

Orchestral manoeuvres, in the dark: what Brexit means for touring musicians



*British orchestras tour widely in the EU – and when we leave, they will probably need work permits and special social security and health insurance arrangements, as well as facing delays at the border. **Mark Pemberton (Association of British Orchestras)** urges the government to ensure bilateral deals are in place to minimise the extra costs involved.*

Heard every day in our concert halls, on radio and streaming sites, on the soundtracks of movies, TV shows and games, and both live and recorded with rock and pop artists, British orchestras are key contributors to the success of Britain's creative industries – the fastest growing sector in the UK economy.



The CBSO at Symphony Hall, Birmingham. Photo: [Amanda Slater](#) via a [CC-BY-SA-2.0 licence](#)

But they also perform a strong public relations role for the UK. They showcase the very best of British culture and musical excellence to thousands of people around the world through international tours.

In 2016 British orchestras visited a total of 42 countries globally, compared with 35 in 2013. Europe is the most toured-to continent, with orchestras doing 96 visits to 26 different European countries. But they are also increasingly popular in China and the Far East, while maintaining their profile in the USA and the rest of the Americas and travelling as far afield as Australia.

Touring is vital to our members' financial sustainability. As public funding cuts have led to a squeeze on their concerts in the UK, touring abroad on a commercial basis has become an ever more important source of income. But it's increasingly competitive out there. The growth in orchestras in China and other Asian countries means more orchestras are chasing the limited number of opportunities to perform abroad. British orchestras' reputation for quality, flexibility and innovation have stood them in good stead, but they need every tool at their disposal to maintain their status in the market. And unlike many of their international competitors, British orchestras, apart from in Scotland, do not have access to public funds to support their tours. The days of British Council funded tours are long gone, and it's down to how good their value proposition is in a crowded market.

Which brings us to Brexit. Membership of the single market and the customs union has been hugely beneficial in enabling British orchestras to tour across Europe, which generates both revenue and secures their international reputation. One positive of the result of the EU referendum was that the devaluation of the pound made British orchestras cheaper on the international market. But the pound will eventually rise, and a cheap currency is small comfort to the overall challenge that Brexit poses, especially as the EU is their biggest market.

Firstly, if controls are placed on EU citizens coming to work in the UK, controls may equally be placed on UK citizens wishing to work in EU countries. Restrictions and costs, for example for work permits, could be imposed on Association of British Orchestras (ABO) members by EU nations, damaging the financial viability of tours.

One anomaly of the single market is that when orchestras tour to another EU country, they are technically 'posting' their workers. This means that the wages and conditions in the host country have to be applied. A crucial tool, however, for ensuring that musicians do not have social security payments deducted when working in other EU countries is the A1 certificate, which proves the worker is paying national insurance in their home country. The ABO urgently needs assurance that the UK will remain within the A1 system, as otherwise our musicians will face as much as 20% being deducted from their fees. To compensate, British orchestras will have to become a lot more expensive to cover this lost income for their musicians, making us less competitive.

The planning cycle for orchestras is often more than two years ahead of performance (and up to four years for opera), so contracts with promoters in the EU have already been signed for beyond March 2019. This means that fees have been fixed, and any additional costs that follow the UK's withdrawal from the EU have the potential to cause already contracted tours to lose money.

Loss of access to the European Health Insurance Card will mean that orchestras and freelance musicians, as well as youth orchestras, will need to pay extra for medical insurance when on tour. Membership of the customs union removes the need for carnets and border controls when transporting musical instruments across EU borders. Should border controls and carnets be imposed once the UK leaves the EU, this will add significantly to the administration and cost of touring into Europe.

ABO members have also reported that they will need an extra day on either side of a tour to ensure sufficient time for trucks to exit and then return to the UK, to compensate for delays at the border, and the musicians will need, at considerable cost, second instruments to ensure they can continue to rehearse and perform in the UK while their other instrument is transported into Europe. It is important to note that customs controls would also apply to national and local youth orchestras, potentially reducing opportunities for young people to gain valuable experience of touring to and engaging in cultural exchange with other EU countries.

We are not saying that touring into the EEA would stop immediately, but there is a clear danger that as British orchestras become more expensive and more problematic, they will become less attractive to European festivals and venues. The consequence could be that work dries up in 5 to 10 years' time. And without the income it brings, the financial viability of orchestras will be called into question, unless there is a significant increase in public subsidy.

So what can government do to help? Well, firstly, listen to our concerns on Brexit. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport has done a great job in consulting us but we need to know this is having an impact on the negotiations. We are not alone in needing A1 certificates, or no queues at the border. Switzerland has been able to negotiate access to the A1 system through a bilateral agreement, and we urge the UK government to do the same.

And secondly, be an enabler. Using the UK's 'soft power' to help build profile and links in emerging markets would be helpful.

And thirdly, look at how other countries provide funding for tours. Touring is a risky business. Promoters can go bust, owing thousands. And in emerging markets such as China, concerts can be cancelled at extremely short notice, turning a marginal profit from a tour into a loss. Some form of 'export guarantee', to cover unexpected losses beyond the orchestra's control, would be helpful.

With these tools at our disposal, British orchestras can maintain their role as cultural ambassadors. We can keep Europe as a major marketplace, while growing our business in new markets. We're up for it. We just need to ensure that barriers and extra costs don't get in the way.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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