

Holly J 0:08

You were listening to Rebecca and Holly, we are the directors of a new society called young musicians for social justice. Young musicians to social justice seeks to bring together and empower young musicians to recognise their potential as agents of social change. And this podcast asked the question, what is the role of music in bringing about social justice? Over the next 10 weeks we are going to be hearing from a number of different speakers, all with unique perspectives on this question. We are both students at the University of Leeds. We met over coffee at Hyde Park book club here in Leeds, which if you're a student in Moscow do and we bonded over a mutual interest in music and social change. We really hope you enjoyed listening to our conversations as much as we did.

Rebecca Ward 0:57

So today we are joined by Matt Peacock. Matt is the founder and director of arts and homelessness international, a charity aiming to bring positive change to people projects and policy in the homeless sector through arts and creativity. Matt is one of the evening standards 1000 most influential Londoners, one of Gordon Brown's everyday heroes, a Southbank Centre Changemaker featured on the independence happy list and a Clore leadership fellow. Matt founded Streetwise Opera in 2002, and With One Voice in 2016, which changed its name to arts and homelessness International, and was awarded an MBE for services to homelessness and the arts in 2011. Thanks so much for joining us, Matt.

Matt Peacock 1:41

Oh, it's great to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Rebecca Ward 1:44

So before we begin, we would love to know what music you've been listening to during lockdown.

Matt Peacock 1:52

Well, most recently, I guess Christmas music I love Christmas music and we're not allowed to listen to it enough - just that little kind of window so anything from Bob Chilcott carols to Britten - my favourite composer Britain ceremony of carols and Michael Buble

Rebecca Ward 2:13

Love it.

Matt Peacock 2:15

And over lockdown I got into things like Beethoven's late quartets, which I hadn't really listened to before and I love Sibelius found his music so uplifting, a lot about nature, which I love like the Fifth Symphony. Got recently introduced to quartet promusica by a great friend. Been listening to Hamilton and 80s music.

Holly J 2:39

Hahaha

Matt Peacock 2:43

Last year we I organised some singalongs, social distancing alongside my streets, every few weeks, and people sang from their porches. So we sang loads of things, but dancing always ended up with we'll meet again.

Holly J 2:56

oh, I want to do that now.

Rebecca Ward 3:00

That will always lift your spirits for sure. Yeah. So as I said, in your bio, you're currently the founder and director of arts and homelessness International. So what are the aims of this charity? And how did it develop?

Matt Peacock 3:13

So we work to bring positive change to people, projects and policy in the homeless community using arts and creativity. And we spend quite a bit of time making the case for why arts is important in homelessness support, and supporting artists who are or have been homeless and projects to develop. It's quite a, I suppose a small young sector, and not as big or doesn't have as much history as, say, arts and health, arts and disability. It's really effective. There are lots of people around the world who are so passionate about it and doing this as activists in their countries. And after 17 years of streetwise opera, it was obvious that a movement was being created around the world, and that it would be good if someone helped to guide this movement, I guess. But also crucially, I think learn from each other because one

of the one things I've found over the years is that you can feel very isolated doing social justice work in the arts. And yes, you know about other groups doing it. But the danger is that you, if we don't talk together as a sector, we miss some great stuff that's happening not just in this country, but around the world. So we do a lot of knowledge sharing, and a lot of advocacy and hopefully, spread a lot of fun, which is much needed with the trauma of homelessness.

Rebecca Ward 4:50

That sounds great.

Holly J 4:50

I just really like that sort of thing about feeling isolated and coming together with musicians and social justice just because in the sort of area of social change - No one person can know enough about that to have the sort of toolkit to do it by themselves. So like, the more the merrier, I think.

Matt Peacock 5:08

Yeah, absolutely. And I make mistakes all the time. I'm working on my second charity that I've started and making the same mistakes again. And I guess, part of it is about, I suppose celebrating some of the stuff that goes wrong because there are always opportunities to learn. Everyone else makes mistakes. And if you're with people together, you can really support each other, which all of us needs.

Rebecca Ward 5:33

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I couldn't agree more. So you mentioned before and just then and the organisation streetwise opera, which you were the director of before arts and homelessness International. And I absolutely loved the story you tell about how you came to this decision as an opera goers, as an opera critic. And can you tell us a bit more about that story?

Matt Peacock 5:54

Yeah, well, I am I studied music at Edinburgh University and thought I might become a singer for a while, realised fairly quickly that that was probably wasn't quite good enough to have a decent solo career. So moved into working for a magazine firstly, in the advertising floor, selling ad space, classical music, those kind of magazines. And then just a lucky

encounter, enabled me to become assistant editor of Opera Now Magazine, so I did a lot of reviewing, different countries wrote that opera. And at the same time, I was really conscious of homelessness in everywhere I went to it was just, it was it was something was in every city I visited. And I just felt increasingly uneasy going past people. And then having those conversations with friends about you know, some of whom thought that people would just, you know, on the make anyway. I, I volunteered for a homeless centre then became a part time member of staff. So I juggle these two jobs as a key worker in a night shelter in London. And as a journalist. Those two careers happened in parallel, I enjoyed the both. And then one of the residents one night from the night shelter, read out this quote in their newspaper from a politician who had said that the homeless are the people you step over coming out of the Opera House. And when you work in homelessness, you realise very quickly that people have extraordinary talents, gifts, kindness, all sorts of positives that you don't see when you walk past someone. And for them, that comment was a bit of a, you know, a usual insult that they were being looked down upon. But also one guy, Doc said, you know, if we were in the Opera House, people would look up to us, instead of look down on us. It was quite political. It was about turning the tables and using opera, which is I guess at the other end of the social spectrum, seemingly, something also which I'd say is also misunderstood. Opera is really for everyone and an amazing art form. And combining these two things, it was just the craziest idea. So we had to do it. And I was fortunate that we just done a an article on the Opera House redevelopment. And this is around about 2000 / 2001. And the linbury Studio, ROH two and the basement wasn't being programmed yet. It wasn't quite open. So I asked him, we got a couple of days, and we put on an opera with them. At that point, the guys wanted to work backstage. So they made props and costumes. And but later on, when streetwise opera was formed after that, everyone was singing.

Rebecca Ward 8:52

Oh, amazing. I love that story. I think it's so inspiring. So, I mean, since then, there's been many years since then. And you've been working on developing projects and in this line of work for a long time. So what has motivated you? I mean, your passion clearly comes across just in the way you speak about that. But over time, what has motivated you through all the ups and downs to continue in this line of work?

Matt Peacock 9:18

Well, I think it's partly the change that you see quite quickly in people and in communities and in, in in policy even. I mean you... if you've worked in this kind of area, I think very quickly, you can see that music can enable people to have the permission to believe in themselves. And that can be in an instant it can be, I've often seen people who've just said no one's ever listened to me. No one's ever thought that I was anything more than a set of problems and music and arts can really unlock that possibility.

And suddenly you're talking to someone about what's strong about them not wrong about them. So that is, I will always work in this area because of the possibilities that it gives people to change positively in whatever way that means to them. For them, in their, in their own sense of well being. Or in there, we're increasingly seeing an understanding the mechanism of how this works. Recently, we at arts and international, we did a literature review of arts and homelessness around the world. We found 61 reports and other evaluations. And they all pointed to four key areas of well being of agency of resilience and knowledge and skills. And I think that is the point that around agency and resilience that we're getting to a really interesting point that the sector I think is beginning to do things with people, not for them. So yes, absolutely. Music can really benefit people day to day, but actually, it can also enable people to have a louder voice. And in this world of huge power imbalances and injustices, that's really important. And I can see that I can see projects developing and getting more confident when they start working with each other. And then policy change has always been this, I don't know, it's a bit of a holy grail sometimes when you think about what you want to achieve, and that's not necessarily always the most important thing. The people are the most important thing. And yeah, it is beginning, I think, you know, with a lot of organisations and people working in this area, to enable policymakers to embed arts more into social services. We've often talked about a jigsaw approach. So instead of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where, you know, you start with food and shelter, and then you move up to enlightenment and and, you know, access to culture, if if you've gone through those steps, but if you actually talk to people who are or have been homeless, and we co created this with people in Manchester - in crisis, you need love. On day one, you need community you need belief. And arts can give that so so our jigsaw of homeless support, which is called with we're trying to get local councils to implement it, and it's working in Manchester, and at the moment Coventry, and first London borough will be Haringay for next year.

Rebecca Ward 12:36

Wow, that sounds so yeah, inspiring. So ingenuitive. Yeah, great, fantastic.

In doing this work, obviously, that you've spoken about a number of inspiring and rewarding parts of the work. And on the other end of the spectrum, what do you think of maybe some of the biggest challenges for practitioners who are wanting to get involved in this work?

Matt Peacock 12:59

Um I think there are, there's issues of feeling like you have to get things perfect right from the start. And people who are, I think, drawn to social justice can be quite hard on themselves as practitioners. And you see kind of the negatives before you see the positives. So I think that can hold people back and and I would say, you know, just have the confidence we had we had this joke at streetwise opera, you know, what could possibly go wrong? And the answer is like everything and more things than we would even know about that we could put on a risk assessment. And yet, that's not a reason not to do it. Sometimes it's actually really empowering just to say, right, but let's, let's do this. And we'll learn from day one. And that will continue, you know, like I said before, continually making mistakes.

And I think, also in our setting in homelessness. I've seen a lot of practitioners struggle when they feel like they have to be social workers, and musicians. We always advocated this area where we'd have someone in the room and typically we would do group sessions, who would take care of the pastoral side of things. And what that does is that it sort of frees up the musician to concentrate on the music without necessarily dealing with all of the sometimes horrendous things that people are going through and the frustrations that boil over with people when they because their lives, sometimes chaotic and very difficult. So I think that's that's something that we've learnt along the way while still seeing now very much enabling homeless people to feel not othered as well. So sometimes it is problematic to have like a support worker who is just by them being there othering other people. So and that needs to be done very carefully. And I think, you know, it's not always perfect, you often feel like you're making real headway with someone. And you can see them changing for the better and believing and turning up. And then suddenly, they're not there anymore. And that can be heartbreaking. And something may have happened, or they've lost their confidence, or, for many people, they've spent so much time in one place being treated in one way that that is familiar. And it's better to know that familiarity than hope for something better.

And finally, I guess, music, social welfare, social justice, it's sometimes pretty hard sell. And everyone says, what about the soup and blankets, you know, why are you entertaining people when they've got very difficult lives? And that can really be draining. And again, it's just starting small. It's, it's getting your allies, it's getting the support workers, the social workers who really believe in it, to advocate for it. Enable people to give it a go. And because they're the people who have trust, and you're not necessarily going to fly in to do a workshop in a Homeless Centre, and everyone's gonna flock there. I mean, they're just really not. Yeah, it's a long, long process sometimes.

Holly J 16:39

Yeah, definitely. I was wondering, with you sort of mentioned earlier about that attitude of what can go wrong, sort of just jumping into things. I was wondering if you felt that the pandemic will exacerbate that make people have more confidence to just go out there and be like, right, okay, like so much has gone wrong already. Let's go for it, or do you think it will inhibit the sort of social justice and music programmes such as the ones you're working on?

Matt Peacock 17:07

I really feel optimistic about, about Arts and Social Change in general, and social outcomes. And I think that we're going into a golden age of Arts and Social Change, because in any crisis, crisis across history, that's when the academics and the activists come out, that's when the innovative ways of working are found. So we're, we're we're living in this weird paradox where the art sector is crumbling and gigging musicians are losing their work. And it's devastating. And yet, underneath all that, there's some green shoots of possibilities with innovation happening, different ways of working everywhere. And we've got to capitalise on that we've got to call it what it is. I believe in talking about things because they become a sort of self self. What's the word? What's the phrase?

Holly J 18:04

fulfilling prophecy?

Matt Peacock 18:06

Exactly. And, and it's not mumbo jumbo. It's really, it's really happening.

Rebecca Ward 18:12

Yeah, I think in these conversations, what we're doing is we're dismantling a current narrative, and we're attempting to rebuild it. And that's what I love about what you're saying. And just to really review how we see the role of musicians in society, are they - if they're merely entertainers, then it feels like there's a sense of redundancy at the moment. But actually, it's forcing everyone to say, but but we think that there's a deeper role to musicians and music in society. And it is more than that. And so I think those conversations are yeah, they're really important. Okay, so getting back a bit more practical now, then, and for those for those music practitioners, who are totally on board with what you're saying, um have you got any tips or tools that you would recommend, I mean, don't share your deepest, most prized industry secrets hahaha. But yeah, just anything that you think you would be happy to share?

Matt Peacock 19:06

Well, there are no industry secrets. It's the big headline, and often still feel like kind of making up as we go along. And yeah, I think there are certain things that have come out over the time with - in an environment about self belief and encouragement, I think continuity and long term working is really important. I've seen short term projects, which leave people in sometimes a worse state than they began. And it's not that every project needs to be super long term, but it's just I suppose an awareness of communication and how the lifestyle of project might work or kind of work because of that, that factor that we talked about earlier about self belief, and that can happen really quickly. And I love things like that we've learned through streetwise and others around freedom within a framework. So enabling people to really come out with their own self expression, whilst being held sometimes in a safe space, because the safe space for some people is actually with some kind of leadership, musical leadership. And sometimes for other people, it's really a free for all. But more often than not, I think that sense that someone's holding a space is really important. And I think there's a there's a kind of, there's like methodologies that are really good to look at, even if you disagree with them. Because I've come across musicians to go, I don't believe in methodologies, I just will work as I work. And that's great. And that's really great and actually can be, you know, treating everyone completely like everyone else. And yet, it's not for nothing, that a lot of this work has been going on for a long time. And we are standing on the shoulders of giants of, you know, the 70s 80s you know, that kind of Community Arts Movement that happened decades ago. So things like streetwise's core principles of art and



homelessness. And on our website, there's a new resource that we've created called co-produce practice guide. And it goes through areas of exit planning, setting aims, helping people to promote, like positive messages in work, and it's just really tips. It's not like how to guides. But I think some of that is, what it does, is it gives people confidence when they're doing the practice. And if you're armed with that confidence, then you can change the rulebook. So I, I think that a lot of that kind of training and, and assimilating ways of working is mostly about confidence.

Holly J 22:04

I've seen I've seen a lot of trauma informed practice sort of guides and podcasts and various research going on at the moment, particularly in the context of working in prisons. But I guess the same sort of applies to any kind of trauma. I think that that's something I've been thinking about is really useful for practitioners, because it is just such a sort of widely encompassing thing that so many people have experienced, and there are proven ways to help other people who are going through it, and it is. Yeah, I think it's just a good good to have those resources out there for musicians and practitioners.

Matt Peacock 22:40

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. And I think most of what we're dealing with in homelessness, stems back to early years trauma, not not for everyone, but for a lot of people. Yeah. So all those tips and when when musicians share warmup games, and icebreakers it's just fabulous. Because you can steal things and you can use them and it sets the right tone. And then it gives you confidence for, for what you're doing.

Rebecca Ward 23:08

We spoke a little bit earlier about that sense of, well, one of the biggest challenges being scepticism surrounding the connection between music and social justice, and in this particular instance, homelessness. And it'd be easy to say, well, surely other primary care needs are more important than musicians coming into this situation. Can you elaborate a little bit more on what you think the role is of music and musicians in bringing about social change in this particular regard?

Matt Peacock 23:41

I suppose, for me, it goes, goes back to that area of working with people and communities and society. One of the biggest problems in social justice is about power, and about inequality of power. And a lot of the systems, government systems and actually, sometimes charity systems, keep people in poverty, through benefits traps, or just making the benefits system incomprehensible. And I've spoken to benefits advisors, my sister as well. And, you know, it's just so complicated and what that does, and I think it goes across everything is that it puts people in their place, puts people out of the realm of being able to make decisions for themselves. So ultimately, for me, healthy social justice is about enabling people to have a stronger voice themselves. And we're seeing one of our big things at the moment in arts and international is what we're calling co creation, which around homelessness - this is about working with people, not for them and enabling people to have - a) be at the table when decisions are being made about homelessness - And some he seems really obvious, but it's not happening enough - to people getting jobs in homelessness services and places like, because, you know, we're 50% representative now on the board and staff, people who are and have been homeless.

And and I think that that is going to create change, and then you can begin to question things. And it's a really unpopular view. But just my reflection on the last year as well is how we've been told consistently, one narrative about COVID. And it's a very important narrative, which is, you know, keep people safe, separate. You know, social distancing? And yet, of course, that's correct. And yet, there is no counter argument about what is the human cost of people being isolated, who are already very, very vulnerable. And I just worry in this politically, we are really controlled. I don't know what the right answer for that is. But I just think that there should be more conversations without about, about the human cost of what is happening. Without it sounding - You know, like you're not toeing the party line, or you're a bit right wing. We work day to day with very vulnerable people, and they are really suffering.

Rebecca Ward 26:22

Yeah, no, absolutely. It's a, it is a huge concern.

Holly J 26:26

Especially, especially regarding mental health as well. And I think often, when the narratives of mental health are spoken about in the media, I guess it's to do with the least vulnerable groups almost. And I think, yeah, that's something that definitely needs to be considered

more. And, you know, I have the privilege not to be in any of those situations. But I realised the other day that I don't know what half like the key workers that work with vulnerable groups like homeless people, I don't know what the rules for that for them are at the moment. So yeah, it's a very important topic.

Matt Peacock 27:01

I never forget this. One of our performers at streetwise who said that she had felt more confident during the singing. And the next time she went to the doctor, she asked more questions. She probed about what she was being told, because she had the voice the confidence to do that. Sometimes I feel the same. You're like going to a scary surgeon, and they, you know, you know they're busy. So you don't ask anything. It's like, if we can enable people through the confidence of music making and arts to have a louder voice and confidence to speak up. That is just going to be better.

Rebecca Ward 27:43

Yeah, absolutely. It's almost like a mending process. For whatever reason, they might have felt as though that voice has been taken away from them or been - they feel as though it's been illegitimised in some way. And so it's like a mending process that needs to needs to happen.

Matt Peacock 27:58

Or they've never had it. Yeah, never been in a situation where they've had a voice. And don't think they have a permission to say anything of value, but they do.

Rebecca Ward 28:08

Yeah, absolutely. I think this brings me crucially into the role of young musicians, and now in society, you spoke before about a reckoning almost that you think may be possible right now, because of the crisis. What do you hope to see from younger generations of musicians who might be interested in this line of work?

Matt Peacock 28:32

So I would say get going, you can achieve so much straightaway. And I believe that the, you know, people can make a change a positive change today by saying something positive to someone by doing something positive. And then the bigger change that we want to make in

society is just a sort of collection and expansion of that. I love thinking about hyperlocal stuff, tiny things that then grow. And just as you drop a pebble in a pond and the ripples flow out of it, I think that's really an exciting thing about social change. And I'd say don't worry about making mistakes, embrace them, they can be your greatest teachers, be kind to each other, it'll come back to bite you if you're not. And I think it's quite nice to enable people to encourage people to get a kick out of proving other people wrong. So if you get criticised or told that things aren't possible, you know, turn that into a rallying call because you can do it. And the younger generation, I think, have got so many, such an advanced set of principles and values around Black Lives, around social justice, around women's rights, everything that's puts Younger people at a much better more - just a better state than the previous generations. So don't listen to us.

Rebecca Ward 30:09

[laughing] Wow. Okay. Well, thank you so much. I'm sure there are many people who would be really encouraged to hear that. I mean, finally, before, before we let you go, we'd love to be able to support arts and homelessness as well. And and spread the word. So how can we, and how can listeners support arts and homelessness international? And what would you like to say in that regard?

Matt Peacock 30:33

Well, thank you. I mean, please follow us on social media. And please do join the conversation - since COVID one of the really positive things is that we gathered together the international community of arts and homelessness every month, on the last Wednesday of each month, at 10am, and 5pm. And we'd love everyone who's interested in this, to join us, it's sometimes often a really joyful moment of hearing Shakespeare from Johannesburg, and, you know, music from Bogota and coming together of encouragement for each other. So please come to that.

Rebecca Ward 31:11

Great, fantastic. Well, it's been an absolute joy to speak with you about this. And, and yeah, please do keep in touch and let us know how your projects develop.

Matt Peacock 31:23

Thanks. And good luck with this. The work you're doing. It's really fantastic.

Rebecca Ward 31:40

So Holly, what was it about our conversation with Matt, that you most enjoyed?

Holly J 31:45

Umm I think it was really great to hear his thoughts on where do we go from here, especially after the covid 19 pandemic, although we are still in it right now. But you know what I mean! So sort of thinking about how it might be potentially a sort of a new dawn or a new age for this kind of social impact of music making, and how people might start to actually realise it's importance. And also, he spoke about sort of listening to younger generations on topics such as sort of inclusion, and he talked a bit about sort of Black Lives Matter and intersectional feminism and things like that, and how the younger generations actually know quite a bit about that. And it's important to listen to them. Yeah, so I thought that was quite good.

Rebecca Ward 32:27

Yeah, I totally agree. I think what what I really noticed when he was speaking about the whole business of social justice work is just how to champion other people and how to encourage and enthuse other people. And it's really no surprise to me that he's in - He does what he does, because you can see that he absolutely is passionate about the lives of other people. And he's passionate about that, starting with encouragement and starting with conversations about - are we othering people in this situation. But on the flip side, I don't think he has this concept of his role as a musician, as overly heroic. I think he talks a bit about perhaps there are other people who need to be involved, for example, social workers, and I think it's easy to feel a little bit overwhelmed about all of the aspects of being a music practitioner and what that entails. And especially in this line of work, how, how can I possibly make change when I'm, I'm just me, and I'm just a musician, you know, but I think what he does is he really, he really celebrates collaboration, and he really celebrates lifting other voices up and he makes the whole process seem like a as it should be a collaborative thing rather than a sort of leadership based style, which is one person being better or above other people.

Holly J 33:43

Yeah. And also like relating that to sort of power dynamics in society, like he mentioned, I think he said that his his organisation now is 50% representative. I assume that means it's of

lived experience of homelessness, which I think is really great, because it just, I guess it shows what music practitioners are aiming for what he felt music practitioners were aiming to do when they started that work, which was to sort of flip the script a bit and give other people that need to be in positions of power, that ability to be in those positions of power.

Rebecca Ward 34:16

Totally.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>