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## Perspectives on Practice:

### Artist-led ensembles – an interview with Conor Mitchell, founder of The Belfast Ensemble

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#### **Summary:**

In the first Perspectives on Practice interview, Conor Mitchell speaks to Ali FitzGibbon about the establishment of artist-led The Belfast Ensemble and its civic and artistic purpose. The discussion explores the challenges and opportunities the Ensemble have encountered in their relationships with venues, festivals and audiences. The interview also considers how the Ensemble and Mitchell himself have negotiated their identity as 'of Belfast' and 'of Northern Ireland'.

**Key words:** Ensembles; artist-led; collaborative practice; Northern Ireland

#### **Introduction**

In this, the first Perspectives on Practice interview, Ali FitzGibbon interviews composer and founder of The Belfast Ensemble, Conor Mitchell. Collaborative and artist-led approaches to running performing arts companies (such as ensembles) have waxed and waned in popularity over the years, often shaped by prevailing attitudes in public agencies towards concerns of efficiency and accountability. This interview was conducted informally and has been edited to draw out the dominant themes of the discussion: the nature of the ensemble as both civic and artist-led; the communication of an

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ensemble as an artistic entity and to/with its audience; and the concerns of place with particular attention to being a Belfast-based ensemble.

Founded in 2016, The Belfast Ensemble is a music-theatre collection that blends multimedia with live musical performance. Premiering all their work in the city of Belfast, the company has achieved significant acclaim winning the Irish Times Theatre Award for *Best Opera*, receiving an *Ivor Novello* nomination and being listed in the Observer/Guardian's *Top Ten of Classical Music 2019*. Recent work includes *Abomination: a DUP opera*, the children's opera *The Musician* and the Ulster Orchestra/Outburst Arts co-production of *Mass*. <https://www.thebelfastensemble.com/>

This interview took place on 13 June 2021.

### **Communicating the nature of ensemble**

*FitzGibbon:*

*If you could tell me, first of all, what is The Belfast Ensemble?*

*Mitchell:*

The Belfast Ensemble is inspired by established ensemble practices that are both civic and artistically defined. These include the Berliner Ensemble<sup>i</sup> and in music, the Scottish Ensemble<sup>ii</sup>, the Manchester Collective<sup>iii</sup>, the 12 Ensemble<sup>iv</sup>, the Hebrides Ensemble<sup>v</sup>. Its theatrical inheritor is the repertory system, artists coming together to make a canon of work. There are practical advantages, but the ensemble approach is a civic endeavour. Ensembles tend to be *of a place*, and the work that they make is tied to that place. These things - the approach, the bringing together, the sense of place - had been cooking in my brain forever. I was not driven to start an ensemble but I could see one did not exist in Northern Irish theatre. That was having an impact on the type of work being made in Belfast. When I started to think about having agency in my own work, it felt worth investigating.

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The Belfast Ensemble now is two things. It's a future self and it's a present self. What the Ensemble wants to be long term, post five years, is a company of musicians and artists plus a design team who always return back together. And everyone is on a two-year contract with six months of each year paid full time and six months free to work elsewhere. That is the dream. If you could draw it on the back of an envelope or say, what's the photograph? It is this group of people that for six months every year will create a canon of work that is festival-based or concerts or new writing. The Ensemble present is a mechanism to get to that point.

*FitzGibbon:*

*I will come back to this question of civic purpose. Tell me first, is there a core number of people who are 'The Ensemble' with you and are part of its decisions?*

Mitchell:

We have a board, then me, and then I defer to three strands and for now the same three associates - a performance associate, Abigail (Abby) McGibbon; an orchestral associate, Aoife Magee; and a technical associate, Simon Bird. It will stay with that core map until we get to the large-scale endeavour, bearing in mind we're not core-funded (we don't receive any annual funding from an Arts Council towards our overheads or programme costs). To demonstrate what ensemble practice gives in artistic benefits, we have to go through five years of project-by-project funding, effectively bluffing to everyone what the company is *going* to be. We need to demonstrate and prove the results through the work. That work – to start - needs a vision, which is what I bring. I have influences that I want to bring to the company but the Ensemble has to have a unity of voice and design that is more than that.

*FitzGibbon:*

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*I have heard you speak about the visual aesthetic of the Ensemble and its importance, what are you talking about when you say that?*

Mitchell:

All the Belfast Ensemble shows to date have a very similar look, which we will deliberately sustain for four to five years. The aim is to leave a very clear fingerprint. A lot of ensembles have no brand. Because of the nature of funding, they change project to project and only the logo stays the same. They morph with each show. That's okay for a company that's been on the go for 20 or 30 years but looking at the early development of Theatre de Complicite<sup>vi</sup>, Punchdrunk<sup>vii</sup>, there was a clear visual aesthetic that established the company blueprint.

Effectively, the Ensemble shows to date are all dance stagings. 50% of that decision came from the limited funding of our early work and a realism that we could do one big and two small shows a year. But I was always a fan of those high white stagings, the work of Robert Wilson<sup>viii</sup>, Japanese theatre, and of contemporary dance. I did not see that in Belfast, except occasional dance theatre pieces. Incorporation of video, which was an established pattern of scenic design in Europe, had not come to Belfast when we started in 2016. I had worked with Mesmer<sup>x</sup> in London and thought video design was important to incorporate. So there's a practicality and a pure beauty about the stagings. In Belfast they are different from everything else in their 'IKEA-ness'.

For the first three years, all the design, typeface onstage, on posters, Facebook was the same, even the video text in the first few shows. I wanted the audience to have in their mind's eye in a few years, 'I'm coming to see a Belfast Ensemble show'. You will not see 'written by Conor Mitchell' or actors' names. I think with one exception which was *Ten Plagues*, principally because Mark Ravenhill was involved and that was a big step for us. However, 'The Belfast Ensemble' must be the biggest thing on the poster, and then the production title, so that the audience feel they are engaging with

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a known product – a style. And we must deliver on that. If after five years, that's a rock-solid brand, then I can get the city of Belfast to see that this has a semi-ambassadorial function and they need to start sending it out.

### **Art in the hands of artists**

*FitzGibbon:*

*The stated vision of the company is 'art in the hands of artists'? What does that mean?*

Mitchell:

Everything we make is controlled by the artists. Everything. Abby is an actor, Aoife is a viola player, the associates are all artists etc. They are consulted on everything. Before, I felt I was never in control of a vision working as an artist. I was someone's puppet. The established pattern of producing theatre and music meant freelancers and artists came in at the last moment to facilitate the mechanics. The art had been created and the recipe made before the ingredients were there.

The Ensemble's work has nothing in the room when people come in to make it. No set, design, etc. It's all decided in the room. There were a few bits and pieces for *Abomination – a DUP Opera*, the idea was there but the artists have to have agency in where it's going. I have a clear idea of what I think it's going to look like but I don't have firm ideas musically. I never write the ending of anything before I start rehearsals.

Our first production, *The Moot Virginity of Queen Catherine of Aragon* (Belfast Ensemble, 2016), was a collaboration between Abby and me. I told her the Ensemble would have music at its core and she assumed that would mean singing. I realised this would be *everyone's* assumption. So the first shows played against that and were all spoken with a constant underscore. That was new.

The big contemporary issue at that time was the BREXIT vote. I thought we should talk about that but from a distance. We decided on the Reformation.

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Because of *Wolf Hall* and *The Tudors*, Catherine of Aragon had become a very public character but that was not our point. I felt there was something unique about a character trapped between Spain and England, the Reformation and the Catholic south, Spanish sensuality and English coldness. It felt like a very old fight that is still being fought in Northern Ireland. Our orchestral associate formed the string quartet. Our technical associate joined and designed the lighting. I still think that's the most successful thing we ever did. It was the purest. A simple white platform and everything intentionally on show, even the poster, I think was all totally on message.

Then we made *The Doppler Effect*, where we went in with even less. We didn't even get the grant. All advice was to cut our losses, accept a £35 loss on the first show and stop. But we did it. We said, what if, instead of having that white space, we create this central installation with a performer, throw video on a giant suspended cube and we get our audience moving around. And we'll talk about physics and motion. Gavin Peden came on board as video designer. Abby became a disembodied voice, we added a male actor/dancer, we used more instruments. For the next production we grew along the same lines, added two more actors, and that was an attempt to use a title that people knew, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Again, that was a polemic: the state 'as family'.

*FitzGibbon:*

*Thinking about your relationship to your audience, I saw you do a try-out of a new work at the end of The Fall of the House of Usher.*

*Mitchell:*

Yes, I introduced a piece about Bach fugue. You see that a lot in classical music concerts. Conductors speak to the audience and it is the best bit. Everyone thinks, 'wow, he can actually see us'. Music concerts are looser than theatre. String quartets can just turn and say, 'Mozart had had his first

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child minutes before composing this' and it adds a piquancy to the performance. At the end of *that* show, we were keen to make a new piece. I asked the musicians to try it out with the audience. It could have been bullshit, but people responded really well. Ever since, I have made a speech or introduced the audience to something. And people respond. It makes a connection. When we first did *Abomination* we went up 45 minutes late, and I said to the audience, 'Look, this is just an idea, what do you think?' By the end, they were all singing along. We felt people were following us like a band. When we did the full stage opera of *Abomination*, they were there. People come to see the Ensemble. not me or the singers or whatever. When you stand in front of them and say thank you, and talk to them about the work, and I make some speech about Belfast art, they're totally inside.

*FitzGibbon:*

*With that trial of the Bach piece did you get something back from the audience about the work?*

Mitchell:

Yes. Absolutely. I saw that the audience loved being asked and I thought, if this piece is ever funded and announced, they're going to feel ownership of it. I've been around *A Play, a pie, and a pint*<sup>x</sup> in Scotland. The quality is very variable but it's also disposable. People are making it in a week. What is brilliant about it is the audience. There's a bunch of people in Scotland who go all the time and have collectively built a mental catalogue of work. They watch something for half an hour and can compare it to the one they saw four weeks ago. I have seen something similar in Aldeburgh Music Festival. Every Friday, the resident string quartet play to an audience of older people at the Jubilee Hall. The audience get a free bowl of soup and sandwich, they pay £2 and they watch the string quartet. And the young musicians dismiss it. I went to see it loaded with my own assumptions but what the musicians and I had not realised is that this is the most informed string quartet audience you have

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ever seen in your life. They could tell you the complete works of Steve Reich to Stockhausen to Mozart to Haydn, they've seen and heard it all since 1948 so their critical analysis afterwards was unbelievable. In the same way as with *A Play, a pie and a pint*, these audiences felt like they were following a band and they had this immense catalogue. I sensed that something like that could exist in Belfast and that we could have that relationship.

### **Running an ensemble**

*FitzGibbon:*

*What challenges have you encountered in running a company as an ensemble and with 'art in the hands of artists'?*

Mitchell:

Separating the finance/funding issues, there is the day-to-day trying to run a company, learning on the job, negotiating it with the rest of my career. The big challenges have been in expressing the massive and long term to possible supporters and venues and to get them to come in at a ground level. When we started, people said, 'you'll sell no tickets'. I said, '*I know* but I can't do this until you invest'. I had several meetings with venues where I said, 'you will make no money on this show, you will probably lose it. But in four years' time, I want to make a big opera. And if we have everything in place, it will do really well'. I expected everyone to say this is a great business deal. Few did. My initial plan was that a venue was going to come on board and support us as an 'ensemble in residence'. If we had artists for six months, we could do micro seasons, readings, new works, new composers, ending in a full production every year that we take to an international festival. That didn't happen. I think this was because companies and venues are trapped in this *non*-multi-annual funding cycle of year-on-year results. There is little space within that for long term strategizing outside of their organisation; itself tied to a 12-month delivery plan.

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The Lyric Theatre<sup>xi</sup> became a key theatre ally, housing many of our works in both their spaces, but I had to rethink the 'in residence' plan and shifted my financial strategy to festival partnerships. If every single show had a festival partner, we created the optic of being a 'festival-worthy' company. It could have fallen apart with COVID19 but it didn't. 2020 ended up with the Ensemble having a presence in every major festival in the city across many demographics. So, you can say to audiences and funders, we are a company that can shift from doing a big queer thing about the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) and perform a show for six year olds in another festival. We can bounce to the Belfast International Arts Festival<sup>xii</sup> and do a show with music by Beethoven. Then make a film for a special Queen's Film Theatre season. Suddenly we have a footprint in every festival and a civic function within the city. That solved many of our challenges. We were not 'in-residence' but housed within civic festivals that provided international visibility.

It focuses us in versatility and international ambition. We have to play all these different demographics and they all have some international optic. This 'move fast, break things' stage will formalise. We need to go forward with core funding and major backing from international partners. Key to that will be 2022 and taking two contemporary docu-operas to international festivals and venues in London, Dublin, Edinburgh and New York. If that target is achieved, we will be a *very* different company. The company that is doing THAT, can go back and say we need £XXX funding as a baseline.

*FitzGibbon:*

*Have you considered doing it without public funding?*

Mitchell:

Yes, but you can't do that in Belfast. It is just not big enough. The major challenge is scale, income and return. I was told for many years audiences would not respond to scale and it was impossible, but we did it.

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*Abomination* happened because we were doing *The Doppler Effect* at Outburst Queer Arts Festival<sup>xiii</sup>. Outburst asked if we could also do a closing concert. I had always wanted to set Iris Robinson's interview to music so on the last night we did it as a concert (for background see Belfast Telegraph, 2008; Ashe, 2009). Everyone loved it. I wanted to do it full scale but we had to prove to the Lyric we could hold the mainstage. I put together a rather grandiose retrospective of our work called *Bash!* (see Coyle, 2019). to prove we could handle all the negotiations, tech, etc for the mainstage to do *Abomination* at the next Outburst Festival.

For *Bash!*, we took over both spaces in the Lyric with three shows. We had a financial plan which left us in deficit. We're still covering those losses. I worked for free for several years and more recently a series of commissions has helped. I'm much more ruthless now in covering our overheads but I wasn't at the start. It was move fast, break things, get the show on and deal with the repercussions. We did *Bash!* in June, and then confirmed *Abomination* for November. And that show was a smash, against all the odds. A 'strange little company' doing a new opera singing DUP slogans. On paper it shouldn't work, but there was a mood in the air, a will for it to succeed.

### **Being a Northern Irish/Belfast ensemble or artist**

*FitzGibbon:*

*Returning to what you said about the Ensemble's civic purpose and the branding of Belfast, can you tell me more?*

*Mitchell:*

I had my formative artistic years in another country, England. In London, you can go from the Fringe to the Royal Opera House and everything in between, all the success, failures and genres, every night of the week. That to me was the standard. When I came back to Northern Ireland, I was keen to put that in my work. I suppose the reason I came back was that after being in London for years, no matter how hard I tried, I did not *feel* English. I wanted to come

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back and make work in Northern Ireland, whether or not it ended up in England or abroad. I moved to Lurgan and in a little house in the countryside, I wrote *Ten Plagues* (Ravenhill, 2011), my songs for Aldeburgh Music Festival<sup>xiv</sup>, redrafts of musicals, some orchestral pieces. I felt more authentic and I noticed a massive change in my work – for the better.

I also wanted Belfast-made work more on the agenda outside Belfast. In London, there is a particular trope that was always rolled out in terms of Northern Irish plays. The exported theatre is generally cut from the same cloth. I didn't see any work from here of scale internationally. I played all the principal opera festivals, the Holland festival, the Rome festival, Aldeburgh and there was limited work from Northern Ireland.

But yet, Belfast had this very clear identity. Whether you were in London or Berlin, people knew the city and would always say, what's happening in Belfast? I wanted to make my work *in* Northern Ireland and start pushing out. I could see a real possibility for creating and touring as 'The Belfast Ensemble'.

This became evident when I did *Ten Plagues* with Mark Ravenhill (commissioned by the Traverse<sup>xv</sup>, developed by the Royal Court<sup>xvi</sup>). Marc Almond sang it and because of him, it became this cause célèbre, headlining the Edinburgh Festival Fringe<sup>xvii</sup>. I felt this ambassadorial role about Northern Irish music. Everywhere I went, people assumed I was working with the Ulster Orchestra<sup>xviii</sup> and the Lyric<sup>xix</sup>. But the reality was, I was writing nothing in Northern Ireland apart from children's shows. There was a mismatch weighing on my mental health. I decided if no one in Northern Ireland is picking up the phone, but yet, I seemed to have this identity, I needed to do something about it myself. I spoke to funders and it didn't seem that impossible. So I just did it.

*FitzGibbon:*

*As an artist, do you feel you are representing where you come from when you work?*

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Mitchell:

When it's my work, yes. I don't feel that Conor Mitchell represents music from Northern Ireland. But I think when Conor Mitchell does a piece by Conor Mitchell in Edinburgh or Cardiff, London or Dublin, you are your country on show. I think we feel that in a much more heightened way being from Northern Ireland, because there's a major invisibility problem for this country. We are the child of two divorcing parents, and each parent thinks the other is feeding the child, but actually, nobody is feeding the child. I remember saying to the head of music at the National Theatre<sup>xx</sup>, London when I worked there, why don't I do more here? And he said, Because Dublin's employing you. Anytime I tried to get a job in the Abbey Theatre<sup>xxi</sup> in Dublin, they said, well, you're working in London, because you're in the UK. And in Belfast they said, well, you're working with both of them. Everyone in London thinks you're an Irish artist, and everyone in Ireland thinks you're a British artist. We [Northern Irish artists] have evolved like marsupials with our own strange set of practices. Because we had to. There's no theatre press, limited funding. Until recently, we had almost no theatres with fly towers, so I grew up in a country where sets did not move or change for the next scene. Nobody changes costume because no one can afford two costumes for an actor. So little work goes out that anytime I did something, for example with Aldeburgh Music Festival, they felt this was a real coup to have Northern Irish work when I was just somebody that happened to be from Northern Ireland. This happened time and time again, as I'm sure it does to all artists from Northern Ireland. There's a piquancy about saying you're from Belfast. And I didn't see any real state or city sponsorship behind this. It needed to happen. The Ensemble is not 'the Ulster ensemble'. Nobody knows what Ulster is, but everyone knows what Belfast is. If those artists were all going to come together to make collaborative work, there was an opportunity to say that this was 'of Belfast'. And if I worked very hard at that for a series of years, and I got people

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interested, it had a shot of working. And I think that's the work that's in process.

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i The Berliner ensemble was founded by Bertolt Brecht and his wife Helene Weigel in 1949. <https://www.berliner-ensemble.de/en/tickets>

ii <https://scottishensemble.co.uk/>

iii <https://manchestercollective.co.uk/>

iv <https://www.the12ensemble.com/>

v <https://www.hebridesensemble.com/>

vi. <http://www.complicite.org/>

vii. <https://www.punchdrunk.com/>

viii <http://www.robertwilson.com/>

ix. <https://mesmer.co.uk/>

x <https://playpiepint.com/>

xi <https://lyrictheatre.co.uk/>

xii <https://belfastinternationalartsfestival.com/>

xiii <https://outburststarts.com/>

xiv <https://snapemaltings.co.uk/season/aldeburgh-festival/>

xv <https://www.traverse.co.uk/>

xvi <https://royalcourttheatre.com/>

xvii <https://www.edfringe.com/>

xviii <https://www.ulsterorchestra.org.uk/>

xix <https://lyrictheatre.co.uk/>

xx <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/>

xxi National Theatre of Ireland <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/>