

The Power of Creativity and the Value of Being an Artist

Hello. I'm Kadiatu Kanneh-Mason and it's a real pleasure to have the opportunity to say a few words this morning as part of this really important conversation amongst musicians in what is a turbulent and critical time. My perspective is not as a musician myself but as someone who is the mother of seven children - and young adults- who are musicians, or for whom music, since infancy, is at the forefront of their lives.

We are a family for whom Music is at the centre of our ethos. I struggle to imagine what we would *be* without music. Stuart and I brought up our seven children to play and to appreciate music from a young age. It is part of their conversation, their means of communication. It is what builds their self-esteem, forms their creative intelligence, and allows them freedom of expression.

We see music as a gift and a privilege. At the same time, it is a skill, an art form and an education that should be open and accessible to everyone.

This year, musicians have been placed, even more firmly, in the invidious position of having to *make the case* for music. Musicians are constantly having to somehow prove that music is viable in education, in the economy and for our society. But the challenges that the music industry and musicians are facing are not due to audiences no longer desiring to hear music, or the quality of concerts and performances somehow *lacking*, but because concert venues have been forced to close, travel prohibited and rehearsals no longer possible.

However, this crisis did not begin in 2020. By that I mean the *cultural* crisis that music is in. Musicians have been increasingly having to make the case for the value of music in our society and for our young people over the last few years.

My own children were incredibly lucky to attend state schools in Nottingham that put music at the centre of their curriculum and their ideology. Walter Halls Primary and Trinity Catholic School, both city state schools in Nottingham, had head teachers and leadership teams who understood the importance of music education and how it impacted on all academic learning. They were able to go to schools every day that championed skills of teamwork, communication, performance, self-confidence, hard work, expressiveness. There were regular concerts, music nights, choirs, orchestras, bands, school shows- every child was expected to learn a musical instrument, encouraged to listen to others, and admired for joining in as well as for shining.

The results were not confined to music appreciation. The sporting achievements increased, academic results went up and the children were happier. They were part of a family, they were acknowledged.

I am almost shy to make the last point about well-being. What has happened within music education and the systematic attack on it in recent years is that it's often berated for being a wishy-washy, touchy-feely, non-academic subject that should be at the sidelines. Music is an academic subject. It does demand intellectual rigour. Learning to read music, memorising a score in order to play a piece, learning to play an instrument or to sing in harmony or unison with others, knowledge of the history and types of music, being able to structure and deliver a performance- these are all incredibly developed skills.

But music *is* part of what makes us human. It is central to much of our cultural life, our identities, our communication with each other. And yes, our well-being.

2020 has been a devastating year for musicians. For us, the beginning of March was a time of looking forward to a year of concert tours to Antigua and Barbuda, to Australia, to Ghana, to the US and Europe, as well as exciting concerts in the U.K. it was going to be a summer of two graduations, an honorary doctorate, an MBE, and our fifth child starting a music conservatoire degree course. We had A Levels (one in Music), teaching opportunities and a chamber music residential for two of the children.

It was going to be a year of sharing, teaching, travelling, performing, learning and celebrating music around the world.

Then, while Sheku and Isata were touring in Italy, the concerts began closing down and the tour was cut short. We naively prepared for our time of performing and coaching in Antigua and, a few days before this, the trip was cancelled. Everyone came home before the lockdown began. International students were beginning to travel home, and The Royal Academy was closing its doors. The older ones brought home a fellow music student who couldn't get back to Brazil, and we were suddenly a household of ten, who realised, quite quickly, that Coronavirus symptoms were spreading undeniably through us all.

By the time lockdown began, we had already spent a week together feeling ill, collectively stressed, confused, anxious and despondent.

But what music had given everyone was a fantastic resource. We had brought up the children to turn to music as a way of expressing themselves and communicating with each other. They did that immediately. There was always so much more to explore, interpret and learn, and several chamber groups to do that with, within the house.

They were saved from isolation by having each other- the soloists had accompanists, the concerto players had a chamber orchestra, and the performers had an audience. The twice-weekly Facebook Lives meant that they were able to connect, via Sheku's

Facebook, with a world-wide, live audience, and with that adrenalin rush that live performance brings. It was a real interaction with others.

It became a mission and a goal. It constantly reminded people of the value, the solace, the excitement of live concerts. Connecting with those who were on their own, and those who needed the congregation of live audiences. It also gave a real meaning to those months in the first lockdown. The psychological and emotional resilience that comes from playing music and having the skills to keep learning and sharing music is extraordinary. Having the opportunity to still hear and see music being performed online was vital.

Of course, nothing can replace concerts in real-life, tactile concert venues and performance spaces. The meeting of an audience together, the face-to-face interaction of audience with performers is something that is impossible to replace. What we have discovered is how difficult it is to replicate the sound of a full orchestra, or solo performer online, or the experience, the thrill of live in-the-flesh performances.

However, there can be a wonderful, close-up intimacy with online concerts, a beautiful depth of detail and sound that makes it a very different experience. But what all performance artists and those involved in staging concerts know is how impossible it is to sustain a livelihood exclusively online. You cannot pay the rent, or feed a family, or keep a venue going with streaming and recordings alone. The incredible, irreplaceable gift of music is, of course, a vocation, but if we value it within our society, it has to also be a living.

Before lockdown, Music was a fantastically profitable sector of the economy. It's still critical to our cultural life, to who we are as humans, and to a hope of coming together after this crisis with understanding, with a shared language. The crisis has put in sharp relief how important the musical community is- everyone, those who manage the artists,

run the venues, book the concerts, sell the tickets, direct the lighting, stage, sound; the orchestras, the soloists, chamber groups, bands; the teachers and conservatoires.

From grass-roots- the local music societies, choirs, church recitals; venues that offer discount tickets to the young; amateur and youth orchestras, courses, residential and peripatetic teachers, school teachers. All these provide steps on the way to The Royal Albert Hall, Wigmore Hall, Carnegie Hall and all the grand concert venues with international performers.

Without all these layers and tiers of music support within society, we risk the loss of the next generation of musicians, the next generation of audiences. And without music, that incredible resilience, generosity and expressiveness that we experienced as a family during lockdown will not be there to carry us through.

Our experience as parents setting out to help our children with music learning from a young age has made us realise how much practise, for how many hours a day, and how many years go into the training of a classical musician. To achieve excellence in an instrument and a high level of technique involves a training schedule equal to a top-class tennis or football player. And an accomplished artist, whether dancer, singer, actor or musician, shares a similar nexus of skills with top sports people- the ability to bring together creative thinking, technique and performance.

The power of creativity and the gift of expression that music facilitates was painfully evident to us during lockdown. Grief-stricken, we witnessed the events surrounding the murder of George Floyd, and lived in the emotional overload of shock, mourning, rage and despair with so many around the world. Our family's response was to be articulate, to protest, to call for strength and love through music. It gave a voice to our sadness and frustration. It communicated our sense of fear and loss. The children wanted to create a

moment of connection through the music they live-streamed to as many people as would and could listen. Through music, it was a moment of eloquence and redemption.

To be a musician, a performance artist, a creative person, is to have been given a great gift, the fundamentally human gift of communication. We learn to listen to each other. We bring up new generations of people who can make themselves heard.

When all my children were home with us for the months of lockdown this year, we were back to how life had always been before the older four left home to study. They were all playing music at the same time as each other, or to each other, or with each other. It was from this heat of interaction that so much new music was created, including their album, Carnival. But it was simply a continuation of what had been happening through their lives together as young children. It was a daily demonstration of the value of music as a creative force in all young minds.

In the book, House of Music, I gave a description of what our family life was like with seven children growing up together with music as a living presence, and I hope it's a vision of joy, humour, hope and fun! I write: (page 162):

'This was not a house of lonely soloists. The children often burst into each other's spaces, giving advice, remonstrating or simply singing and celebrating another's efforts. There were regular spontaneous moments where a duo or a trio would spring up. What began as a solo on the violin would be joined by an improvised accompaniment or a cello harmony. A classical string quartet would flow into a reggae or jazz beat and everyone's voice was loud. Sometimes instruments were swapped and the children would play their second instruments to try out a different part of the music. Sheku would often take a violin and play a violin tune, holding it like a cello on his lap. Braimah would move from his

violin and accompany Sheku on piano, or sing astonishingly accurately in mock opera style. Often an instrument would be strummed or rapped to provide percussion.

Whenever they launched into serious trio or quartet practice in order to prepare for a concert, there would be prolonged shouting. Perhaps Isata had an idea that was being ignored, or Sheku was grandstanding, flying into a solo routine in the midst of an ensemble piece. Braimah would want to perfect one bar of music and finesse the collective tuning exactly, and Konya would want to perform a dramatic flourish to the end. And then the collision of intellectual, instinctive and emotional reactions would suddenly coalesce into a melting moment of such intense harmony that I, passing through, would sink onto the stairs and sigh.'

I hope that what I've said reaffirms the extraordinary power of music, its ability to reach so many people in so many different ways. How it can enable a diversity of voices and collaborations. And how that diversity, the transformative power of music, is so vital to our future as a society and to our hopes for the next generation.