

Case Study

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# The Knife of Dawn



Image courtesy of Hannah Kendall: The Knife of Dawn © Sarah J Scott

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Supported using public funding by  
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ENGLAND**

Positive action results  
in 45% black, Asian and  
minority ethnic audience  
for Caribbean-inspired  
opera.

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Published 2016  
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# Positive action attracts diverse audience

Caribbean-inspired opera promotes inclusion with content and casting

## About The Knife of Dawn

The Knife of Dawn is a one-man chamber opera inspired by the life and works of Guyanese poet and political activist Martin Carter. It was first performed at The Roundhouse in October 2016 and sold out, achieving an audience that was approximately 45% black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME).

## Background

As a British composer of African-Caribbean heritage, diversity in classical music is important to me. At London Music Masters, we work at education level to ensure that everyone has access to extraordinary music. Recently, we've talked more about education being just part of the picture. Despite strong learning initiatives, ensembles and audiences are not changing in terms of diversity. I wanted to address that in my work as a composer.

In planning The Knife of Dawn, I decided to take positive action and create a role specifically for someone of African-Caribbean origin. The decision was prompted partly by our conversations and work at London Music Masters. I wanted to present diverse role models that would help encourage young people to pursue music beyond education. It was also inspired by a performance by Chineke! Orchestra, Europe's first BAME orchestra, at Queen Elizabeth Hall in 2015. Despite performing a traditional repertoire, they achieved a new audience for classical music by changing who was on stage.

I wanted to welcome a wider audience to opera, including younger people and people from minority backgrounds. I knew if I wanted to achieve that, the venue needed to be not traditionally associated with classical music so I approached The Roundhouse. Although they'd never hosted contemporary opera before, they were immediately open to the idea.

## The story

I wanted the story to be something that people from wider backgrounds could engage with. It was important to me that the subject matter be grounded in human experience, rather than mythical or fantasy like some opera.

Martin Carter is considered one of the leading Caribbean writers so I knew he would be a draw for the African-Caribbean community. His story also touches on cultural, political and social issues that are still relevant today.

Martin Carter fought for Guyanese independence in the 1950s and was imprisoned without charge. *The Knife of Dawn* is set in his prison cell towards the end of a hunger strike in 1953. The story incorporates six of Carter's poems, which also form a separate song cycle.

## Funding the project

I secured initial funding from the PRS for Music Foundation's Women Make Music fund to begin developing the work.

I made twelve applications to trusts, foundations and grant-making bodies in total. All but two were successful, leaving me just £5,000 away from my fundraising target.

I crowdfunded to reach the final sum and raised £4,700 from 77 donors. Four individuals, one of whom I'd never met before, donated £500 each. These higher level donations were from people who believed in the inclusive aims of the project. Many of the other donors were friends who work towards greater diversity in other sectors.

## The performance

Presented during Black History Month, the main performance sold out within ten days and The Roundhouse said they could have filled at least one other show. They promoted it through their regular channels and I worked with the Guyanese network, through hairdressers and other key contacts, to spread the word.

In addition to the main performance, Trinity Laban funded and coordinated a series of workshops for secondary school students from Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark. All 100 students who attended the performance were from BAME backgrounds.

The performance was recorded by the BBC and broadcast on Radio 3's Hear and Now.

## Tips for success

### Learn how the sector works

I studied Arts Management and work in the sector. Without the knowledge of funders and contacts I've developed over the years, I don't think I could have made this project happen.

### Take positive action

There's a lot of nervousness about positive action but if the sector is to progress beyond just talking about having diverse audiences and role models then we need to be bold.

### Be clear about your ambitions beyond the art

Much of the funding for this project came from individuals and trusts who believed in the need for diverse role models. If your work is about more than just the art, make that clear from the start and talk about it.

### Research and apply to lots of different sources

Applying for more money than you need enables you to deal with inevitable rejections and keep your project moving.