

English Touring Opera's non-renewal of 13 musicians' contracts: Racism and sexism dressed as "diversity"

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The English Touring Opera (ETO) has cited "diversity" to justify not renewing the contracts of 13 musicians, nearly half its orchestra. Though employed on rolling freelance contracts, many of the players had been with ETO for 20 years or more.

The players have made a long contribution to the excellence of the ETO orchestra. As their playing was already known, they were not expected to audition at a recent call for new players. But this now suggests a longstanding intention to remove them, and to replace them based on racial or gender-based criteria.

This divisive move dismisses the qualities of the musicians involved and attacks the very basis of artistic accomplishment. Such "quota-filling" positive discrimination does nothing to address the historically determined divisions that stem from the very foundations of an unequal, class society, but serves only to fuel the racial divisions it claims to oppose. It is a gift to racists and the right-wing.

The announcement came in an unexpected letter to the 13 players, aged 40-66, from ETO Director James Conway last week. In it he wrote of "significant changes" at the company under new Music Director Gerry Cornelius, making it "likely that ETO will not be in a position to offer you a freelance engagement in the Spring 2022 season, even if we would like to leave the door open for freelance engagements in the future."

Conway explained that these changes involved a commitment "to increasing all kinds of diversity in the team," and that the company had "prioritised increased diversity in the orchestra." This was "in line with the firm guidance of the Arts Council... and of most of the trust funds that support ETO."

Arts Council England (ACE), the primary funder of the ETO's extensive touring programme, swiftly denied any

responsibility or support for the move, suggesting that ETO's actions might actually have compromised the arrangements of its £1.78 million funding: "We did not instruct the English Touring Opera to send this letter. We are now in conversation with ETO to ensure no funding criteria have been breached."

The orchestra's tours, with live productions and education projects, reach nearly 50,000 people each year.

Veteran British classical music journalist Norman Lebrecht has described the move as setting "a dire precedent across UK arts."

ETO employ musicians on short-term contracts each season, but with a culture of rolling long-term engagement. That the players had no firmer security is in large part due to the Musicians' Union (MU). The MU admit that ETO have "always resisted the MU's negotiations around instating a 'first call' core players list" into its collective agreement. The MU describe this as "a key protection a freelance player can have against losing their regular work in this way."

This has allowed ETO management to treat these non-renewals as a matter of course, with Conway writing "the orchestra has always changed season to season."

But ETO has nevertheless depended on the long service of players and their considerable talents. Moreover, the coherence of an orchestra, no matter the individual talents involved, including those of the conductor, is hugely impacted by their previously playing together.

Conway admits the move casually sacrifices the high standards "achieved... during my tenure." The MU noted that the ETO orchestra has been consistently praised in the press for its quality, "with some of the players (including those who have not been booked) being mentioned personally for the high standard of their playing."

But Conway used his recognition of their excellence only to justify abandoning them to their fate, pointing them to other employment: “all those players have achieved distinction in their work with other groups, in their teaching, and in many other fields.”

There was immediate outrage, with huge support for the dismissed players from other musicians and from audience members. However, ETO aggressively defended the policy, saying seasonal bookings and employing different players for different repertoires carried “no obligation... for future seasons.”

ETO then said these seasonal contracts were offered “on the basis of excellence.” But if so, the decision to remove the musicians substitutes race, gender and other identity-based criteria for excellence. This can have only negative artistic and indeed social effects.

The last 18 months have been terrible for musicians, who have found themselves without work and often without means of support. The government’s initial wage furlough scheme offered no provision for self-employed and freelance workers, most arts workers. Its Cultural Recovery Fund was aimed at enabling venues to reopen, although it was clear this could not be done safely. It was not aimed at enabling artists to survive during their enforced layoff.

When the government belatedly introduced its Self-Employed Income Support Scheme, many artists were not covered. The MU estimated that 38 percent of musicians were not eligible. Last October, the MU reported that more than 1,000 freelance orchestral musicians had had no income since concerts were closed-down in March 2020.

Conway’s initial letter declared, “I recognise... this last 18 months have been extremely difficult for freelance artists and technicians.” He then tells these struggling artists to accept being effectively sacked to supposedly rectify social injustices for which they bear no responsibility whatsoever.

It must also be stressed that any failure for the ETO to not properly reflect societal diversity is Conway’s responsibility, not those being let go. In all events, no one, including of course Conway, has suggested that his employees gained work because they were white and/or male. They are only being let go for this reactionary reason.

Based on previous employment patterns, many musicians hoped the 2022 season would enable a return to work and a chance to begin repaying the debts that have built up. But it is clear that ETO have long been planning

their latest move, as their refusal to incorporate a ‘first call’ core players list in its collective agreement demonstrates.

The make-up of Cornelius’s new orchestra is not yet clear. The day the non-renewal of contracts was reported, ETO announced the arrival of 12 musicians, speaking of “an equivalent number of players we have worked with previously.” This statement has now been removed from their website.

The comments of Jo Laverty, the MU National Organiser Orchestras, make clear the MU knew this situation would arise eventually. She said that ETO “had mooted in pre-pandemic times their desire to ‘refresh’ the orchestra.”

The union noted, “Sacking half the workforce under the guise of ‘improving diversity’ is insincere and bad practice,” with Laverty noting that its “desire to ‘refresh’” had never been expressed “in terms of diversity” and that ETO had made no “efforts to address diversity in gradual and inclusive stages” like other orchestras. Nor does the ETO’s current call for musicians mention “an equality, diversity and inclusion statement,” or any “commitment to addressing barriers for underrepresented groups.”

The MU said it “lauds efforts to increase diversity in the workplace, [but] this should be achieved fairly and legitimately, not by ‘sacking’ half an orchestra.” It also reports that musicians who have been offered work “have expressed how devastated they are for their colleagues.” Yet it has announced no measures to combat this wholly undemocratic and retrograde step.

ETO say they remain optimistic that the MU will smooth things out for them: “We recognise the [MU’s] mission to champion all their members and are confident that the Union will continue to find [ETO] a supportive and fair producer.”



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