

The Guerilla Orchestra and the struggle to defend the arts from funding cuts

An interview with Heather Bird

By Jackie Warren
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“I want to send out a global message that these cuts are not acceptable and give the Detroit Symphony Orchestra the simple message that people do really care about their struggle.”

Heather Bird, a Manchester, England-based classical and jazz double bassist, created the “Guerilla Orchestra” in response to the savage cuts being made in music performance and education.

Inspired by the Dutch Radio Orchestra’s impromptu performance in The Hague Railway station, Heather has been involved in protest performances in Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham. Heather, who has taught and played jazz and classical music all over the UK in quintets, chamber and large orchestras, explained, “Music education has been massively undervalued. We’re going to have a situation where only rich people will be able to afford to study music in higher education.”

Heather aims to stage musical event protests on a global scale, including transatlantic collaborations. She has been in contact with members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), currently on strike in the United States. Her latest effort is to develop work with the “Youth Music” project, making music more accessible to disadvantaged children and young people.

We spoke to her recently.

Jackie Warren: How did you develop an interest in classical music?

Heather Bird: Apparently when I was about 18 months old, I had these big squishy headphones on, listening to Bach’s Brandenburg concertos, and when my father tried to take the headphones off, I went berserk. I went mental until he put them back on! The bass and flute are very different instruments. I love the contrast.

JW: Yes—the flute’s refined pure sound and the deep resonance of the bass.

HB: The flute’s very immediate and quick, to improvise, it’s such a different experience from the bass. It’s a really nice contrast. I’ve always been around orchestral music. I had parents who weren’t actually players, but loved all kinds of music.

When I was about five, my mum took me to a concert in Manchester to see Mahler 2. In the last movement, there’s this amazing flute bit and apparently I said to my mum, “That’s what I want to do”. So she took me to a lovely teacher in Cumbria called Mr. Tears, and I just became obsessed straight away, I loved it. Then when I was about 13 I started the double bass because I loved Jazz. I joined the Carlisle and Cumbria youth orchestras and realized that, although I love the flute, playing the bass in orchestras was going to be my life.

JW: What attracted you to your particular instrument, the bass?

HB: It’s the sound—it’s so damned sexy, it’s completely versatile. You can play anything on the bass, from playing in a big orchestra to performing early music in a chamber ensemble. It’s just as exciting. Whether you’re playing Mahler, Shostakovich, Bach or modern music,

the range is enormous. It’s the best feeling in the world. I consider myself very lucky to have been given the opportunity to play this instrument.

JW: What kind of impact has music had on your life?

HB: I’d go as far as to say that it’s actually saved my life. I didn’t have the easiest of childhoods. My mum died when I was 12 and my father was absent for most of my life. I was raised by a friend of my mother’s after she died, and to have that focus and that passion enabled me to be much stronger and to express myself. Music has helped me through the worst possible times, it has helped me immeasurably.

JW: How did you come to organize the Guerilla Orchestra?

HB: I was hearing more and more about funding cuts, and becoming increasingly cross, especially when I heard about the proposed cuts to all higher education arts funding. They say arts cuts are necessary, but imagine if they announced wholesale cuts to economics or science? This has really sent out the message that the arts don’t matter—that unless things are just for money or for wealth, they aren’t important. I have pupils who are fantastically good, who would not realistically be able to take on the level of debt they would incur if they went to a conservatoire.

We don’t go into music to make money, but these cuts are such a massive step back—to many, many years ago when a musical education was for the very, very lucky few.

I saw a clip of the Dutch Radio Orchestra flash protests and I thought, that’s genius, very direct. We don’t have to have banners, or marching, but utilise the function of music itself. And I “stole” the idea! So I put a post on Facebook—“Musicians against arts cuts”—and got a big response.

I wanted to organize it in Manchester because everything happens in London and Manchester is very well known for music. Then I began to consider organizing flash protests in lots of places at once, because friends kept saying that it should be in London/Birmingham, etc. So I thought that it wouldn’t really be that much more complex to have more than one event, then realized that staging simultaneous events would be pretty spectacular, would involve more people and get the message across more directly. I created the Facebook page two weeks before the actual event, asking if anybody would be interested. It got a tremendous response—about 1,500 members, it developed very rapidly.

JW: So you went out to perform in public stations and shopping centres. What kind of response did you receive?

HB: It was a fantastic public response. In hindsight I should have had information handy, but it was covered by the media. I was very new to this style of protest and felt I might have organized the press better, but things just took off anyway.

JW: In one of your Guerilla Orchestra group discussions you criticise the so-called “patronage big society” idea vaunted by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government and describe the resistance to cuts as a “global uprising in classical musicians protesting”. Could you

elaborate on that?

HB: I think that art is what makes any civilization humane. People need to be able to express themselves freely and art does that. It offers people hope, comfort and to expect people to do it voluntarily, following six or eight years of training in musical college, without support! We spend as much time training and working as a lawyer, or an engineer. Of course we don't go into it for the money, but we can't do this job for free. The UK is renowned all over the world for its arts scene and it brings in huge amounts of revenue. We don't expect charity and realize that there have to be some cuts but the axing of *all* funding to arts higher education is blatantly unfair.

Having listened to Baroness Warsi [co-chair of the Conservative Party and minister without portfolio] on the Big Society, they expect people to do it without training, to work without support, or regulation, without any kind of security. It will lead to things happening in a very patchy way, or not at all.

I've been teaching music for a long time and I've seen the difference that it can make to kids who have real problems. Music education is a basic right.

JW: The WSWS has written of the return of the "Aristocratic principle", stating that, "Under the old regime, the population was essentially at the mercy of the great ones in society, who bestowed—or did not bestow—favours and gifts as they saw fit." This is putting access to education, culture and technology at the whim of the super-rich. Do you have any views on this?

HB: This whole idea of patronage—it happens in orchestras in the UK, but on a much larger scale than in the US. I believe it does not work well. I think it leads to corporatisation, to things happening in rich areas and not so much in poor areas.

We have some of the best orchestras and colleges in the world, some who are operating on a shoe-string budget, who do outreach work, going into some of the most extremely deprived regions, exposing children and people to the highest possible performance level and teaching. This is hugely undervalued.

Under patronage that simply wouldn't happen to the same degree. Music would be marginalized to the big spectacular projects, which are popular for a reason, but we should always have room for less popular music, new composers' work, and for experimentation.

JW: You've recently been in touch with members of the striking Detroit Symphony Orchestra. What are your thoughts about their strike?

HB: They are such nice people. It's been a real pleasure. They're so passionate and so committed and they are doing an amazing job, performing free concerts is absolutely fantastic. I've got huge respect for them, to keep on like they're doing. Things are quite tough for them at the moment, but it's on the table to collaborate and support each other transnationally. I want to send out a global message that these cuts are not acceptable and give the DSO the simple message that people do really care about their struggle.

JW: The DSO face 33 percent cuts to wages and 42 percent for new members, plus reductions in health insurance and a total freeze on pensions. The management plan includes imposing fewer concerts and forcing musicians to carry out non-performance related tasks, such as clerical work. As a socially engaged artist how do you think we can defend culture against this kind of assault?

HB: Asking an orchestral musician to do clerical work—why should highly trained committed professionals have to do this? Will they ask a surgeon to wash his own instruments after operating, or a lawyer to do his or her own filing? It's not that we're elitist or money-driven, but it's much more than performance and rehearsal. It's the hours of practice that go in, the teaching that people do alongside that. It's a full-time job.

JW: How do you feel about "Classical Revolution", which offers chamber performances to the community in highly accessible venues

across America? You talked about starting it in Manchester, where we are now.

HB: I'm so excited by this! It's right up my street. I initially heard about it through Rick Robinson—the Detroit Symphony Orchestra bass player who was interviewed by the WSWS.

I checked out their site [Classical Revolution]. There are big conceptions about elitism, in England especially, less so in Spain or France. In England you still have this upper middle-class Victorian, ritualistic approach to classical music and it's quite scary for some because they feel they don't know the ritual—when to clap, when to sit down, when to stand up. It can seem stuffy and boring.

There is a place for formality. It can be really nice to get dressed up and see a nice concert. But I think to have really good musicians who are prepared to come down and play amongst amateur musicians, students and everyone, who can actually sit right in the ensemble, to improvise, for people to be able to chat with the performers ...

JW: You talked about arranging simultaneous performances with symphony orchestras in America, Holland and Italy, where the cuts have been sharpest—would you tell us more about this?

HB: It would be great if we could. I think orchestras as institutions are a bit reticent in terms of saying, "We, as an orchestra are completely behind this". On the other hand I've had incredible support from many members of major UK orchestras for this project. It's individual members really, plus amateur musicians, students, youth orchestras, because it's their future.

I plan the UK section to be in the protest area in Whitehall, so I have to speak to the police, conduct child safety checks, etc., and at the same time I want to make it fun. Not to cause chaos, but to get a seriously large number of people playing one of the most incredible pieces in the repertoire, including singers who were a bit disappointed that they couldn't participate in the last event.

As for the international aspect, it would be fantastic to do it in Detroit simultaneously. I recently spoke to someone who's prepared to contact every orchestra in America. I have spoken to the Dutch protest organiser, who is also considering the idea. I think it will make a fantastically positive global statement, especially if we could organise through different time zones to have the performances coincide.

JW: What do you think about the student protests, and workers in many industries facing similar attacks on wages and conditions, while billions are being made available to the banks and for neo-colonial wars?

HB: How long have you got! It's good to see young people protesting and 99.9 percent of those protesting were immaculately behaved, and out there because they care. It's really about the kids who are coming later. They are also protesting on their behalf.

I was watching the BBC broadcasting from a helicopter. There was a huge police line and a group of students picked up a section of steel fencing and passed it backwards over their heads, in the opposite direction to the police. The police instantly started beating them with batons, the helicopter immediately panned away. That's not impartial. I saw the December 9 kettling of students, without water, food, toilets. The police were unbelievably heavy-handed.

JW: Wall Street today has just recorded record profits, while hunger and poverty are soaring. In the UK, the National Health Service is threatened with mass redundancies and art is increasingly under funded. So the perspective remains to unite workers under genuine socialism.

HB: I fully agree. These cuts are ideological, the promotion of the Conservative idea that we should all be consumers, survival of the fittest, that there should be no involvement from the state, unless they're beating you around the head with a truncheon. It's disgusting. You have huge corporations making huge profits while avoiding tax.

The funding to provide instrumental lessons in schools is no longer ring-fenced. Every authority has had cuts. It costs £290 million year to

provide nationwide instrumental lessons in all schools. Fifty percent of that is already funded by parents who pay for lessons. Thirty percent of the proportion of this fund is being cut by April. Compared to the banks, what people are asking for to fund musical education is a drop in the ocean.

With the NHS, it's blatantly the beginning of privatization. On the radio there was a guy from a private health company who was practically drooling at the prospects of the profits that could be made from this free-market approach to the GPs. Asking the GPs to organize everything ...

There's this whole thing about "growth, growth growth". Well, how do you get growth when you are going to make half a million people unemployed? VAT increases hit the poorest people hardest, rising interest, inflation.

JW: Coupled with a huge decline in living standards worldwide, which really underlines the fundamental contradictions in the global capitalist system.

HB: Absolutely. I've read much of the WSWs web site and I think it's great.

JW: Thank you, Heather—a real pleasure talking to you.

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<http://www.wsws.org>