



RSNO musicians join secondary school participants of a mentoring programme during a Highland residency in Inverness

# Get with the programme

Friend or foe, the professional development programme is a reality for many of today's orchestral musicians. **David Kettle** looks at how it has worked at the Royal Scottish National Orchestra

**F**or some, it has been an opportunity to develop new skills, push themselves in unexpected directions, even think afresh about their roles as orchestral musicians. For others, it has felt like a bit of an unwelcome intrusion of business-style management into the hallowed spaces of the symphony orchestra.

The Royal Scottish National Orchestra's professional development programme (let's call it PDP for short) has had its controversies – not least in the person-centred reviews that the orchestra is instituting – but, as the RSNO musicians readily accept, it has also offered some extremely valuable opportunities. Now in the last of its three years, it is the first programme of its kind run by a UK orchestra – meaning that the RSNO has been

both leading the way and feeling its way. It was supported by an award of over £200,000 from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and the RSNO's findings will be available through the ABO to other UK orchestras interested in exploring similar schemes.

'It originated before I arrived,' says chief executive Michael Elliott. 'But the essence remains the same – we don't invest in the orchestral world in the way we should, in terms of professional development, and with the support from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation this was an opportunity to make a significant difference and see what lessons could be learnt.'

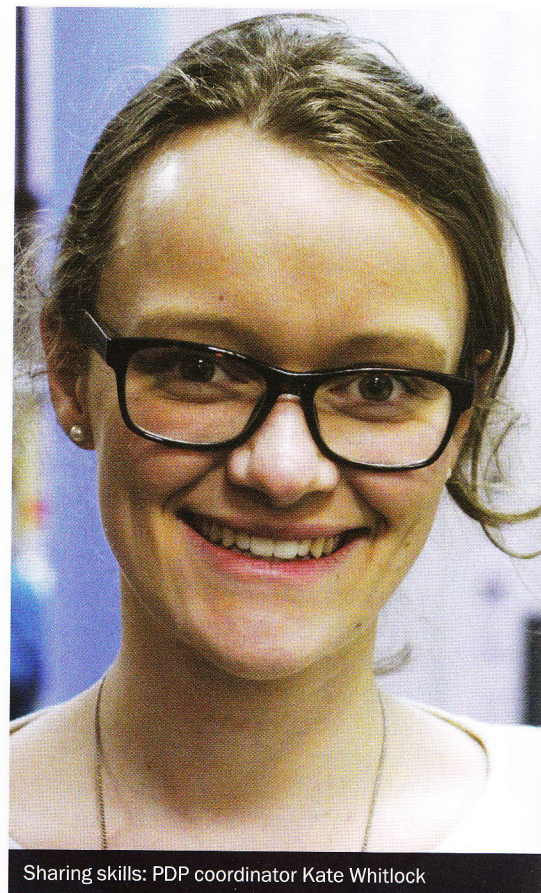
The RSNO brought in Kate Whitlock, who had previously worked in artist development at Aldeburgh Music and the London Symphony Orchestra, as PDP coordinator

during the project's second year. 'Essentially the programme breaks down into four strands,' she explains. 'One is about widening involvement in learning work, and there's also been a focus on strengthening communication. The third strand is about looking at the orchestra's activities more broadly, extending the range of what the orchestra does. And fourth, we're looking at personal skills and personal development – and we've got a fund where people can apply for things according to their own development needs.'

From the RSNO musicians' points of view, that has meant trying out new ideas in workshops, suggesting areas for exploration, and taking a certain degree of control of the direction of the project itself. 'One of the most successful practical things



The professional development programme played a role in the formation of new music ensemble RSNO Alchemy



Sharing skills: PDP coordinator Kate Whitlock

I've done was a breathing workshop with Danish professor Kristian Steenstrup,' says the RSNO's principal trombonist Davúr Juul Magnussen. 'I suggested the idea, and a group of musicians took part – the PDP enabled us to draw in something that a single person had come across to present to their colleagues.'

RSNO associate leader William Chandler is currently applying for PDP funding to take part in a leadership conference. 'I lead the orchestra about 25 to 30% of the time, and I'm also an RSNO board member, so I'd love to develop in that role,' he says, also pointing to sessions on presentation skills as valuable in breaking down the 'glass wall' between the orchestra on stage and the audience. 'We've had a group of string players apply for funding so that they could look at samba techniques for string players in education work,' continues Whitlock, 'and we've had a traditional music session led by one of our violinists, Alan John – it's vital to be able to share internal skills as well.'

Nobody's shy of admitting there have been less valuable elements, though. 'There have been workshops that haven't been very productive at all,' says Magnussen, 'and also workshops that have caused a lot of discussion and head-scratching. But that's all part of the learning process as well.'

Elliott stresses that the range of outcomes

has been part of the project's aims. 'We've made mistakes along the way,' he explains, 'and we've learnt the lessons from them and documented those mistakes, as part of what we'll feed back to the profession and to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.'

The one area of the RSNO's PDP project that has caused the most head-scratching has been the introduction of person-centred reviews. 'These are absolutely not performance appraisals,' explains Whitlock, 'but it's a huge change culturally, and it isn't done in any other UK orchestra that I know of. There have been some vocal critics, but even then I think they can see the value of them for some people, maybe just not for everybody.' The reviews have been developed in consultation with the ABO and the MU, and the aim is that they'll be led by players. 'It won't be a discussion initiated by management about someone's playing not being up to the mark,' says Elliott, 'but if players themselves says they've been struggling with something or need support, it makes sense for us to pick up those kinds of issues as we go along.'

'I'm not so sure personally how these reviews can develop and become meaningful,' admits Chandler. 'The funny thing for me is that we as musicians are constantly self-analysing – we practise every day, and we analyse everything we do. To sit down with someone

who may not be a musician to talk about that – I've yet to see how that could actually bear any fruit. But I might be completely wrong – I'm trying to keep a very open mind about it.'

All acknowledge, though, the value in an orchestra rethinking its role and activities – both for individual players and for the orchestra as a whole. And the reach and impact of the RSNO's PDP is there in the breadth of the orchestra's recent activities, not least the launch of new music ensemble RSNO Alchemy, with a strong focus on improvisation. 'If you're in a string quartet it's very easy to change direction,' says Chandler. 'But if you're in a large group with a lot of debate, it's very tricky without an overall vision. We need to make sure the whole debate about the PDP feeds into that vision and keeps us as nimble and agile as possible.'

Whitlock has only been running the project for a matter of months, but she admires the orchestra for even attempting such a scheme. 'I think just having the bravery to tackle something like this as an organisation is brilliant, and of course we're not going to get it right all the time, but you don't learn unless you make mistakes. I hope that if nothing else comes out of it, it'll be the lessons we've learnt that we can share with other organisations if they start doing the same thing.'

