



## A Universal Movement

*For years, prominent figures in classical music have harped on the need to draw new audiences. But it’s equally important to draw new musicians.*

By Charles Hazlewood as told to Elaine Lipworth Illustration by Hadley Hooper

**M**Y YOUNGEST CHILD, who is 9, was born with cerebral palsy. She’s introduced me to a whole world I had never considered. I started wondering why, in my 25 years as a conductor, I’d never encountered disabled musicians in any of the great orchestras I’d worked with.

Music is the most universal language. You can play a melody to a child in Beijing, play the same melody to a child in Cape Town, and, despite the differences in their backgrounds, they will draw a lot of the same truths from it. So it would make sense for orchestras to reflect all elements of society. Not that they always have, of course. If you look at a photograph of any orchestra from 50 years ago, how many women would you see? Virtually none. But now the idea that an orchestra wouldn’t have a balance of genders is unthinkable. By extension, why should it be that an orchestra doesn’t also include disabled people, who are a vibrant part of every community?

There’s absolutely no reason why someone who is, say, visually impaired wouldn’t be as musically brilliant as someone who has his or her sight. Disability doesn’t make any difference; the problem is getting the musicians

the technology and assistance they need. For instance, most concert halls are not calibrated to deal with wheelchairs, so if you’re a wheelchair user and you play the trumpet, it’s difficult just to get on the stage.

I saw an opportunity to make a platform for this issue during the Paralympic Games in London in 2012. People used to assume that the combination of disability and sport was a therapy project for beleaguered athletes. But now we know better; the Paralympics is simply about world-class sport. So I formed the British Paraorchestra, which is like any other orchestra except that every musician has a disability. I can’t tell you how difficult it was to get the powers-that-be to take the idea seriously. It was only with the support of the band Coldplay, the main event of the closing ceremony, that the Paraorchestra was invited to take part.

Since then, the group has become extremely powerful. One of our founding fathers, the extraordinary musician Clarence Adoo, is one of the greatest trumpeters in the U.K. Tragically, he was in a car accident that rendered him paralysed from the shoulders down. He met with composer and inventor Rolf Gehlhaar, who made him a computer-based

instrument controlled by breath and head movements, and now Adoo is back, making music digitally. Gemma Lunt, another wheelchair user, is a virtuoso soprano sax player. She has weak lungs, and when she does a recording session with us, it will often leave her almost unable to breathe. But she’s so intensely committed to what she does that she’s prepared to give it her all every time she performs.

And the orchestra is in demand: We are invited by the British Council to tour Bahrain in March, and we hope to add our weight to the British Paralympic squad’s ambitions for Rio 2016. Even more important, we’re partnering with conventional orchestras so audiences can experience true integration. Our goal is that it won’t be surprising to see musicians with disabilities playing alongside non-disabled musicians. For example, our members were onstage with a conventional chamber orchestra during the Paraorchestra’s launch at our new residency at Colston Hall in Bristol last July. And it was clear to the audience that the disabled musicians were the ones leading the charge. That felt like a new world.

Anyone who thought the Paraorchestra would be a “disabled ghetto” is absolutely wrong. The Paraorchestra is a link in a chain, with the ultimate goal of full integration. Incorporating these voices is important because each individual brings something unique to the music. If I’m conducting a Beethoven symphony in Copenhagen, I will give a different account of that piece from the next conductor, or even someone who’s conducting it in London on the same night. Why? Because we are all gloriously different.

There has been a lack of imagination in terms of the musicians who are thought most “appropriate” to perform the great symphonies. I challenge conventional orchestras to get out in their communities and find musicians with disabilities. Only then will these musicians start to get the attention they deserve, and, where necessary, the support they need. We now live in a world where assistive musical technology exists or can be created for any kind of disability. There is no barrier beyond perception to prevent anyone from making music. ■

*Charles Hazlewood has conducted some of the world’s top orchestras and has served as music director for Cape Town lyric theatre company DDK. He’s the founder of the British Paraorchestra ([paraorchestra.com](http://paraorchestra.com)).*