

AT THE START OF 2020, TOKS DADA WAS the Classical Programme Manager at Town Hall Symphony Hall in Birmingham in England's West Midlands. But as the pandemic took hold, the theater was shuttered and cost-saving measures were put into effect, leaving him furloughed.

"That was very unsettling," he told the *Brunswick Review* in an interview in May of 2021. "I would say my life is probably 95% work. During the pandemic, to not have your work, your creative outlet, your platform, if you will, that was really difficult to deal with."

Then, George Floyd's death in the US at the hands of a police officer made international headlines. Protests shook the world. A young Black man, Toks felt it as a personal blow. "That was a low point," he said. "I still don't talk about the impact of that moment. I think 'trauma' is the only word I can use to describe what happened."

Watching a world roiling in crises, he worked to identify a new future for classical music, that part of the world he knew best.

"I began to use the time to just reflect and consider all of the ways in which the industry and my role in it might have to change. Because it was clear that the way that we were doing things before, we would not be able to sustain, post-pandemic. So I made a list. And I said, 'All this is going to have to change.'"

He started writing about his ideas in a series of blog posts and his articles captured the attention of the classical music community. By December, he had been hired in his new position, Head of Classical Music at London's Southbank Centre, a vast complex of cultural venues on the Thames that includes the Royal Festival Hall.

Dada had begun his career in classical music while studying at the Royal Welsh College of Music



For the LOVE of MUSIC



TOKS DADA,
the new Head
of Classical
Music at
London's
Southbank
Centre, talks

to *Brunswick Review's* **CARLTON WILKINSON** about social change and how the arts should respond.

& Drama. He had taken lessons in several instruments as a child, eventually settling on the viola. That instrument closely resembles the human voice in range and timbre, and frequently serves as a quiet facilitator, a central supporting bridge between the upper and lower instruments of an ensemble. While he doesn't play anymore, the choice proved both formative and symbolic.

"If I had not chosen the viola, my journey might have been totally different," he said. "That led me to the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama. Composers in Wales didn't have the platform I thought they should have, so I ended up setting up a commissioning and producing company."

While still an undergraduate, the company he founded, Sinfonia Newydd, produced collaborative cross-artform projects combining music with visual art and dance, an experience that eventually brought him first to Birmingham and from there to his current position at Europe's largest art center. As a producer and curator, he has become a central supporting bridge for artists and audiences.

When we spoke with him, Toks was a few days away from attending the first live performance he had been to in over a year, and eager to start talking about the coming season for Southbank, where he hoped to build on the progress the multi-arts center has already made toward a more inclusive and relevant cultural experience. Our conversation ranged from the lessons learned during the pandemic to the longstanding need for systemic change—including the ways in which classical music culture regards itself, and the ways in which performers and presenters can adapt to bring that evolving tradition to a wider public.

At one point in the conversation, Dada, regarded as a changemaker by the classical music community, paused and said: "I just love classical music so much. That's ultimately what is driving all of these changes that I think that we need to make. I am absolutely in love with this art form. And I just want as many people as possible to have that same feeling."

Do you think your writing about the need for change played a role in your being hired by Southbank Centre?

I imagine it probably did. Personally, I saw the job as an opportunity to really put in place all the changes I had been talking about in my blog posts, and that I had been thinking about for many years. Some of these things I had not only been thinking about before, but I had been doing to a certain extent. However, the past year has become a real catalyst for

change. With the pandemic, we've been unable to do things the way we've done them before—so, what does a new way look like? What would it look like if we started from scratch? These were the questions that were going through my head.

You wrote, "For art to survive, we need to separate the art from the building." Is this experience going to permanently change the way we look at concert halls?

I think it has to. That blog post was from August 2020, and it was part of my thinking about whether arts venues should hibernate or adapt during the pandemic. This was a time when many venues were just shutting. There was a real tension between venues needing to do that to preserve their finances, and artists that needed to make a living and couldn't just hibernate. So that was the context.

I still completely stand by that statement, but it does take on a different meaning now. Coming out of the pandemic, I really do think that venues need to adapt their approach and think more fluidly about how they utilize their spaces. As I said in that post, we need to think outside of the box—literally, the box of the concert hall.

This approach has always been a key part of Southbank Centre's DNA. From mass youth orchestras with Dudamel and Rattle to Hannah Peel presenting cutting-edge new music in the Clore Ballroom, Bryn Terfel singing with thousands of people out on the terraces, performances in foyer spaces and in our underground Hayward Gallery car park, the innovative use of flexible civic spaces, inside and out, is undisputed.

I am proud to have come to a place where that boldness to play with space and place is so central and this thinking will continue to play a really big part in what we're doing in terms of the classical music program.

I've heard it said that Southbank Centre is seen as "London's living room," because the spaces are so welcoming and people come in and they literally camp out there for the day. They work from there and they meet friends and they socialize. Then they go to a gig, then get some food. That's truly what we want. Southbank's here for everyone. We want to think more flexibly about how we can become the living room for a greater pool of people.

Classical music is facing its own reckoning, with a lot of upheaval around the language and machinations the community uses to defend its reverence of its white European heritage. How

does classical music make itself relevant in the face of current social pressures like Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and wealth inequality?

We need to look at what we do through the lens of the people that we're trying to serve. I think there are some people for whom the definition of classical music is very narrow, and anything outside of that narrow construct is very difficult for them to deal with. They think we can just kind of tinker around the edges—change some really small thing here or there—but ultimately not really change what we do very much. That is not going to cut it. Very often we almost hide behind monolithic ways of working, as a way of not needing to implement change.

I try to approach it like this: Over here is the utopian future; and this is where we are right now. These are all the things currently stopping us from getting to that utopian future. Make a list. And then just go down the list: What's each solution?

Some critical discussions see a vocabulary that defends white privilege in classical music. One of the terms mentioned is "canon."

Yes, for instance: "We can't possibly program any work by composers from an ethnically diverse background, because the classical music canon looks like *this*." That is a typical example of a classical music organization just leaning back on what they've always done as an excuse to say, "we can't change."

I think this is why Chineke! [Europe's first orchestra of majority Black, Asian and ethnically diverse musicians, directed by Chi-chi Nwanoku], has done so well. That group is one of Southbank Centre's Associate Orchestras. Chineke!'s response would be, "Right, we can no longer rely on the canon. Let's become historians and do the research to unearth all of those composers that have been forgotten or just not received appropriate recognition." Chi-chi and I helped to do exactly that when we worked together as advisors on an Arts and Humanities Research Council and BBC Radio 3 project.

And then, let's also do the work and find the next generation of composers. Indeed, when conceiving the digital program *Inside Out* last Autumn, Southbank Centre was intentional in its programming and foregrounding composers of color; over 18 of the total 53 pieces of music were by composers of color, many of whom received world and UK premieres in the process, including composer James B. Wilson and writer Yomi Sode's Centre-commissioned piece *Remnants* which was a powerful and visceral response to the Black Lives Matter movement here in the UK.

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We have to follow up on our observations with action. Otherwise we're just talking.

Returning to the concert hall after more than a year's absence is thrilling in itself, but what are you most excited about in the coming season?

I will be there at the Southbank Centre on the night we reopen with I think 749 other people back in the Royal Festival Hall. It will be the most amazing thing, just to hear live music again. It's when one is almost starved or has to do without that we really miss it and value it.

We have a big reopening summer program, titled *Reunion*. It will be a moment to reunite with friends and to come together. Artists that haven't performed together for a long time will similarly reunite. For many people it's not a celebration, because it's been a very painful time. But it's a reunion.

I'm really excited about the autumn too. We are making immediate changes to how we present classical music. We're launching new strands of work, taking the approach of putting the audience first. One of the things I'm really big on is exploring partnerships with creative companies outside of the orchestral sector. We cannot just keep looking inwards.

We're also evolving how we announce what we present. One of the pre-pandemic ways of working has been to announce up to 10 months of activity all at the same time. How can we be responsive to wider society if we're just setting in stone what we're doing for the next year or year and a half? How can we talk about classical music in a way that is more relevant to people's everyday lives in the 21st century?

We will also mirror the way artists are now working as well. Artists are not necessarily working within specific strands or labels anymore. We need to present classical music in a way that enables greater flexibility.

One of the new strands of work is for families. If you have a family, what do we have to offer you? A 7:30 p.m. weekday concert in two halves and a very set format of overture, concerto, interval, symphony... How does that work in the context of your everyday life? So instead, maybe once a month, we have a weekend day where you can come with your kids and immerse them in classical music. This all sounds very basic, but it is literally a case of going down the list of the things that don't work for the people you are trying to serve and creating solutions.

You're also a guest curator at Wonderfeel 2021.

Can you tell me about that?

It's a three-day summer festival outdoors in an

area of the Netherlands that's set aside as a natural monument. Audiences come and experience great music for three days. I think this year, it is an opportunity that people are crying out for. Unfortunately, it has to be scaled back. Due to COVID restrictions, the capacity and the number of stages is reduced. My full guest curatorship won't take place now until 2022, however I'm really looking forward to bringing the most forward-thinking UK artists to Dutch audiences.

Is there something businesses could be doing that they're not doing now to support venues like Southbank Centre?

I really wish for there to be greater collaboration between arts organizations and creative commercial organizations—technology, fashion, food and beverage. I think this collaborative approach will be the key to the classical music industry's attempts to open up, to serve those audiences who haven't been served. Many businesses really understand how to position themselves within people's everyday lives and that's a really important part of how classical music can reposition itself for new audiences.

In the US, music organizations often point to the decline of music education. Is that a problem in the UK as well?

Yes. The decline in music provision within schools in the UK is problematic. The onus will more and more be on organizations like Southbank Centre to address that need. The value of large organizations like ours needs to be in solving some of these big problems. The question for me is how can we continue to support the curriculum through learning and participation. I can tell you, if it wasn't for early opportunities that existed in East Manchester when I was a teenager, when music provision in schools was much healthier than it is now, we would not be having this conversation. It's because of those centers that I got the start that I did.

How does digital media fit in?

I think now is the time to invest in digital, even though we're returning to live performance. Just the ability to be responsive—what's the possibility of another life-changing event similarly bringing the arts to a complete standstill?

And there might be people that, for whatever reason, still cannot or don't have the means to enter the concert hall. So maintaining the audiences we have, attracting new audiences—those are worthwhile reasons for making the investment. But there's also



The Chineke! ensemble performed in May at the reopening of the Royal Albert Hall at Southbank Centre, in a program titled "Reunion."

"THE CHILDREN TODAY ARE GROWING UP WITH A SCREEN IN THEIR HANDS. WHAT WILL CLASSICAL MUSIC LOOK LIKE THROUGH THAT LENS?"

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a third reason: creating exciting new experiences. That's why we're here. That's why the arts exist. With all of these advancements—augmented reality, for instance—we can create a completely different kind of experience. We spoke of looking through the lens of the people we hope to serve: the children today are growing up with a screen in their hands. What will classical music look like through that lens?

I am yet to see an arts organization where digital is positioned with the equivalent of my team, in programming or artistic planning. I think there is value to it sitting in marketing or education, but it also needs to be in programming. We need to utilize digital as more than just a streaming mechanism.

Anything else you want to share about the future of classical music?

I'm really, really, really hopeful for the sector post-pandemic. But I'm also really nervous—about the appetite for change and the inconsistency of the appetite for change throughout the sector.

Music has the power to break down barriers between people, communities and society. It has the potential to transcend barriers in every single type of division in society that you can think of. Why would we not let it? My worry is that in 500 years' time, classical music will just be something that people read about in history books. That's a genuine concern.

We spoke about people who view classical music as a very specific thing: the reason they hold on to that, cling to it with their fingertips and resist change, is because they want to really preserve classical music. I'm actually saying the same thing, but from the other side of the argument. The only way we will preserve classical music is if we don't become too wedded to this very specific construct. By resisting change to the tradition, we actually run the risk of not preserving it at all. ♦