



ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA Music-making with Visually Impaired Participants

Background

This guide has been developed by **RPO resound**, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's community and education department, drawing upon experiences of delivering creative music projects with visually impaired (VI) participants and partner groups. This valuable work has led to the development of specific knowledge and skills for the Orchestra's musicians and leaders, and draws upon training and support from partner organisations the Royal National Institute for the Blind, and the Royal London Society for Blind People.

Two video examples of recent projects can be found on our YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/rpoonline

- **La Bohème creative project** with the RLSB
- **RPO at the Aquarium** with the RNIB and SEA LIFE London Aquarium

Visual Impairment

A visual impairment may mean a person who has no sight at all, but will mostly refer to people who have low vision or are partially sighted. This means that most people who identify as blind are light-sensitive (i.e. they can tell if a room is light or dark, if they are in light or shade) and may experience some blurred or distorted vision. In addition to this, for some vision impairments, an individual's sight can fluctuate based on a variety of factors; how tired they are, what the lighting conditions are, or simply varying day-to-day.

Reasons for visual impairment are manifold. Some VI participants may have been blind since birth, whilst some may have lost their vision over a number of years. VI participants may be immediately obvious through the use of a cane or a guide dog – however others may not use either and their condition may not be immediately obvious to an observer. Due to the wide variety of VI conditions and how a participant may approach their own condition, there are also a wide variety of access requirements for project work with this participant group.

As ever, the best guide to a participant's condition is to discuss it directly with them or with a member of staff who knows them well. Take guidance from partner organisations or experts from the RNIB and RLSB.

Some conditions that lead to visual impairment can also lead to difficulties in hearing or speech, as well as some learning disorders. Participants presenting with complex needs may not be immediately obvious, so it is important to work with project partners to identify participants on a VI project who also have additional needs.

Etiquette for VI work

- Address participants by their name and always introduce yourself. Don't assume that participants will be able to recognise you from your voice.
- If working with a group, take time to introduce everyone who is present, or ask them to introduce themselves – so that everyone is clear who is in the room.
- Announce when you, or anyone else, is entering/ leaving a room, so that participants are aware of any changes and who is in the group.
- When talking to VI participants, speak normally. Don't change your tone of voice, body language or change the language you use (for example, you can still talk about 'seeing' or 'watching' things). All these factors are important parts of the way you speak and it doesn't help participants to change it.
- If giving directions be accurate and specific e.g. 'the door is in front of you and the handle is on your left hand-side'.
- Be aware of simple project actions that may not be immediately clear to VI participants, e.g. when giving out instruments, tell the participant what instrument you are giving them, check that they're happy with it, and where with where you have put it.
- If a participant uses a guide dog, do not touch or feed the dog without the owner's permission. Participants will be used to being asked about their guide dog and will likely be very happy for you to say hello to it. However, as working dogs, it is important that they are not distracted. Members of staff and other participants should be discouraged from paying them too much attention.
- VI participants, particularly those in a new venue, may bump into things and take wrong routes etc. This is a normal part of life for VI people and, as long as it is a safe environment for them to do so, it is not something to be worried about. It is good practice to make appropriate risk assessments of a work space and use the necessary measures to minimise risks such as trip hazards.
- If you are wondering whether a VI participant needs help, approach them and ask them before doing anything. Listen carefully to them and the details of how they want to be helped.

Managing VI Workshops

- Ensure that all workshop deliverers and practitioners are briefed on the basic etiquette of working with VI participants, even if they have taken part in VI workshops or training previously. Coordinate with your workshop leader (who is likely to have considerable experience of working with VI groups) to ensure that this briefing is relevant to both the project content and how the workshop leader wishes to run it.
- Check lighting levels in your venue are nice and bright and make provisions for increased lighting if necessary. If participants are partially sighted, they may rely on outlines and colour differences to navigate their surroundings. Low light levels (such as you might have in a traditional performance) can severely compromise participant's ability to do this and should be avoided.
- Make name tags for all participants and staff members. It is important that you can identify all participants by addressing them by name throughout the project. Make all name tags large and clear enough to be recognised from across a room.

- Keep written records of which members of staff are familiar with which participants. Staff from partner organisations will likely be very familiar with an individual participant's condition, and you should always take your lead from them consulting on any concerns you have before approaching a participant.
- Pay particular attention to background noise levels during the workshops so that vocal communication can continue throughout. If necessary, ask the workshop leader to establish ground rules with participants about noise. Be aware of your venue and surroundings and try to minimize unnecessary background noise, e.g. people passing through your workshop space, doors left open to noisy reception areas.
- **DO** make sure that the workshop area has clear and unblocked entry and exit points and that these stay the same throughout the project, including for any performances/sharing sessions.
- **DO** make sure that any trip hazards are minimised as follows: tape all cables down, make sure keyboards and heavy instruments are placed securely on stands, do not balance any items on chairs or against walls etc.
- **DON'T** move equipment or belongings around without telling participants that you are doing so. Obviously participants will want to have access to their bags and coats etc, however, even things like playing instruments informally at breaks should be accessible to the participants by them knowing exactly where these items are.
- Finally, VI groups are usually full of energy and enthusiasm for workshop sessions, and very happy to engage in any activities you suggest. However, it's always worth your workshop leader or the project manager checking in with the group's staff team or project partners to gauge if plans will work.

Feedback

We welcome feedback and input to the development of our resources, so if you would like to be in touch please contact us:

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