is unreasonable, and potentially undermining, to expect this of new audiences simply because they are unfamiliar with concert-going. It is perhaps necessary to recognise that it is in the nature of the art form that an orchestral experience is an interaction of 'internal' and subjective responses in the moment of performance and in reflection afterwards, filtered through discussion and reflection, and as such, a single snapshot on leaving a concert-hall is likely to be of limited value. If the aim of a project like *iOrchestra* is to promote and share the real experience of a live symphony orchestra then perhaps this involves a recognition of the subtlety and ineffability of response, even among the uninitiated, and to have greater trust in the art form to achieve this, even if this is not measurable.

The voices of children and young people are well represented within the data gathered using this tool. The open-ended nature of the tool allowed engagement by pre-literate visitors. Frontline staff within both *MusicLab* and *Universe of Sound* reported the enthusiastic participation of toddlers and other infants. While there is a clear interpretive problem in making sense of these contributions which often amount to scribbles and other abstract markings, or drawings of interactions, there is clearly a role for this tool in explicitly sending a message to all participants that their responses are valued and that feedback which demonstrates musical literacy is of equal dignity and value as that which is enthusiastic and non-verbal. As well as children and young people, both *Universe of Sound* and *MusicLab* welcomed groups of adults with significant multiple learning and developmental disabilities who were

able to interact with the music and particularly the instruments at the level of vibration, sound and light. Front-of-house staff and volunteers reported these engagements as some of the most significant and moving of the project as a whole, though again, textual or verbal feedback was impossible, yet it would be wrong to undervalue these engagements. There is a choice to be made for future projects as to whether this sort of tool is repeated and allowed to function in this way as an end in itself, rather than attempting to collate and analyse material which cannot be meaningfully assimilated but has value for younger and/or learning disabled participants at the time it is completed.

By design, neither *Universe of Sound* nor *MusicLab* were text-heavy experiences for visitors with minimal signage, unobtrusively displayed foregrounding the visual, auditory and participatory elements of the project. In this context, the prominent display of diverse and democratic feedback, unfiltered for positivity was successful as a statement of the projects values. However, to some extent, the project was a victim of its own success in this regard - the fact that the feedback was overwhelmingly positive reduced the ability of this tool to act *as* a conversation or to draw out a broad range of responses with the result that display boards were almost monotonal. While gratifying for project staff and reassuring for visitors, the tool failed to enact a conversation as had been hoped.

This, in turn, can partly explain the lack of success in the next aim; this tool and parallel efforts resulted in very little take-up online and in social media, with well under 0.5% of visitors interacting over social media, and interactions concentrated among a small number of users. A persistent tension in the project was the relationship between digital and human elements and the elision in the audience development plan of 'digital' with 'virtual'. A significant increase in the quality and range of media and content shared via social media between year one and two, along with more consistent and prominent messaging to visitors in person about social media did not result in substantially increased social media engagement in the second year of the project. While both the project Twitter and Facebook accounts offer useful archives of the project, arguably the time servicing them was not a good investment in a project with such limited resources. For future projects this raises the question of whether the arts sector as a whole has over-invested in social media, and conversational tools. Traditional media is, at this point, seeing a turn in the tide, with several major outlets reversing policies to include message-boards and comments functions on websites after the initial enthusiasm for 'web 2.0' because the resource required to moderate are not commensurate with the advertising revenue they help to generate. Without the incentive of advertising revenue, arts projects have nonetheless tended to 'buy' the notion that creating an online conversation is a worthwhile end in itself, despite the dearth of quality contribution in, for example, significantly better resourced newspaper comments sections online. The experience of *iOrchestra* would suggest that this is not worth repeating in future, and that foregrounding physical, in-person experience and trusting in face-to-face conversation is more useful than attempting to orchestrate its online equivalent.

As an 'early-warning system', this tool was extremely useful. The interactive percussion in *Universe of Sound*, for example, was at times in tension with the desire of visitors quietly to listen and watch in other parts of the installation. Different facilitators took different approaches, and the cards on the board allowed front-of-house coordinators to 'take the temperature' as to how visitors were experiencing the balance and encourage either more or less assertive facilitation within the percussion room. Similarly, in *MusicLab*, the cards enabled a sense of the relative popularity of interactions and adaptations of time allocations within curated visits accordingly.

Finally, as an assessment tool as to the responses of visitors artistically, this was a moderately successful system. Two factors inhibited what might have been possible. First, the targeting of 'hard-to-reach' communities necessarily involves the majority of engagement being with communities which include relatively low levels of both literacy and so-called cultural and social capital. As such, while responses are enthusiastic, they are on the whole fairly inarticulate. Secondly, while they are gratifyingly warm, and taken as a whole, offer a strong endorsement of the artistic choices of the project, this lack of range allows for relatively little learning or deep analysis. With these provisos, the rest of the report will unpack the responses gathered through this method.

Visitor Experience

Across the different phases of the project, which included thirteen distinct communities, and three different central civic spaces for *Universe of Sound*, as well as in uneven application across creative and participatory projects, feedback about engagement with *iOrchestra* is almost exclusively good, with dissenting voices usually commenting on an element of the project they would like to be different, rather than outright rejection. Themes which emerged consistently were expressions of amazement, surprise and sensory richness for visitors to *Universe of Sound* across the regions. Visitors to *MusicLab* expressed the fun and playful nature both of the interactions, but also of the facilitators – Wilf Petherbridge and Oli Mason, who both deserve a special mention, having over thirteen weeks amassed on the side of the *MusicLab* kitchen cupboards a whole gallery of portraits of themselves on these cards, drawn by young visitors. Concert attendees, in a smaller sample, expressed their surprise and enthusiasm for the power of the orchestra, commenting on the experience as an occasion, and favourite pieces of the programme. Across the three core elements of the project, participants widely expressed gratitude for a significant, and often unexpected, positive experience. In both large and small installation, they demonstrate the centre points within audience journey, with the instruments and the Chorus Booth overwhelmingly heavily cited among specific interactions commented upon, drawn, and approved.

The implication of this overall positive trend is that the variation across the sample is very minor, and the quality of messages relatively simple. This reduces the breadth of meaningful analysis and the depth of conclusions. A lack of variation across regions and sites, makes it redundant to break down to this level, and so for the purposes of this report, they are considered at the level of project strands.

MusicLab

The picture of the participant journey through *MusicLab* is weighted heavily to the instruments and the chorus booth. Hi-5 follows both of these in terms of references though less than a fourth as frequently as the cello alone among the instruments.

Of the small minority of comments dealing with the video bench, the most positive and most disproportionately cited is the Touchpress *iOrchestra* with the wider videos rarely receiving mention.

While the brand 'iOrchestra' appears at a comparable frequency to among the sample from Universe of Sound, the brand 'MusicLab' appears three times as often, suggesting that, uniquely across the project, 'MusicLab' as a brand has recognition and traction independently of *iOrchestra* and could be expected to communicate as well and generate similar connection and affection with other communities beyond the South West.

Rare complaints or negative feedback mostly concern capacity caused by over-demand or periodic complaints about particular items, sometimes when remembered from the year before, not working. During over 12,000 visits even robust interactions were occasionally out of commission, though these were rare and rapidly restored.

The value of dedicated animateurs, who are referred to continuously, often by name, and with great warmth and affection. Many visitors cite being shown how-to do something specific in person one-to-one. However sophisticate the technology visitors are particularly appreciative of in-person enthusiasm and connection.

'Word cloud' emphasising the most frequently occurring feedback in MusicLab 'response cards' submitted across Plymouth, Torbay and Cornwall, April – July 2015.

Universe of Sound
While name 'iOrchestra' is widely cited, the brand *Universe of Sound* is almost never present within descriptions of the experience across the regions.

While 'the conductor' is often cited as of interest, particularly the ability to watch from the orchestra's perspective, the conducting pod was relatively rarely mentioned, which supports the observation of front-of-house staff and volunteers that it was pitched at a higher level of complexity and was unreliable technically, and so while a minority of visitors took significant time and were highly engaged, it was either missed, ignored or dismissed by most visitors. Conversely, the interactive percussion section is cited very frequently and almost always positively.

Complaints or critical comments are infrequent: though rare, there are both complaints about the noise in the percussion room from being to lax *and* complaints that young creativity being stifled by being too strict with the same instruments suggest a balance was struck. Occasionally older visitors report finding it too dark, and very young children finding it overwhelming, though from front-of-house feedback it is clear that these, too, were not representative of most engagement by both older and younger visitors.

The tone of most feedback is less energetic than that from *MusicLab*, with more contemplative thoughts and expressions of a deeper emotional connection.

Visitors often record appreciation of volunteers and front of house staff, particularly the facilitators in the percussion room. There were occasional complaints of inattentiveness, but overwhelmingly thankful for knowledgeable, permissive and appropriate staffing of the event.

'Word cloud' emphasising the most frequently occurring feedback in Universe of Sound 'response cards' submitted in Plymouth, Torquay and Truro, April – July 2015.

Gaps and omissions
Given the broader aims of the project to engage in ongoing relationships and journeys with orchestral music in particular, and culture in general, it is regrettable that signs of inspiration to continue exploring are largely absent. Very few people suggest a change in behaviour, or make a commitment to do something as a result of the visit, such as expressing a desire to attend a concert, though given the

relatively tight frame of the question, pointing to the experience itself, this is not particularly surprising. The exception to this rule was a relatively high number of visitors to *Universe of Sound*, using the cards to record a reawakened desire to take up an instrument that had been learned as a child but since abandoned. A study well beyond the scope of these documents would be necessary to establish whether this had resulted in any action being taken; but in some areas – such as in Paignton, Liskeard and St Austell – new adult, young, and intergenerational ensembles are now being sustained by Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra's education remit, which were created by the *iOrchestra Fringe* which increase the chances of desire sparked by Universe of Sound being sustained by more vibrant and active musical communities.

Learnings

Within *MusicLab* while not mentioned as a whole to a wide extent, there is a strong preference described in the video bench for the *iOrchestra* app, well beyond the videos. This seems to emphasise the need to prioritise the interactive and tangible elements of *MusicLab* in future iterations, and to avoid replicating material which could better be accessed online as a follow-up, and which was, in retrospect, pitched above the level of most visitors.

The emphasis on good training and consistent staffing is borne out by the positive picture painted of volunteers and paid staff in both *MusicLab* and *Universe of Sound*. The deeper investment of time in the second year and the range and rigour of training is endorsed by the volume and warmth show through this evaluation tool.

As reflected from other tools, there was a danger in eliding 'digital' and 'virtual'. Simply because the delivery method is technological, there is no need to expect forward engagement to be primarily online, and the aim to make all elements digital was incidental for most visitors in practice, who mostly did not take up encouragement to continue the conversation online. As discussed above, the necessity and even desirability of this, should be considered for future projects.

The overwhelming weighting of commitments to return to a musical instrument was in Universe of Sound, not as might have been expected, in *MusicLab*, with its more 'hands-on' and experiential approach to engagement. Partly, this can be explained by the findings of the Audience Journeys report, with the tighter focus within *MusicLab* visitors on communities of lower socioeconomic status, with higher levels of relative and absolute deprivation, including lower educational attainment, and therefore lower chances of having educational experience of learning an orchestral instrument. But beyond this, it suggests that, important as have-a-go approaches to first engagements with orchestral instruments are within a wider audience development project, it is necessary to combine this with high quality, high production values, serious presentations of orchestral music, in order to make the intellectual and emotional connection between the interactive experience, an experience of excellence as inspiration or aspiration. In the longer term this requires and a wider cultural community which is open and active enough to sustain engagement. *MusicLab* plays a different role within the audience journeys:

feedback is more animated, joyous and energetic. This is partly explained by the lower age profile, but when combined with the high numbers of visitors to from *MusicLab* crossing over into the *Universe of Sound* audience, the body of responses on the reaction cards suggest that *MusicLab* was a highly successful as a signpost and a driver to wider engagement. Even though, within the wider evaluation, there have been concerns about the continuing educational limitations of the some of the *MusicLab* interactions, this evaluation tool suggests that *MusicLab* is a highly effective first contact with the art form and builds a genuine base for ongoing exploration. The fact that the instruments and the chorus booth feature so highly within the sample, evenly across the thirteen regions, suggests that future re-designs should focus on real musical engagements with instruments, concurring with the firm view of *MusicLab* facilitators that instruments, even if entirely 'analogue', should form the basis of any radical redesign of *MusicLab*. The popularity of Chorus Booth typifies the playful and engaging, low-judgement and high entertainment 'mood' of the *MusicLab* feedback across the project.

The experience of *iOrchestra*, as told through these cards, is of communities energised and excited about the possibilities of orchestral music. In small ways, *iOrchestra* has met that need and collaborations with Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra mean that meaningful engagement will go on within specific communities within both Torbay and Cornwall, but they also describe a landscape in which much greater sustained investment will be necessary, and a much more active role for a shrinking statutory sector, in order to respond to the need generated by *iOrchestra* and expressed through these reaction cards. *iOrchestra* was always intended to be a catalyst for ongoing audience journeys, and the feedback of its audience members creates both a powerful case for ongoing support, and a stark demonstration of the size of the gap in current provision.

While the lack of variation across sites has limited the breadth of what can be concluded here, the even nature of response across sixteen very distinct communities suggests an important learning. That while getting to know a community well is necessary to build strategic partnerships and facilitate creative work, there should be a limit to the micro-analysis of communities, in the presentation of the core artistic offers at least. The reaction cards demonstrate that the same high quality experiences generated similar levels and patterns of responses, across communities which included respectively both urban and virtually rural areas, sink estates in both a post-industrial city and the edges of a seaside town, market towns, former mining communities, and seaside resorts. It suggests a need to ensure a strong creative lead within such projects and a clearly articulated artistic vision – and this was a key strength of *iOrchestra*.

As a measure of branding, the sample demonstrates the success of *iOrchestra* as the core brand of the project, and it can be inferred that good recognition and highly positive associations are attached to the *iOrchestra* brand within our core communities. *MusicLab* achieves even higher levels of inclusion, though for a much smaller sample.

Recommendations

Were the installations likely to receive a similar presentation, as audience engagement and development opportunities, continue to combine hands-on participatory work *and* real engagement with a real symphony orchestra, whether digitally or live, but preferably both. The combination allows much wider audience reach – not just because different segments of the audience engage differently with the different parts of the experience – but because it is necessary to embody both the excellence that is possible when such a project is delivered by a world-class orchestra, but also which explains, in entertaining ways, what underlies that artistic experience in terms of craft and technique, discipline and learning, composition, structure and texture. In this regard, *iOrchestra* emerges as an excellent, necessarily loose, model of the core elements of a successful, first-access, orchestra audience development project.

The success in generating so even and widespread a positive response across such a wide diversity of communities, suggests that the core elements of the project, as measured by these tools, have widespread applicability across diverse elements of society and segments of the audiences and potential audiences of orchestral music. Future projects need to aspire to the same production values and high quality user experiences, though this will necessarily mean continuing to evolve and update the key resources of *MusicLab* and the walk-through installations beyond the versions which were deployed by *iOrchestra*, recognising the high levels of investment that this would require in order to remain relevant and impactful.

Within *MusicLab* the wide differential in positive feedback for Chorus Booth and the instruments, as compared with the other interactions, suggest that interactivity, with the flexibility to express some creativity are the most impactful elements. Despite the unquestioned quality of the Philharmonia films, they were mostly underused by these communities who, when engaging with video bench more usually opted for the Orchestra App. If resources were not an issue, based on this feedback it would be ideally advisable to swap the video bench for a further set of instruments, or remake the video content reworked for new audiences. As a model for further projects, this body of evidence suggests that hands-on and participator elements are central to this first entry-point level of intervention, in terms of breaking down barriers and enthusing and engaging the reluctant or the uninitiated. These conclusions are further supported by the relative reception of the conducting booth as opposed to the percussion room within *Universe of Sound*.

The evidence from these tools support the awareness that emerged throughout delivery that a strong central brand was necessary to communicate a complex and varied offer. The adoption within reaction cards of the unofficial titles 'iOrchestra truck' and 'iOrchestra tent', often above the project branding, suggests the necessity for clear messages within branding about the nature of any future project incorporating multiple elements and flexible audience journeys.