

BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

**ThinkTank Music, Migration and Displacement 7 & 8
October 2025**

Executive Summary



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Introduction

This strategic ThinkTank was convened to explore and address the intersections between music, migration, and displacement. This initiative brings together artists, cultural leaders, policy makers, academics, funders, and grassroots organisations to collectively envision more inclusive, sustainable, and impactful ways to create opportunities for refugee and migrant musicians and foster meaningful musical participation among displaced communities.

Migration is as old as humanity and as it continues to shape our society, music emerges not only as a form of cultural expression and emotional survival but also as a tool for community-building, advocacy, and socio-economic inclusion. This ThinkTank aims to generate actionable insights, identify structural barriers, and propose frameworks for ethical, long-term support, career development, and community engagement.

This ThinkTank was produced by Britten Pears Arts in partnership with Counterpoints Arts as part of the Platforma Festival 2025.

platforma

phf Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

Delegates

Dijana Rakovic	Senior Producer	Counterpoint Arts
Dunya Habash	Postdoctoral Researcher	University of Cambridge
Emmanuela Yogolelo	Musician, facilitator, cultural leader	Amani Collective
Francoise Lamy	Director	Orchestra of Samples
Dr Florian Scheduling	Associate Professor in Music and Migration	University of Bristol
Josephine Burton	CEO	Dash Arts
Josh Asokan	Artistic Director	Odyssey Ensemble
Lis Murphy	Producer and instrumentalist	Music Action International
Maren Ellerman	Producer (mental health)	Counterpoint Arts
MoYah	Performer, Producer, Facilitator	Independent
Samia Malik	Musician, facilitator	Independent
Suren Seneviratne	Sound artist	Independent

Facilitated by **Katherine Zeserson**, Co-curated with **Counterpoints Arts**.

Programme Manager **Angie Lee-Foster**, Assisted by **Etty O’Rielly**.

COUNTERPOINTS.

Preparation for the ThinkTank

We asked delegates to come prepared with their responses to the following key question and wider questions.

"What systemic barriers do displaced and refugee musicians face in host countries, and how can cultural institutions, policies, and ethical practices be transformed to support their artistic agency, wellbeing, and equitable participation?"

Some wider questions to consider:

- What systemic barriers - social, legal, cultural, and financial - do musicians from refugee backgrounds face sustaining and developing their musical practice in host countries? What practical and policy-level interventions can help dismantle these obstacles and foster more equitable pathways to participation and recognition?
- In what ways can cultural institutions actively decolonise their programming, leadership structures, and curatorial practices to authentically reflect more diverse experiences and aesthetics? How can this transformation enable more inclusive access, collaboration, and creative agency for displaced artists?
- What ethical responsibilities must organisations consider when engaging displaced communities in participatory music-making? How can practitioners ensure that such initiatives are grounded in care, consent, cultural sensitivity, and long-term equity, rather than extractive or performative approaches?
- How can music function as a tool for mental wellbeing, emotional resilience, and cultural continuity within migrant and refugee communities? What models of musically based care and community healing can be shared, scaled, or supported across different contexts?
- How can opportunities for professional musicians from refugee backgrounds help change the narrative around displacement, for example by reaching wide audiences?

Event Structure and Intent

The event was designed as a **non-linear conversation**, moving through layers of reflection, storytelling, and strategic thinking. It was framed as a space for **radical listening, ethical reflection, and strategic imagination**.

Core Themes and Provocations

1. Fragmented Identity and Representation

Artists shared how their identities are often compartmentalised depending on the context or event. One participant described a friend's experience:

“She’s a refugee during Refugee Week, she’s Black during Black History Month, and she’s a woman during International Women’s Day. But when is she just herself?”

This fragmentation leads to emotional exhaustion and a lack of holistic recognition. The conversation called for spaces where artists can be seen in their full complexity, not just through the lens of trauma or diversity.

There was also discussion of **censorship and editorial control**, especially in documentary work:

“You tell one story, but it’s edited in different ways. So do you still have ownership over that?”

2. Tokenism vs. Holistic Support

Participants critiqued the tendency of institutions to engage artists from refugee or migrant backgrounds only during specific events or for symbolic purposes:

“How do you create sustainable development opportunities for refugee and sanctuary-seeking artists without being extractive or performative?”

“We are audible but not listened to, visible but not seen.”

There was a call for **circuits of care and solidarity**, where venues, organisations, and institutions work together to support artists in a holistic and ongoing way.

Case Study:

A participant shared how a refugee artist was invited to perform at a diversity event but was excluded from the main festival lineup. This highlighted the need for **year-round programming** and **mainstream inclusion**, not just symbolic representation.

3. Legal and Structural Barriers

There was insight into the legal challenges faced by asylum seekers:

- Lack of access to legal representation.
- The complexity of the asylum process.
- The legal distinction between asylum seekers and refugees.

The need for **organisational awareness and training** around legal realities was highlighted in order to provide a broader understanding of needs.

4. Cultural Hierarchies

Western genres are privileged, while music from Africa, Asia, and Latin America is often treated as decorative or secondary:

“Western classical music, opera, jazz are seen as serious art... while music from Africa, Asia is decoration.”

The term “world music” was critiqued as a **colonial construct** that flattens diverse traditions into a single category.

Case Study:

One artist recalled being asked to perform “Qawwali” at a festival, despite being trained in a different genre. This was likened to asking a blues musician to perform country-western music—an example of **cultural illiteracy and tokenism**.

5. Power, Ownership, and Co-Creation

A recurring provocation was the shift from **hospitality to co-ownership**:

“The most radical act is to move from hospitality to co-ownership: to hand over the keys.”

Artists called for:

- Co-authorship in programming and pedagogy.
- Shared decision-making in commissioning.
- Mentorship by peers from similar backgrounds.

“Those of us from different backgrounds to the mainstream are mirrors for the people that are like us, and we are bridges for the people not like us.”

Case Study:

A producer described working with an Iranian refugee animator and connecting her with a more established Iranian mentor. This peer-led model was seen as more culturally relevant and empowering than traditional top-down mentorship.

6. Practical Solutions and Advocacy

Concrete suggestions included:

- Microgrants for displaced artists.
- Instrument libraries and free rehearsal spaces.
- Travel and childcare budgets.
- Mentoring by peers from similar backgrounds.
- Advocacy for accessible funding platforms.

There was also discussion of:

- Universal artist wages.
- Audits of arts sector demographics.
- Ring-fenced funding for refugee and migrant artists.

7. Music as Healing and Resistance

Music was framed as a tool for:

- Joy and solidarity.
- Trauma recovery.
- Cultural resilience.

“Using music as an immediate act of joy and solidarity regardless of what else it’s for.”

Artists working with survivors of torture emphasized **trauma-informed approaches** and **non-verbal healing modalities**:

“Western talking therapies aren’t right for everyone... jam sessions might be better.”

Case Study:

A group working with Freedom from Torture described how music was used in therapeutic settings, with public performances carefully designed to avoid triggering trauma.

8. Reflections on Success and Visibility

Participants questioned dominant definitions of success:

“Graffiti wasn’t allowed in museums, so they painted on trains. Now it’s in museums; is that success?”

Visibility was seen as both a **tool for empowerment** and a **burden of representation**:

“Make us more visible so we can be role models for those coming after us.”

There was also discussion of **cultural gatekeeping**, where artists from migrant backgrounds are expected to conform to Western norms or genres

Group Work: Insights and Proposals

A. Instrument Libraries and Studio Access

A pilot project was proposed in London, Bristol, and Norwich to create:

- **Instrument libraries** using donations from manufacturers and musicians and partnerships with museums.
- **Free rehearsal and studio spaces** in underused venues (churches, schools, universities).
- **Storytelling projects** around instruments and migration.

“Some instruments carry centuries of colonial history; they tell stories.”

The project would involve mapping existing resources, identifying partners, and creating a database of available instruments and spaces.

B. Training Programmes for Organisations

A **coalition-based training initiative** was proposed to support:

- Trauma-informed practice.
- Legal awareness.
- Language accessibility.
- Inclusive programming and commissioning.

“Training should be centralised through a trusted source, not scattered across disconnected organisations.”

Organisations like Britten Pears Arts, PRS Foundation, Help Musicians, and the Musicians’ Union were identified as potential partners.

C. Sector-Wide Code of Conduct

A **code of conduct** was proposed to guide ethical engagement with displaced artists, including:

- Anti-tokenism principles.
- Fair pay and representation.
- Co-authorship in programming and pedagogy.

This would be developed collaboratively and adopted by arts organisations, funders, and venues.

D. Peer Mentoring and Out-Scaling

Mentoring was framed as a **community-based, reciprocal practice**:

“Let’s think less about upscaling and more about out-scaling.”

“Each one teach one: go back to community knowledge and indigenous knowledge.”

Mentors would be paid, and mentoring would be integrated into funding models and organisational practice.

E. Decentralised Refugee Week Programming

Instead of concentrating events in one week, participants proposed **year-round programming**:

“What about starting small activities in December that build toward Refugee Week?”

This would allow for deeper engagement, longer-term visibility, and more equitable commissioning.

Strategic Reflections on Change

Participants explored how **micro and macro change** can be achieved through:

- Asset-based community development.
- Coalition building.

- Strategic use of existing resources.
- Reframing narratives of excellence.

“Diversifying music education and the classical canon isn’t separate from supporting displaced artists; it’s the same work.”

There was also discussion of **slow change**, **geological time**, and the need to hold paradox and contradiction.

Final Reflections and Next Steps

The event concluded with reflections on:

- Holding **paradox** and contradiction in collective work.
- Building **coalitions** around shared values and practical needs.

“Even if nothing else happens, you leave here with those pictures in your heads... and that will change your thinking.”

Participants expressed interest in:

- **Reconvening** regionally or online.
- Hosting **showcases** and exhibitions.
- Developing ideas with **support** from institutions like Britten Pears Arts.

There was also discussion of:

- Creating a **showcase** at Britten Pears Arts and other music venues.
- Organising **regional meetings** in Liverpool, Exeter, and other cities.
- **Connecting with museums** like Pitt Rivers for decolonial storytelling projects.

