

What we need to thrive

Improving collaboration with autistic composers

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Who are the Autistics?

Since its discovery in the early twentieth century, the definition of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has evolved and adapted as new information is presented to us. Promoters wishing to be more accepting of autistic people do not need a complete medical understanding of Autism and its comorbid disorders, such as Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, or Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but an understanding of the main characteristics will allow promoters to accommodate people according to their needs.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-V) defines ASD as persistent difficulties with social communication and social interaction. Restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities, or interests (including sensory behaviour) present to the extent that they 'limit and impair everyday functioning'. DSM-V also redefined Asperger's Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and Pervasive Development Disorder as ASD.

As with all accommodations for disabled people, the spectrum is large and variable; what is helpful for some is unhelpful to others. With this in mind, this document aims to illustrate areas in which promoters can address barriers that may exist for autistic people highlighting seven key areas of professional life and work which cause significant enough barriers to hinder their chances of maintaining a professional career.

Despite all the information given in this document the simplest step an organisation can take is simply ask the individual in question and act upon the requests.

Language

Language is an important tool and the history of language around ASD has strong implications today.

Neurodiversity

A term given to a broad collection of mental disabilities including ASD, Tourette's, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADHD, and to some extent Down's Syndrome and other learning disabilities.

This term is not necessarily the medical terminology but is a communal word used to unify these disparate groups. So, often autistic people will refer to being neurodiverse.

Autistic person

The question of identity first or person first language has been a long-fought battle and often people are unsure which is the correct way to discuss it. Commonly, like the LGBT community, you would say identity first so autistic individual or homosexual individual instead of person with autism and person with homosexual characteristics. The wider community also argues that the main reason for saying identity first with both autism and disability is distancing it from the individual implies it is something to remove i.e. a person has cancer which a doctor will aim to remove, a person with autism sounds afflicted. However, this is not a universal rule, so if unsure simply ask the individual in question.

Spoons

A colloquial phrase used in some disabled communities which has come into a more common parlance over the past five years, referencing spoons is an indicator for how capable an individual is feeling that day or moment. In short, the more spoons the better. Commonly, three spoons is normal functioning. Two spoons is feeling a bit down, but functional. One spoon is a hard day, but not completely restricted. No spoons is at the bottom and in need of time to recuperate. Four spoons is very positive and the individual may be capable of doing things they are not normally able to do or cope with. Five spoons

is ecstatic and buoyant, highest functioning and can be met with a lot of challenges and cope beyond normal capabilities.

What this model does is allow the individual to plan their life around capabilities. On hard days, the focus can be more on staying at home in a place of comfort, whereas days with many spoons will allow you to get a lot done. What this also means is if a person had to use a lot of spoons one day, the chances are the following day their number of spoons will be lower; this understanding of spoons can allow organisations to plan strategically around the fluctuating stamina of the individual without burning them out.

Burnout

As it is understood by the non-disabled community, burnout is a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion. It is important to understand that burnout is much more significant for autistic, neurodiverse and many disabled people. It is not only far more common, but also core functions are likely to diminish, i.e. interpreting information, hearing and communicating may become depleted or even non-functioning.

Stim

Medically, stimming is an abnormal repetitive behaviour like fidgeting or flapping hands. In the past, this has been observed as a behaviour to restrict, however it is understood now that stimming is both a communicative tool and an aid to focusing. Stimming could be a sign of distress or excitement, or it could help the individual deal with a difficult situation. Either way it is a necessary thing and should be allowed to happen. Autistic people may also refer to something as 'stimmy' which simply means it is so positive and pleasing that it actively encourages them to stim.

As the community grows and evolves, language will change with it. Remember also that language is never universal; not everyone calls the last meal of the day 'tea'.

If you are unsure about the meaning of a phrase or how to refer to individuals you are working with, simply ask.

Areas of restriction and accommodations

The next seven sections will highlight areas of professional work which may prove trying or difficult. The sections will also highlight ways in which an organisation could address these to enable all parties to function to their highest abilities.

1. Networking and promotion

The arts and culture sector is, arguably, the industry most dependent on networking and personal promotion.

Issues for composers

Instant problems may include:

- Anxiety/strained ability to communicate with new people.
- Overstimulation due to number of people present, lights, smells, sounds, and textures within the room.
- Misinterpretation of information
- Misinterpretation of intent (i.e., are nice statements just niceties or due to positive feeling).

Lingering problems may include:

- Mental/Physical exhaustion (due to overexertion of energies to maintain composure);
- Struggle to maintain/follow up professional relationships (due to anxiety or personal confusion or capacity to organise multiple strands of work).

Issues for promoters

The issues affecting the individual, may not directly impact a promoter or organisation, however it must be noted the influence of such areas will diminish someone's ability to work to their highest standard.

Solutions:

- Offering to meet the individual in a quieter or more familiar location can reduce stress and strain.
- If networking events are connected to a larger event (i.e. conferences), networking events should be on a separate day to help save mental energy.
- Clarity. If there is interest in the individual, language must be direct and be ready to offer further clarification if needed.
- To take the pressure off the individual, promoters and organisers should try to take the lead on follow up discussions.

2. Improving opportunities for autistic composers

Calls for scores or proposals are often the first contact an ensemble or promoter will have with an emerging composer. If there are barriers to entry on this platform, it will obviously have a longer-term impact on a composer, and could hinder success. The answer, however, is not necessarily to simply give autistic/disabled people an easy entry to such opportunities.

Issues for composers:

- Interpreting the intent of the call. What sort of music is being looked for? This question may be off-putting for a composer and for an autistic composer may mean they are unable to decipher the intent or how to best to present their work.
- Clarity: due to the surplus of reasons as to why composers are chosen for opportunities, how can a composer work out why their own work was not chosen?
- Format: sometimes the format of text, images, font, and colours can make information impossible to interpret.

Issues for promoters:

- In such calls, the challenge is finding high quality music without blocking off minority groups. This also means including minority groups without dumbing down, or patronising the individual in question.

Solutions:

- Issues around clarity are relatively easy to resolve: make sure individuals know their application is received; let them know if they fail or succeed in getting the opportunity; if there are delays, keep them posted; and, most importantly, give concise feedback when asked.
- Choices can be made for pragmatic reasons e.g., these two go together well, this idea fits the concept better, or we have too many male composers. These choices are rarely because of 'lack of quality' in a composer's submission. Make sure the composer knows they were just unfortunate and that those harder to control elements did not work in their favour.

Case study

In 2018, in collaboration with CENMAS (Sheffield), the Ligeti Quartet put out a call for scores for composers who were not university students. The ensemble was particularly eager to include individuals from minority demographics. Their solution was to have two rounds of judging submissions.

Those from a minority group (female, LGBT, BAME, or disabled) could elect to be automatically considered for the second round. This simple choice meant that agency was given to the individual. If someone felt it necessary, they could jump to the second round and be judged alongside a smaller pool, or they could choose to go through the first round to be judged with the broader collection of submissions.

This led to a more diverse group of individuals (one disabled individual, four women, and three men) being selected, without necessarily falling into traps of tokenism.

3. Working with ensembles

A successful concert or festival depends on all parties being able to work together and work to the highest of their ability. The performance of a composer's work will be of a higher professional standard if everyone is comfortable in each other's company and rehearsal time is not diminished because of other outside issues.

Collaboration

Be it a new commission, or a pairing that has not happened before, collaborating can involve a lot of stress and strain for an autistic individual when unfamiliar with the group they are working with.

Issues for composers:

- Anxiety about meeting new people.
- Anxious about reception of piece.
- Unsure of tone, so could misinterpret someone's intent.

Issues for promoters:

- If the composer is overstressed, they may be unable to work with the group.
- Communication channels may become restricted if the individual is overly stressed/panicked.

Solutions:

- Introduce the ensemble/performers to the composer as early as possible, so they are familiar with each other.
- Focus on being clear when giving instructions/information.
- Prepare a space for the individual to 'unwind' if they experience burnout.

Communication and planning with groups

Although not as planning heavy as long-term projects, short-term projects do still require organisation and planning as well as long distance communications.

Issues for composers:

- Planning can be difficult, meaning if an individual has multiple projects to juggle, projects are more likely to become unachievable.
- Even minor changes to plans can cause high levels of stress.
- Communicating via telephone may be difficult.
- Coordinating multiple threads can become overstimulating meaning an individual is unable to work sustainably.

Issues for promoters:

- If the individual struggles to keep themselves organised, deadlines will be hard to meet and could in turn negatively impact events.
- Sometimes changes are unavoidable.

Solutions:

- A promoter may have to take more control of organising i.e. keeping in direct contact with the composer, or being the go-between so the composer does not need to coordinate with all other parties themselves.
- Keep to plans as much as possible, however if plans do have to change, be as clear and concise as possible to reduce any stress caused.
- Use whichever form of communication is most suitable for the individual, and in whichever format is most accessible.

Example

When looking to fix a rehearsal time for an afternoon rehearsal, an autistic composer advised me not to set a precise time for her participation if there was a possibility that the time might change. She said that she would find it difficult to cope with that sort of change. In order to avoid that type of stress, it was better to keep the rehearsal time vague ('afternoon') and let her know a precise time once it was certain there would be no changes.

4. Long-term planning

As mentioned previously, mental stamina and long-term planning can be difficult, especially in a profession which demands the individual to co-ordinate all activities themselves.

Issues for composers:

Immediate problems:

- Understanding how a project fits within daily routines.
- Meeting deadlines: many professionals struggle with this, however neurodiverse individuals are more at risk of high anxiety/stress. This means their ability to work is inhibited by stress, which in turn leads them to struggle to meet a deadline, producing more stress, which then makes meeting the deadline almost impossible.
- Difficulty managing multiple projects: very few professionals have the joy of focusing on one single project for a long period of time. Often, composers juggle a portfolio career, combined with multiple commissions/projects simultaneously. This is particularly challenging for an autistic composer.

Longer term problems:

- Finding collaborators/partners. Finding good partnerships is often the key to a successful project.

Issues for promoters:

- Often promoters can give a lot of freedom to creative individuals in the knowledge they will meet the goals set for them. This allows the promoter to focus on other specific tasks such as promotion and marketing. However, where planning is an issue for an individual, the promoter and administrative team may need to go beyond their usual tasks to help the composer complete the project.

Solutions:

- Promoters need to be not only aware of how the individual works but how to use this to bring out the best in that person. Success is never particularly sweet if everyone involved collapses at the finish line. A more hands-on approach is generally needed but always make sure to listen to what the individual needs to thrive. Sometimes all that is needed is helping to find the most suitable partner or making sure the individual is financially stable enough that they can dedicate more time to composing.
- Communicate regularly to help keep them going in the right direction: a regular email just to make sure they are doing okay, or setting up a simple routine with them could be the difference between scraping through and thriving.

Case study

Composer, Stacey finds keeping to a schedule slightly difficult, which produces a lot of anxiety and inhibits her ability to work. To help accommodate this, the Ensemble put the following bits of information in her contract, to demonstrate why the deadlines were shaped the way they were:

“The new work should ideally be delivered to the ensemble by 23rd January (this would give the ensemble six weeks to learn the score). However, if this proves difficult, delivery of the work between 23rd Jan – 27th February would still allow the ensemble ample time to prepare the score. To help prepare the Ensemble and the Composer, we shall send a weekly update email and will aim to schedule a phone call/conference call (Zoom or Teams) as often as Composer may need.”

5. Sensory issues

The senses are arguably the most impactful thing that autistic and neurodiverse people have to navigate. All sounds, smells, textures, sights, and tastes interact with us on a continuing basis. Supermarkets are aware that the smell of warm bread can entice potential shoppers further into the shop. We are also aware that a poorly smelling train can make a trip to work incredibly tedious. For non-disabled people, this sensory impact can be a chore or simply tedious, however for an autistic or neurodiverse individual something as simple as the right lighting can be the difference between coping and being unable to function.

In a profession like music, this sensory battle can become confusing to understand and suggest the response should be to limit the

complexity of the sounds an individual is presented with. However this can be a tad reductionist or unimaginative. Think about it this way:

You go to a Christmas concert and are stuck in traffic for half an hour. Then pedestrians are not being mindful of the cars coming into the car park. You get out and the ticket machine doesn't work very well. You finally get to the concert venue, come face-to-face with a less than welcoming individual and the entrance hall smells questionable because of the roadworks outside. How many people can feel Christmas-y when inundated with all of this? The concert itself was not the problem, but rather the negative experiences leading up to it.

Sensory issues within a performance venue

Issues for composers:

- Sight: this can include colours, intensity of light, patterns and shapes. If it can be seen, it will interact and can cause a sensory issue.
- Sound: background noise especially heating, electric lighting, air-conditioning, and background chatter can cause sensory issues. Issues with electronics (namely feedback from speakers) as well as other bangs and pops that can happen by accident.
- Texture: flooring, seating, and walls are just simple examples. If it can be touched, it may cause sensory distress.
- Smell: cleaning products, smells from a venue's café, smells from the loos... any smells can irritate an individual.
- Taste: some individuals cope with stress by biting things. This in turn may increase distress if something suitable is not available.

Issues for promoters:

- Sensory impact means the individual is not functioning at their best, meaning a performance or rehearsal is not carried out to the highest quality.

Solutions:

- Rehearsals and concerts do not take place in a void, this means almost regardless of efforts to control the environment, there will always be a sensory interaction. However, it is important to flag up things that might be an issue.
- Talk to the composer you are working with to find out what things they are most sensitive to so that you're aware of the issues and can avoid them or at least warn the composer so that they are prepared.

Case study

Drake Music Scotland and Hebrides Ensemble asked the Queen's Hall to clinically assess their space for a concert they were promoting in December 2019. This assessment included listing everything an audience member might interact with such as steps, box office, concert hall, bar or toilets. Every detail was listed – size of steps, textures of flooring and walls, lighting, and possible sounds in the space. This meant the venue could be open and honest about everything in the space and give the individual the power to assess whether they have the capability to navigate that environment.

6. Travel and accommodation: anxieties and sensory issues

In a similar fashion to the sensory strain felt in a venue, these can also occur within accommodation and travel. Plus, there are additional anxieties that can lead to a stressful day of travel which in turn means the ability to function is significantly lessened.

Issues for composers:

- Uncertainty about the journey: Where am I going? How will I know I am there? What if I am late? Uncertainties can magnify stress.
- Uncertainty about the accommodation: How do I get there? What if I get lost? What if there is an error in the booking? What if the sheets are made of an unpleasant material?

Issues for promoters:

- The better the travel and stay is, the more likely the following day will be positive. Equally a bad day's travel and a bad night's sleep can seriously handicap a composer's ability to function.

Solutions:

Overall, this is a much harder element to control. Things can go wrong and ultimately you are not responsible for problems with trains or buses. However, there are pre-emptive measures that can be taken:

- Avoid booking hotels in busy locations. Where possible, arrange someone to collect and help transport the individual from each location i.e. train station to hotel, hotel to venue, then venue to train station.
- Communicate with local hotels to see what adaptations/preparations can be made to accommodate the individual. Where possible produce an itinerary or plan for

the journey and stay. Clearly describe each step and where possible show images to give context to the information.

- To reduce the pressure on the day of travel, book travel to occur a day before the rehearsal or concert. This will mean that the only task for that day is to get from home to the hotel.
- Likewise, aim to make return travel occur at least a day later than the concert/competition of said project. This will ensure mental faculties are directed solely to the project/concert without the lingering concern of having to go and catch a train.
- Fewer train changes are ideal, as there is only the concern about one train instead of three. However, this is not always achievable. To make sure the individual knows the journey and what to expect, discuss in advance what the journey entails, how many stops, how many changes, how long it will take. Overall, make sure they are fully aware that if something goes wrong you are there to help as best you can.
- Many train services offer 'quiet coaches'. These carriages are significantly quieter and can help reduce the sensory strain during travel.
- Each individual is different, so make sure to **talk with them** to find out how you can best assist them in their journey and what sort of accommodation would suit them best.

7. Legal and administrative tasks

For many, the hidden administrative tasks behind the production of a new work are filled with barriers and a simple lack of awareness of how one should best navigate these areas. This particular area is challenging for many disabled and non-disabled composers alike, meaning adaptations to make this area more accommodating and less challenging will benefit composers at all levels of the profession.

Issues for Composers:

- Navigating contracts – What are the implications of the contract? Can the composer ask for changes to the contract? What are the repercussions of not meeting the contract?
- Invoicing – How do you produce a contract? Did the invoice arrive? How soon does the invoice get paid?
- Emails – What does a professional tone look like? How often should the composer be in touch? How legible/accessible is the format? How does a composer communicate their concerns?

Issues for Promoters:

- Uncertainty about the processes like the timescale and other administrative and legal responsibilities may impede the composer's ability to carry out other tasks.

Solutions:

- Ultimately, clarity and openness is the best solution to many of these issues. Being as upfront as possible can alleviate many individual concerns.
- Offer to talk through the implications of contracts, obviously ideally prior to the signing of the contract.

- Alongside discussions about the direct implications of the contract, openness and clarity around discussions about timeline/publicity/invoicing and other elements alongside the public engagement will help the composer navigate this area.
- The Musicians' Union has produced a standardised '[Access Rider](#)' which is a document intended to highlight all particular needs for disabled musicians. Having this document included within the contract discussions would allow all stakeholders to have a written description of accommodations (what is being done to take into account the needs of the autistic composer) to ensure they are all implemented.
- Emails may need adapting. This could include large font, Dyslexic friendly font (Comic Sans or OpenDyslexic), colour of text, and language.
- If you, the promoter, can be proactive and open up to the potential collaborator/composer concerning all elements of accessibility, encouraging them to inform you about any accommodations they may need and ensuring the individual knows all elements are open for discussion and clarification. Openness and encouragement will allow the composer to flourish and to help them navigate the complexities of legal and administrative tasks associated with the commission/project.

Useful Links

- Birds of Paradise Resources <https://www.boptheatre.co.uk/what-we-do/resources>
- Musicians Union Accessibility Rider <https://musiciansunion.org.uk/rights-and-legislation/the-equality-act-2010-and-guidance/disabled-musicians-rights/access-riders-for-disabled-musicians>
- Shape Arts Resources <https://www.shapearts.org.uk/Pages/News/Category/resources>
- National Autistic Society <https://www.autism.org.uk>
- Autistic Self-Advocacy Network <https://autisticadvocacy.org>
- Drake Music Scotland <https://drakemusicscotland.org>
- Sound and Music Fair Access principles <https://soundandmusic.org/our-impact/fair-access-principles>

Ben Lunn

Winner of two Scottish Music Awards 2020 for his work with Hebrides Ensemble and Drake Music Scotland, Lunn is associate artist for Drake Music and Drake Music Scotland, and Trainee Artistic Director of the Hebrides Ensemble. Current projects include a commission for Durham Brass Festival, Royal Scottish National Orchestra's Composers Hub 2020-21, a new work for the Royal Northern Sinfonia, Ensemble Proton Bern's ProtonWerk 11, Making Music UK's Adopt a Music Creator 2020-21 where he has been partnered in the inaugural Collaborate Pathway which partners him with Aberdeenshire Saxophone Orchestra and Ugie Voices, and a theatrical collaboration with Daryl Beeton Productions. In 2021, Ben helped found the Disabled Artist Network, an organisation which is bridging the gap between the professional world and disabled artists. In 2020 Ben was elected to the Musician's Union Equalities Commission, and became chair of the MU's Disabled Members Network.

sound

sound is a new music incubator based in north-east Scotland encouraging new music creation and discovery. We run the annual **soundfestival**, as well as year-round activity supporting a wide range of composers, engaging with local communities and providing educational opportunities.

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