



COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

DISSEMINATION LEVEL	PUBLIC (PU)
WORK PACKAGE	WP3 COMMUNITY OPERA CO-CREATION
DELIVERABLE NUMBER	D3.1
VERSION	V4.0
SUBMISSION DATE	23/12/2020
DUE DATE	31/12/2020



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Control sheet

Version history			
Version	Date	Modified by	Summary of changes
1.0	25 October 2020	PL	Draft of Sections 2
1.1	27 November 2020	JB	Additions to section 2
1.5	30 November 2020	PL & SS	Draft of Section 5
1.6	2 December 2020	FM	Revision and additions to document
1.7	6 December 2020	JB	Draft of Section 4
1.8	11 December 2020	IC & EG	Draft of Section 3
2.0	14 December 2020	FM	Revision and additions to document
2.1	17 December 2020	JB & SH	Revision of section 4
2.2	18 December 2020	IC & EG	Revision of section 3
3.1	19 December 2020	FM	Summary, conclusion and editing
4.0	23 December 2020	FM	Final report for submission

Peer review		
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Reviewer 1	Mikel Zorrilla	20 December 2020
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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report concerns the TRACTION project's approach to community dialogue during its first year (2020). TRACTION researches how new digital technology can facilitate opera co-creation with communities at risk of social exclusion and involves community opera trials in Spain (LICEU), Ireland (INO) and Portugal (SAMP). Identifying individuals and community organisations willing to participate in these trials was a vital first stage of the process. By engaging in community dialogue, LICEU, INO and SAMP sought to build confidence and common purpose prior to beginning co-creation activities, understanding that co-creation is a form of community dialogue by other means.

[Part Two](#) sets out the thinking that informs TRACTION's approach to community dialogue, explaining the complex, diverse and overlapping communities that make up the project. It then outlines the importance of dialogue to the community opera trials, comparing the process to laying the foundations of a bridge, where much invisible work has to be done before a stable roadway can be laid. It touches briefly on the problems caused by the Covid 19 pandemic to this process, and ends with a simplified timeline of community dialogue activities in the three trials.

Parts [Three](#), [Four](#) and [Five](#) describe how each of the community opera trials has approached the communities identified as potentially interested in participating.

- In Spain, the trial focuses on the diverse inner-city neighbourhood of Raval (Barcelona), where meetings and informal contacts have been held with a range of local NGOs and persons with disabilities, vulnerable women and students, among others.
- In Ireland, the trial is working with Irish speaking communities of the far west of the country, young people in the rural centre, and adults in the capital, but because of the travel restrictions, most of the contact work has had to take place remotely;
- In Portugal, community dialogue has involved inmates at Leiria Youth Prison, the wider community of the institution including guards and management, and relatives, friends and former inmates, as well as the music school that leads the project.

Each section follows the same structure, first describing the communities, then the dialogue activities undertaken in 2020, and concluding with the successes, challenges and lessons learned. Any resulting changes to current plans are noted at the end.

All this work has been undertaken in the context of a global pandemic and health protection measures that have had the worst effects on those with least resources (including many of those with whom TRACTION has been working) and presents an existential crisis for many performing arts institutions and individual artists.

The final section of the report summarises these effects and outlines how each trial has adapted its plans to ensure no loss of momentum in response. The report concludes by outlining how the learning about community dialogue arising from the work of the trials will be analysed and reported by TRACTION.



2 TRACTION AND COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

2.1 TRACTION

Opera uses all the visual and performing arts to create extraordinary experiences of passion, ideas and sensibility. It is rightly recognized as a great achievement of European culture and yet a form that has inspired social and artistic change is now often seen as the staid preserve of elites. [TRACTION](#) is a three-year research project that aims to reveal opera as a path for social and cultural inclusion, and a factor in positive social change. It does not aim to make opera palatable to those who don't attend but find new ways in which marginalized groups (people living in poverty, migrants, young offenders, people with disabilities and others) can co-create opera performances with professional artists to tell stories that matter to them, and reconnect the form with its potential for social change.

By combining best practice in participatory art with digital technology's innovations of language, form and process, TRACTION explores new approaches to co-creation, and innovate in three fields:

- Opera creation and production;
- Immersive and interactive digital media; and
- Social integration and community development.

Experimental trials in inner-city Barcelona ([LICEU](#)), a youth prison in Portugal ([SAMP](#)) and three rural and peripheral communities in Ireland ([INO](#)) are testing new ideas in partnership with the other members of the TRACTION consortium: [Vicomtech](#), [CWI](#), [Virtual Reality Ireland](#), [Dublin City University](#), [Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona](#) and [François Matarasso](#). TRACTION is funded by the European Commission through the [Horizon 2020](#) programme.

2.2 The Consortium as the first dialogue community

A recently-founded national opera producer in Ireland with a focus on accessibility and all things digital; a historic opera house in Barcelona with a global tradition; and a small school of art in a Portuguese village—three institutions working to involve their communities in an ambitious co-created opera. So, the three community opera trials bring at least six communities into dialogue, within their locales and with each other.

But that's not all. A virtual reality company, and two technology research institutes—three communities of engineers, technicians and researchers immersed in 360° video experiments, coding and algorithms are also part of the project. Then are two universities—one concerned to research the technological innovations generated, the other managing methodologies, intellectual property rights, and evaluating the impact of the project. These eleven communities are joined by yet one more person, an individual who can provide a comparative analysis due to their vast experience in co-creation and seeking to stitch together these communities that make up the TRACTION Consortium.

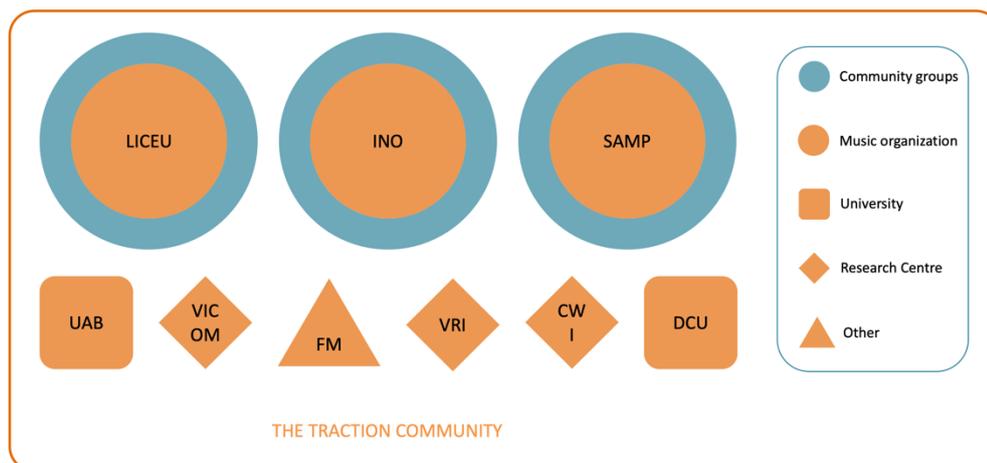


Fig.1 Schematic representation of the TRACTION community

Around the consortium is the European Union that funds the project, and other communities linked by individuals in the local advisory teams (LAT) and International core advisory team (ICAT). Other public bodies, NGOs and enterprises are stakeholders in each of the community opera trials. While their contact with the project may be limited, they all leave their mark and the experience also affects their future operations and actions. TRACTION reaches much further than the three communities in Portugal, Spain and Ireland, and this wide network of communities must always be kept in mind.

TRACTION works continually to nurture dialogue between every member of the consortium, because each has a valuable contribution to make and a right to be heard. Creating a meeting point between our various universes and the different languages we speak is an intellectual training in itself, and a starting point for developing concepts, methods and technologies that can span TRACTION's unique range of concerns. Our different cultures (geographic, linguistic, socio-cultural, economic and even legal), our varying interests (academic, artistic, social, technological) and our difficulties in communication are important, but much less so that the barriers we face when talking to members of local communities that we identify as being 'in need' of our project.

2.3 The importance of community dialogue within TRACTION

2.3.1 Community

So TRACTION is a coalition of communities, some working closely together, others unaware of each other's existence. They include professional communities of artists or researchers; communities defined by place, like the islanders of Inis Meáin with whom INO are working; and communities created by social realities such as citizenship, disability, age, gender, imprisonment, tastes or interests. These communities overlap: it is possible to be a musician, a resident of Raval, a parent and have a disability.

Human beings are social beings, as the pandemic has painfully reminded us, and community is vital to their well-being. But it can also define their rights, as when age or citizenship affect



the services to which a person may be entitled. For the sociologist, John Field, community – understood as a form of social capital – is central to their life chances:

People’s ability to access resources through their social capital can make a considerable difference to their life chances.¹

From a capabilities perspective, the philosopher, Martha Nussbaum also identifies community – for which she uses the term ‘Affiliation’ – as essential to human flourishing:

*(A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.)
(B) Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.²*

Nonetheless, vital as they are, it is also necessary to acknowledge that communities are not simply benign.³ In identifying itself, a community inescapably identifies outsiders, who may therefore be denied services and rights enjoyed by members. Communities create boundaries. Social exclusion, among other things, is an experience of not-belonging.

These complex issues are at the heart of TRACTION, which recognises that millions of people feel, and are in reality, excluded from experiencing opera, whether as an audience member or a creator. That is problematic for those who are excluded, especially when it combines with other disadvantages or discriminations to become social exclusion. But it is no less a problem for opera creators, who find themselves performing for a narrow section of society and, despite their current protection by public funding, at risk of being marginalised in European cultural life.

2.3.2 Dialogue

The gulf between opera houses and large parts of the population whose taxes support them could be bridged by dialogue. But what kind of dialogue? Since the emergence of modern cultural policy alongside the post-war welfare state, there has often been little more than a monologue by cultural institutions using practices of seduction or, more prosaically, audience development and marketing. This policy of cultural democratisation seeks to persuade people to want an artistic heritage that rarely considers its own need to change. It is a believer’s vision, so sure of their faith that they can only imagine it being rejected by those who have not yet understood its value.

This, evidently, is not dialogue, which helps explain why the social profile of opera audiences has changed so little. In advocating co-creation, TRACTION situates itself within the alternative theory of cultural democracy, in which everyone has a legitimate voice in the shaping of artistic work and a society’s culture. Co-creation—by which we mean the creation of new operas by professional and non-professional artists working together—is dialogue, but dialogue rooted in an equal right to speak and extended far beyond words into the whole range



of expression available in the performing arts. That has the potential to do two things of real importance in social and cultural policy:

- To show people who feel disrespected, devalued and perhaps even humiliated (to use Nussbaum's terms) by the world of opera, and the social elite of which it is both symbol and embodiment, that their values and humanity are have equal validity in a democratic society;
- To co-create new artistic work that neither the professional artists nor the community (acting as non-professional artists) could have made separately, bringing the voice of marginalised and excluded people onto the most prestigious stages, and ensuring that all values and humanity are visible in a democratic space.

This is not as ambitious as it might seem. Some opera companies have already achieved work of this kind, though most, such as [Streetwise Opera](#), who work with people experiencing homelessness, are small and fragile. [Birmingham Opera Company](#) is a notable exception, staging full scale community operas, although it does not create new work.⁴ Across Europe, there is a now growing interest in opera co-creation, as exemplified by [Silent City](#), produced as part of Matera European Capital of Culture 2019.

Nor is it as difficult as it might seem. Opera is the art of dialogue *par excellence* – symbolically in the arias, duets, choruses through which it tells its stories, and practically in the continual negotiation between text and music, and between the myriad of artists and disciplines that must collaborate to achieve anything. More prosaically still, an opera house is a territory in which finance, politics and class compete with and for art. There are 300 people who work at the Gran Teatre del Liceu. Their productions are the result of that unending dialogue within the building and with external stakeholders. TRACTION's challenges to make non-professional artists from Raval and Barcelona part of that conversation, fully confident that the result will be innovative and unique.

In doing that, the people involved will also create community. Each of the TRACTION opera trials unites in dialogue people from different communities and with diverse identities. Many may feel at the outset that they have little in common with the others. But in the months of workshops and rehearsals, as they develop their skills and knowledge, sharing ideas in co-creation and seeing something new emerge from their collaboration, and above all as they earn a sense of mutual achievement through the performances, a group of disparate strangers will become a community. Shared desires, experiences and memories will connect them in unexpectedly powerful ways, and leave them with resources of social capital and stronger capabilities that will support social inclusion. Co-creation is itself a form of community dialogue.

2.3.3 Building a basis for co-creation: TRACTION community dialogue activities in 2020

But none of this can happen without people getting to know each other, and laying the foundations of mutual respect, interest and trust. There are huge imbalances in power between an opera house and people at risk of social exclusion. So, the three TRACTION trials set aside most of year one to activities which would lay the ground for the co-creation process itself, as the Description of Activities states:



Community dialogue: in this stage the community and the opera professionals will get to know each other, explain their ideas and their needs, discuss the best way of participating to the trial. During this stage the participants will agree on how the community can transform opera and how opera can help fostering inclusiveness and integration of the community into the social fabric. During this stage, the technical partners will gather requirements for the toolset. During the following phases, when partial releases of the toolset are ready, the community dialogue will persist through the TRACTION system. (DoA Part B, p. 17)

This process could be compared to building a bridge. A great deal of work will happen, and tonnes of concrete laid out of sight below water, before the roadway itself can be built. But the second cannot be done unless the first solid. People with experience of community dialogue will be familiar with its seeming unproductivity and unpredictable pace: confidence can be withheld for a long time until, from one day to the next, it is given. It requires time and patience: nothing is less likely to build trust than pushing people to make commitments before they are ready. On the contrary, being genuinely willing to put their needs and concerns before yours is much more effective in winning people's trust. Consequently, it was understood that only limited co-creation work would take place in 2020, because there was so much relationship building, planning and negotiation to do first.

However, the sanitary regulations imposed to control the spread of the Covid 19 pandemic have presented huge obstacles to the planned community dialogue activities. All three countries where the trials are happening entered strict lockdown in March, with restrictions in Spain and Ireland only partly relaxed in the summer. The return of the illness with the autumn saw a reintroduction of lockdown in Ireland, and new restrictions in Portugal and Spain. The continual changing of regulations has made it impossible to plan effectively. The Liceu theatre re-opened in September, was closed for most of November and December and is now open once again: each time, the conditions to be observed are different. INO made good progress with building community relationships during the more relaxed conditions of the summer and organised a festival with the community of Inis Meáin at the start of October: a few days before, with all the plans in place, lockdown conditions were reimposed and it was impossible to travel to the island.

The following sections of the report describe the community dialogue activities in detail, while the conclusion assesses where the trials are at and outlines the action taken to ensure that they will achieve their goals even if the pandemic conditions endure, which we are now obliged to assume. As the activities described in each chapter are rather detailed the following page offers a simplified timeline of the community dialogue activities by the three trials during 2020.



2.3.4 Community dialogue activities timeline

2020	LICEU (Spain)	INO (Ireland)	SAMP (Portugal)
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership meeting Interviews by librettist with local people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership meeting
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suspension of plans due to lockdown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suspension of plans due to lockdown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparation
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue with 3 community partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue with Justice Ministry & prison
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remote dialogue with NGOs and community groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning Establishment of local advisors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue with prison guards and managers
June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue with clothing NGOs, schools and college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of local advisory team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of local advisors
July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of local advisory team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussions with community partners and groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prison workshops
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of local advisory team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue with artistic team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue with prison staff and guards Dialogue with professional artistic team
September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue and introductory sessions with Sinia Centre and Escola Massana 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visit to Inis Meáin Dialogue with communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prison workshops Dialogue with families
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue with Institut Miquel Tarradel and community groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talks with community partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue w. families
November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue with Institut Miquel Tarradel and community groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VR Focus Group Redesign community programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prison workshops Dialogue w. families
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> User tests with Sinia and Escola Massana 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning and community dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> User tests in prison

Table 1: Simplified timeline of community dialogue activities by TRACTION Trials in 2020

Note: The grey areas indicate periods of lockdown because of pandemic health protection measures. Throughout the year, from March 2020, there have been different and fluctuating regulations in the three countries: for example, even outside periods of lockdown, people have been unable to travel outside their own county for much of the year, preventing face-to-face meetings between INO and the three communities in the trial.





3 COMMUNITY DIALOGUE IN THE LICEU OPERA TRIAL (SPAIN)

3.1 The communities of Raval and the Liceu Opera House

The opera co-creation project in Barcelona is developed around two large communities: the social community of the Raval neighbourhood and the artistic community of the Gran Teatre del Liceu. The values and methodologies of co-creation affect and must be worked on in both groups. In the first year of TRACTION development, the priority has been listening and building relationships with community organisations to plan co-creation work that will contribute to the opera production. Progress has conditioned both by the production process, and by difficult conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1.1 Raval – a social community

The Raval neighbourhood of Barcelona is located in the city centre, and houses a large number of cultural institutions. It has a high population density (433 people/ha) and many elderly people: 39.5% of the inhabitants are aged 75 years or over. In a city whose ethnic diversity has greatly increased in the past 25 years, Raval is notable for being home to a large number of communities, including many of migrant origin (principally from Pakistan, Philippines, Bangladesh). This contributes to it having the highest density of organized entities per inhabitant in Europe, but it is a very vulnerable neighbourhood which is being hit very hard by the COVID pandemic

The work with the community of Raval focuses on two areas of co-creation: the production of a visual identity for the marketing of the Opera, and the creation of costumes for the production. They are part of a wider community engagement that has included facilitating meetings between the librettist and local people in the process of creating the opera text, and working with local music schools and choirs to develop the singers and musicians who will participate in the performance.

Two communities are involved in the creation of the image (poster, programme etc.) of the community opera, alongside an artist facilitator:

- [LA MASSANA Art and Design Centre](#): a group of nine female students aged about 20- and a lecturer;
- [SINIA Occupational Centre](#): four adult women and men with disabilities, an educator and head of the art workshop

As regards collaboration in the co-creation of the costumes, discussions have been held with several groups who are interested in participating, but a decision is waiting until the design concept has been developed by the creative team. The groups are:

- [DONA KOLORS](#): a women's clothing firm working with women in a situation of social exclusion. It is an initiative of the entity El Lloc de la Dona (Oblatas Barcelona), a care centre for women involved in prostitution, where they are offered psychosocial,



training and work support. Currently in the sewing workshop there are 9 women between 19 and 34 years old; six Nigerian, two Latin American and one Romanian accompanied by a textile designer and the management team.

- [TOP MANTA](#): Top Manta is the clothing brand created by the collective of traders of Barcelona. They have a store in the Raval neighbourhood and a screen-printing and clothing workshop. The people in this group are principally male irregular migrants of African origin.
- [ESTEL TAPIA](#) is a training NGO for adults experiencing social exclusion due to marginalization and disability. They have a tailoring workshop in Raval with approximately 10 women, supported by design and management professionals for the development of the Ecotó clothing and objects brand.
- [SERVEI SOLIDARI](#) is a creative project of a foundation that works to promote autonomy and full citizenship for young people and adults at risk of social exclusion. They develop a sewing project that brings together women with knowledge in clothing, but they do not have a space or schedule as a group at this time.
- [LA MASSANA](#): there may also be a role in this project for textile design students. It is especially interesting that they also research new sustainable textile materials.

The other key NGO with which we have been working is [Fundació Tot Raval](#), which connects around 50 social entities, educational centres, cultural institutions, business associations and people linked to Raval and works to improve social cohesion, coexistence and quality of life. The Liceu and Tot Raval has a historical relationship with the common will to offer resources, possibilities, cultural openings to the Raval neighbourhood.

3.1.2 Gran Teatre del Liceu – an artistic community

The Gran Teatre del Liceu is an institution in Catalonia with more than 170 years of history, with an important consciousness, and the fruit of a collective work. The Liceu is not limited to its artistic ambition but conscious that without the citizens, it is nothing. It is a facility that represents a cultural heritage with a sense of responsibility towards society. The Liceu Social Programme was created in response to the theatre's mission in the Foundation's statutes and which is based on '... promoting and executing all those initiatives that revert to the promotion and empowerment of culture and more specifically, of the operatic ...'. It also responds to the principles of the Liceu 2014-17 Strategic and Viability Plan.

For many years, the Liceu has taken into account social diversity, and made the theatre's accessibility a priority aspect. Since 1999, it has ensured accessibility in the main auditorium, and added subtitles in several languages, audio description service, reserved spaces for people in wheelchair, easy-to-read summaries, etc. In 2013 it was decided to order the aspects related to the social sensitivity of the Liceu. Many things were done with vulnerable people, but that year they were reviewed and structured. Since then, a coherent line has been followed where accessibility, inclusion, excellence and offering opportunities to all people are central to the work. Services, advantages and activities are implemented in the social programme called [Liceu Apropa](#).



This stable team is joined by other artists for the community opera, including a specialist in community artistic creation and mediation, a playwright, a composer, a stage director, a musical director, a set designer, a costume designer, choreographer, light designer, artistic video and various assistants. They bring diverse personal and professional backgrounds and varied work methodologies and views on art in co-creation and community participation. Reaching agreements with their collective intelligence is one of the key challenges of the project.

Likewise, the specialized team of the Liceu is part of the co-creation between the different departments (example: wardrobe, communication, accessibility, etc.), with professional and non-professional artists. The theatre itself supports this process, making known its work, its methodology and its antecedents, giving an opportunity of openness, of mutual knowledge, so that the co-creation is as complete as possible.

3.1.3 Co-creation around the accessibility of community opera.

As already explained, the Liceu has developed an in-depth work to make the programming for each season accessible to persons with disabilities. This includes physical access provisions, surtitles in Catalan, Spanish and English, magnetic induction loop in parts of the building, access materials (e.g. plot summaries and guides with photographs and pictograms of access, support for persons with visual impairments and so on. Pricing policies are another important part of this, with deep discounts for disabled patrons and their companions, while 4,000 tickets are reserved for social organisations at a fixed rate of €3. There are also lectures and music talks adapted to the needs of different audiences, relaxed concerts for persons with autism or attention difficulties, and a rest area available to anyone who needs it.

TRACTION goes one step further by establishing a collaboration on the development of accessibility tools for community opera, with a group of students from a neighbourhood institute and organizations for persons with disabilities. In Raval there are two secondary schools: IES Miquel Tarradell (with a Social Action module) and IES Milà i Fontanals (with Arts Baccalaureate studies). The Liceu has a good relationship with both and has worked together on educational projects in the past. As part of the community dialogue, for Opera Prima, we have been exploring a project to develop new access resources and activities with and for persons with learning disabilities.

3.2 Community dialogue activities

3.2.1 Preparatory community dialogue activities for Opera Prima Raval

Before turning to the activities carried out in 2020 to involve community groups, it should be remembered that the co-creation project is an interrelated ecosystem of activities and groups, where some are the consequence of others. It is also important to bear in mind that the Barcelona project is a newly created opera. For the development of the opera's visual identity, the opera *libretto* was a necessary source of inspiration and the guidance of the Liceu Department of Communication. For the development of costumes, a first proposal is required by the designer in the creative team. Likewise, the creative project needs the opera



libretto and the music, since it includes the scenic approach as a whole (set design, costumes, lights, creative video, choreography). The TRACTION co-creation processes relate to the Opera Prima project, so they have also been shaped by continuing dialogue with other partners, including the District of Ciutat Vella, [Fundación Tot Raval](#), four Raval music schools, 11 amateur choirs in the neighbourhood and cultural and socio-cultural facilities such as CCCB, Macba, Filmoteca, Museu Marítim, libraries, *casal de barri*, etc. The part that any of these bodies will play in the community opera process remains to be seen as it develops.

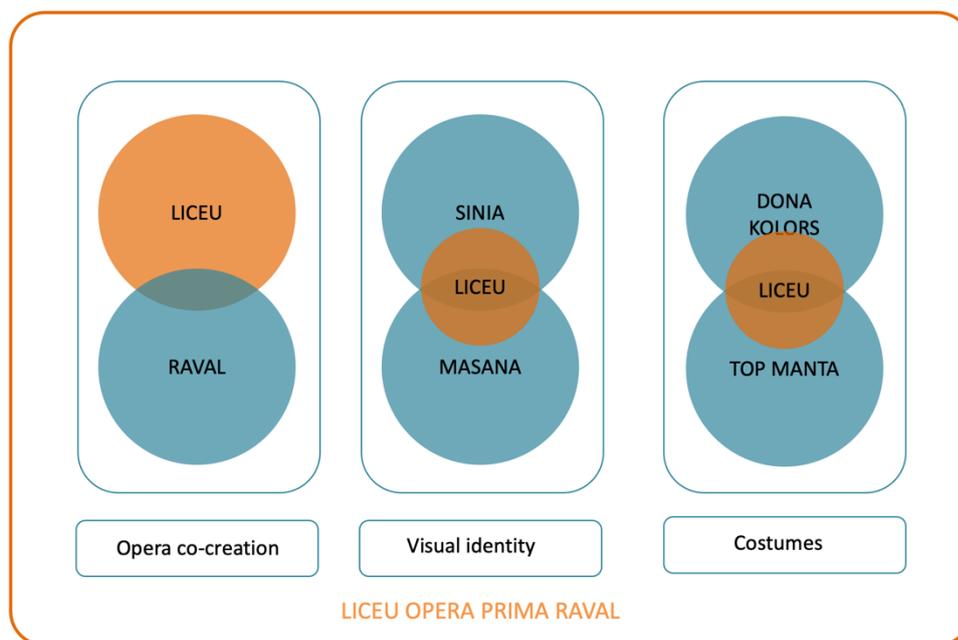


Fig.2 Schematic representation of the Liceu-Raval community and the TRACTION Projects

3.2.2 Co-creation of the image of the community opera

Art and Design Centre 'La Massana' January-July

Both the person in charge of the Social Programme of the Liceu 'Liceu Apropa' and the person in charge of extension relations of 'La Massana' are part of the Board of the Tot Raval Foundation, so there was already prior knowledge and contact. The community opera project was presented with the Opera Prima coordination team and decisions were made about the best groups to involve in this collaboration, taking into account availability and schedules, relation to content and training courses, relevance of to work practices. It is expected that there could be two levels of collaboration with the La Massana school involving students from training cycles on

- Design for image creation
- Design of objects and textiles for the creation of costumes

An internal process began in La Massana in which information about the opera project was provided to the teachers to test motivation, interests and sustainability of the approach. Two referents from the School and the Director of Communication of the Liceu joined the



project discussion group. The school and theatre calendars were shared so that the design of the image is viable and compatible with the times of both institutions and the people involved. The theatre shared its design principles so that beyond the specificities of this opera it is coherent with the image of the theatre as a whole.

Sinia Occupational Centre January-July

In the same way, there were already links between the Liceu and Sinia, which usually attends theatre performances through the Apropa Cultura programme. The Opera Prima team decided to involve a specific group of persons with disabilities in one of the creative processes of opera. Sinia has a visual arts project, a stable group of creatives and a professional who accompanies them. It seemed to the team that the possibility of putting this group in contact with design students could be positive for both institutions and in this way conversations with Sinia began, open to listening to their feedback and making the necessary adaptations and modifications.

Activation of the co-creation between La Massana and CO Sinia September-December

La Massana made a communication about the project and interested students held a meeting with the contact person. Subsequently, a meeting was held between potentially interested parties with the person in charge of 'Liceu Apropa' and the coordinator of the community opera project to provide more specific information or resolve doubts. Thus, the definitive group of students was created.

Work at Sinia started from a natural group of its creatives, but a smaller group had to be chosen for this project due to sanitary conditions. In parallel, Liceu contacted [Curro Claret](#), who has suitable skills and experience to support the project. He will accompany the group formed by the Massana students and the Sinia creatives for the duration of the project.

The groups have started the joint work process online due to Covid restrictions. Each of the groups has made a video introducing the participants; the schedule for work has been agreed and currently they are holding sessions of mutual knowledge and brainstorming on the methodology to be used both from the point of view of co-creation and design as well as the online format. The opera script and the 'Branding Creation Guide' prepared by the Liceu Communication Department have been shared with them.

In the process of creating the image of the opera, the Escola Massana students and the Sinia creatives used the libretto by the playwright Victoria Szpunberg as a source of inspiration. A virtual meeting with the author and the groups led to a rich dialogue in which she explained her creative process and the students and creatives asked about aspects that will later be a source of inspiration in the co-creation of the image. After this meeting, it was agreed to arrange a further meeting with the playwright – in person, if possible – as well as with other professional artists of the project.

3.2.3 Co-creation of the costumes for the community opera

The work of Liceu on Opera Prima and TRACTION builds on foundations of co-operation between the theatre and many institutions and NGOs in the neighbourhood, to exchange desires, concerns and limitations, build trust, respect each participant's needs and ways of



working, to prepare the ground for specifying a viable proposal rooted in shared dialogue. The Liceu knew Lloc de la Dona and Dona Kolors because they have attended functions at the Liceu. The community opera team and other professionals linked to the Liceu attended the Christmas and summer textile market that they organize, being an opportunity to see each other, chat informally and get to know each other.

In the process of writing the libretto (February-March 2020), the playwright interviewed four former prostitutes who lived in the neighbourhood and also attended a rehearsal by the choir 'Dona Gospel'. In July 2020, the sewing projects in the Raval neighbourhood were visited by the opera coordination team, with the costume designer and her assistant. This enabled people to get to know each other, and for the professionals to see the work at first-hand and understand the different skills, technical resources and usual timetables. Several conclusions were drawn from these meetings:

- A choice will have to be made of which groups to work with, since it will not be possible to involve everyone;
- Top Manta is interesting for its screen-printing skills and facilities;
- Dona Kolors has extensive experience in making clothes;
- Estel Tapia is less skilled and sophisticated in sewing clothes than the other projects;
- Crea Dones is in a fragile situation at the moment with difficulties regarding time and space to work, so this is probably not the right time to work with this NGO;
- Escola Massana has potential for research, experimentation and for involving students with other communities in the neighbourhood.

At present, the costume designer is waiting for the musical composition of the opera to be complete to finish the creative proposal and decide which groups to work with.

3.3 Results of community dialogue activities

3.3.1 Successes

The process of community dialogue in the Barcelona community opera trial has been rewarding for everyone involved – the artistic community of the Liceu Opera, the NGOs in the Raval neighbourhood, and the vulnerable people they support. It has been a period of mutual discovery, listening, and learning, connecting people from different cultures and social backgrounds. In Raval, the physical distance between a soprano appearing before an audience of thousands and a former sex worker in a clothing workshop might be only a few hundred metres, but in other respects they are worlds apart – much more so than in the community opera trials in Ireland and Portugal. It takes time to build confidence across such a gap, and there is always a risk of misunderstanding and causing unintentional hurt. That would not be simple at the best of times, but in the context of lockdown with communications frequently limited to the phone, email or video calls the difficulties increased greatly.

In that context we are satisfied with the progress that has been made, even if it is not as far as had been planned. In particular we have met enthusiasm at the idea of collaborating with



the Liceu and many potential participants are excited at being able to be involved in a professional project of such high ambition. People are also happy at the idea of working with other organisations in Raval, (for example Sinia and Massana), and not only in the binary relationship between them and the opera house. They are seeing the potential to develop mutual knowledge that goes beyond the process of artistic creation and may offer roots for mutual support and future collaboration.

The artists with disabilities who work at Sinia have spent 10 months in very strict lockdown and are understandably excited at the prospect of working with new people, and exploring new technology. The face-to-face (actually mask-to-mask) user trials conducted by Vi-comtech in December 2020 were an important moment for everyone, and as much a part of the community dialogue process as a necessity of the technological development. According to one person involved, 'The possibility of carrying out this project has given them hope, enthusiasm and desire to cope with the pandemic. This statement seems presumptuous, but the reality is like that'.

3.3.2 Challenges

There have been two principal challenges in terms of community dialogue for the LICEU community opera trial in 2020, one anticipated, the other not, but much more serious.

The first challenge is the complexity of working with the artistic community of the Opera house, which has long established procedures and habits governing the creation of any production. It is like a well-oiled machine: when the component parts are all in sync it is capable of producing extraordinary achievements that could not be secured in any other way. But the introduction of co-creation processes with non-professional artist from the community presents people with practical and psychological challenges because of the need to change existing ways of working. Established processes, methods and timings are all destabilised when people unfamiliar with them are brought into the creative work. The commitment to take on a community opera is also a commitment to accept and rise to that challenge, knowing that the artists and technicians of the Opera house can also learn from the non-professionals they invited to their work. Arguably, one of test of Opera Prima will be in the extent to which the changes in working practices that it requires are taken up and become embedded in the theatre's permanent approach to its work.

All this involves an immense exercise of community dialogue, within the theatre and between the theatre staff and the community. It was never anticipated that bringing these cultures together would be easy, but it is essential if the LICEU is to live up to its ambition to be a fully part of the community where it is located. This process, already challenging, has been severely constrained by the second and an anticipated challenge experience by the opera trial in 2020: the severe effect of the pandemic and its associated health restrictions on the city of Barcelona, which spent many weeks in lockdown and with the theatre closed.

The effect of the lockdown on the community of Raval has been especially hard because of the precarity of many people's lives. Closure of shops and businesses, the overnight disappearance of the tourism industry, insanitary living conditions and difficulty in accessing public services have affected the vulnerable people of the neighbourhood even more severely



than the population of Barcelona as a whole. This has imposed practical difficulties in organising meetings, and sometimes evening contacting people. But there is also an important human dimension. It was already challenging to involve people at risk of social exclusion in an opera when they face many and varied pressures in their lives. To do so in the context when those pressures have multiplied has been especially difficult. When someone has been affected by illness, or maybe grieving the loss of the relative, and may be without work or means of support, and invitation to take part in an unpaid co-creation opportunity is unlikely to seem very attractive. And yet these are the reality is that the TRACTION project set out to address, even if it did not anticipate the extent to which they would be exacerbated by the pandemic. The team continues its work, adjusting to the new conditions as necessary, believing that the connections it is trying to make or even more important today.

3.3.3 Lessons learned

The most important lesson learned during 2020 is the imperative need for flexibility, so that the project can respond to the rapidly changing needs of people at risk and social exclusion. The starting point must be the needs and obligations of the participants and the NGOs who support them so that the creative work is never a burden but, on the contrary, has the potential, if only by offering an alternative, to relieve some of the difficulties for a time. For an opera house where flexibility does not always come naturally, this has been a challenging lesson both internally and in its relationship with the community.

3.4 Plans for 2021

3.4.1 Energizing actions for the community

Liceu would like to promote, through visits, workshops and activities, close contact between professional and non-professional artists from the Raval neighbourhood and the Opera house and its staff to foster mutual knowledge and create positive synergies of human rapprochement. Despite the pandemic restrictions, the Liceu has prepared a plan with proposals for opening the doors of the institution and sharing its human potential of the people involved in the Opera Prima project; they include:

- Visit to the tailoring and characterization services with two department heads
- Workshop on the History of Opera by a specialist from the Liceu
- Backstage visits with some kind of musical intervention
- Workshop on how a symphony orchestra works in an opera theatre with the participation of the musical director of the Liceu or with musicians from the Liceu Orchestra
- Workshops on composing for opera with Arnau Tordera (the composer)
- Training in theatrical costume design by the professional costume artist
- Attendance at a rehearsal of the season's stable programming,
- An exhibition of the co-creation Sinia and Massana in the design of the image of the opera with presentation made by the co-creators and their managers

Liceu has asked Fundació Tot Raval to help in this process of opening and organizing activities but also to the Escola de Músics School. One potential idea is to take advantage of the



festivities and activities that are usually organized in the neighbourhood as a platform for dissemination and for establishing contacts. They include

- Sant Jordi Festival (April)
- The Main festival of the neighbourhood (July).
- Raval's Festival (November),

The pandemic reality has made us reflect on the possibility of carrying out these activities both in person and in virtual format. Obviously the Liceu's preference is to do this face-to-face, but the team is making plans to work remotely if necessary.



4 COMMUNITY DIALOGUE IN THE INO OPERA TRIAL (IRELAND)

4.1 The three communities and the INO opera trial

Irish National Opera (INO), being a relatively new company, was in the early stages of building an outreach programme from scratch when TRACTION began in January 2020. Consequently, it had no pre-existing participatory community with an established relationship to build the trial on and so saw TRACTION as an opportunity to engage with communities that previously had no relationship with INO, or indeed opera as a whole.

Core to the project vision was to build a piece that drew on a diversity of participants from across Ireland. In order to achieve this, INO approached three organisations with strong ties to specific geographic communities to work in partnership and develop activity relevant to the people concerned. These three organisations (termed 'community partners') and their respective community groups are:

- [The Civic Theatre](#) – Residents of Tallaght (Dublin periphery)
- [Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath](#) – Secondary school students in the midlands
- [Conradh na Gaeilge](#) – Residents of Inis Meáin (one of the Aran Islands)

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic hit just as we were beginning the process of community dialogue, which presented significant challenges for engaging our chosen communities in the project.

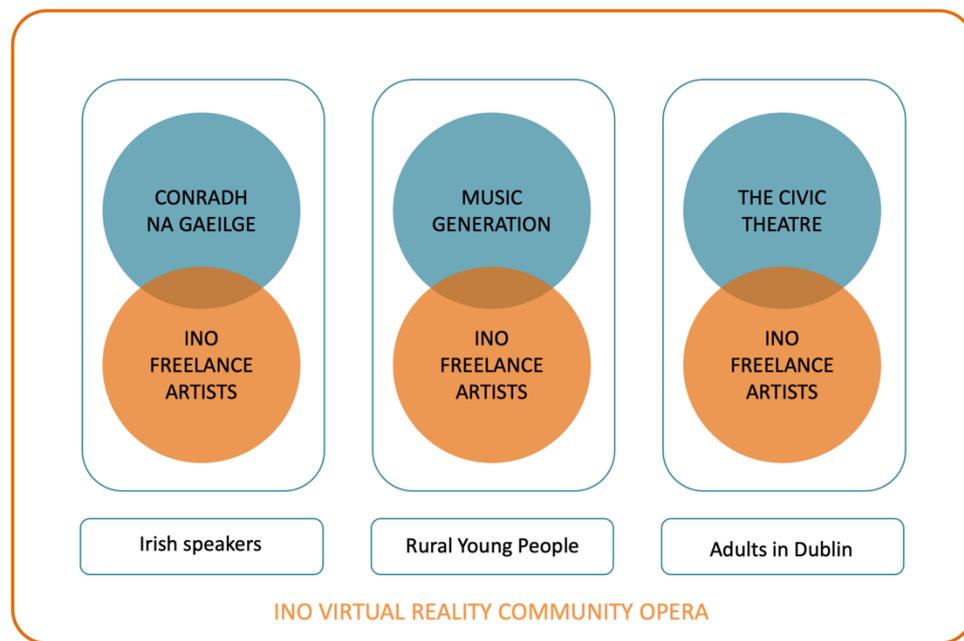


Fig.3 Schematic representation of the INO community opera project



4.2 Community dialogue activities

INO planned for small scale outreach activity to take place in all three communities in Autumn of 2020 with two aims:

- To gain an understanding of our community participants, their needs, situation and interests. and explore possible connections that might contribute develop the artistic arc of the project and join the three community projects in a meaningful way; and
- To gain an understanding of how digital tools can be used effectively in co-creation for creating stimulus content for a VR community opera.

We assigned a core element of opera creation to each community partner to focus research in year one. These decisions were based on current activity or interests of each community partner, highlighted through dialogue we had with each organisation. The proposed and actual activity is outlined below.

4.2.1 Project 1 – The Civic

INO planned to run a series of weekly VR art classes in the Civic Theatre for local residents to work with VR artists and a facilitator. The group would listen to an extract from an opera and build a suitable costume, prop or space inspired by that aria through [Tilt Brush](#), [Quill](#) or another suitable VR design tool. As a method to engage participants beyond the Civic's usual reach, it was planned that the Civic would recruit a community facilitator to gather a group of community advocates to take part, so that they could spread the word within their own communities. Based on this, we would then run standalone workshops with community groups in a variety of contexts across Tallaght.

4.2.2 Project 2 – Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath

A composer would work with a group of secondary school music students to produce a soundscape based on sounds recorded by the students during their day to day lives. Students would mix the soundscape for headphones to create the effect of 360 ambisonic recordings. Over the course of four to six week, students would be taught the basics of sound manipulation in electroacoustic composition and mixing.

4.2.3 Project 3 – Conradh na Gaeilge

INO would run a three day mini-festival on the island with a range of activities demanding different levels of engagement, including a two-day group writing workshop with the writer Myra Zepf, a recital featuring singers from INO's ABL Aviation Opera Studio, and play sessions on Oculus Quests curated by Virtual Reality Ireland. Several months prior, residents were posted Oculus Go headsets with curated content for participants to play with.

4.2.4 Activities run

Unfortunately, due to the ever-changing issues surrounding Covid-19, our plans for all three of these projects were significantly impacted and consequently re-imagined, focussing on



activities that can take place with remote participation to overcome the societal restrictions associated with Covid-19.

In early summer 2020 we established a connection with a local resident on the island of Inis Meáin who would serve as our gateway to the island community. In an effort to progress engagement with the community, in spite of the realities of the pandemic, we worked with her to distribute VR packs to a number of islanders. The aim was to make an introduction, both of ourselves and of the project. Included in these packs was an information booklet which introduced INO as a company and the work that we hoped to engage in on the island as part of TRACTION. Anecdotally, the headsets were received well, with the recipients enjoying the novelty of the VR experience, but overall, the activity was not successful in making an impactful introduction to the project, and it highlighted just how difficult it is to make an initial connection in the absence of an in-person meeting.

We then planned to run a mini-festival on the island of Inis Meáin, once restrictions had eased somewhat, in the early autumn. This would have comprised a number of events including a musical exchange between INO artists and some residents on the island, a VR pop up, where islanders could get more familiar with VR technology and a series of writing workshops where we would begin to explore co-creation methodologies. Unfortunately, this was cancelled due to re-imposition of Covid-19 restrictions.

The work with Music Generation was significantly stalled due to issues around Covid-19. We were able to carry out exploratory work with composer Finola Merivale aimed at developing an approach to online composition, but it was not possible to do this work for TRACTION. One learning from this work was in relation to recruitment. Whilst the work itself was very fruitful and resulted in an engaging and valuable process for participants, there was a very low response in terms of attendance. We need to do more to empower our community partners to engage in quality recruitment, or we need to take a more direct approach in the recruitment of community participants.

Project 1 – We are currently in conversation with the Civic to produce a programme of activity in the form of online workshops based round composition and storytelling from workshop plans designed by facilitators in projects 2 and 3.

Project 2 – Exploratory work was undertaken by composer Finola Merivale aimed at developing an approach to online composition, but it was not possible to do work for TRACTION.

Project 3 – James Bingham visited the island to meet local people during one of the brief periods when travel was permitted and later gave an online presentation to residents about the project. Writing workshops were modified and were due to take place online in December 2020 led by children’s author, Myra Zepf. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen personal circumstances, these workshops were cancelled the day before they were due to start.



4.3 Results of community dialogue activities

4.3.1 Successes

The process of community dialogue has begun and good relationships have been established with the community partners and with some potential participants. There is enthusiasm for the project both in terms of being part of the work of a national arts organisation and being part of an exciting European project.

Our artistic team for the creation of the opera is developing and we have now appointed a number of key roles. We have had regular engagement via Zoom with director Jo Mangan and VR producers Camille Donegan and Terry Madigan, to discuss the development of the work. We have also appointed a composer, Finola Merivale and a visual design partner, Algorithm, who complete the professional creative team.

Engagement with the wider TRACTION consortium, in particular with the other trials and with François Matarasso has allowed for significant learning and development around our process of co-creation which will be vital as we move into the next phase of activity early next year.

What activity has been possible has been of encouraging and we are confident that once we are able to begin workshops online, good progress will be made.

4.3.2 Challenges

Covid-19 has been the major challenge for the trial and has meant plans have been stopped at an advanced stage several times. This is not only frustrating for the artists but has an obvious corrosive effect on the interest and confidence of the partners and communities that we are inviting to work with us.

The involvement of the community partners has posed challenges too, as each has been consumed to a large extent with their own internal issues in relation to Covid-19 with little room left to focus on engagement in TRACTION. Whilst in normal times, these partnerships would have been extremely beneficial to the project, the pandemic has had a negative effect on the ability of the partners to engage with the project, particularly as it hit just as we were looking to develop the interaction between the partners and the project.

Recruitment has posed a challenge. On the few occasions where activity with communities has been possible, recruitment has been disappointing. For example, only a few residents attended the presentation for Inis Meáin and we have not received any feedback through the questionnaires that were sent out to residents. We are reviewing approaches to recruitment and participation with the work package leader

Whilst we began with a generous amount of time to run this project, the delays and postponements caused by Ireland's strict lockdown conditions has seen that advantage eroded. Consequently, we have had to rethink the approach to ensure we can ensure the artistic co-creation is largely achieved during the first six months of 2021. That means taking an approach that can be implemented even if, as seems likely, we have another lockdown. The



plans for this are described below. It is concerning that at this stage we have yet to run any substantial and meaningful co-creation activity.

4.3.3 Lessons learned

It is clear that for the foreseeable future activity must be entirely Covid-safe. Regardless of the severity of the health situation, all workshops and other activities must be able to work online. Any face-to-face meetings or workshops must be considered a bonus at this stage.

It has been very difficult to establish relationships with communities for the first time online, and especially when working through community partners who have their own problems caused by the pandemic and for whom TRACTION is not always their first priority. It is imperative that we establish our own direct relationships with communities and participants in the first months of 2021, and the new approach is intended to achieve that.

Our own experience, and that of other music organisations during the pandemic, has shown that online activity can work well when it is regular, frequent, and designed to work in that context. Although there are issues around digital exclusion, there are also access advantages, for instance in people not having to pay for public transport to attend workshops, or being able to participate even when a carer is not available. Some people also prefer being able to participate from the security of their own home.

4.4 Plans for 2021

During November and December 2020, we reviewed our approach comprehensively with the lead artists, INO's own team, and our colleagues in the TRACTION consortium. In this way we have developed a new programme that is ambitious in scale and range and translates the planned geographic community into communities of interest. Thus, while retaining our focus on the island of Inis Meáin, we will open that project to the whole Irish-speaking region of western Ireland. The Music Generation project will similarly be opened to young people living in rural Ireland, and the project in Tallaght will focus on adults in urban areas especially Dublin, including the new Irish. This will turn the online work from a weakness into a strength, because we will be able to engage large numbers of people and without your graphical constraints. Our ambition will be to secure a high level of participation, leading to a substantial body of co-creation work. As that develops, we may separate the group into people who will continue to work on the VR opera and others who may have more interest in the wider range of INO's outreach and participation work.

The role of community partners would principally be to manage the marketing aspect of each and use their contacts nationally to recruit a base of participants. Workshop activity would run exclusively in partnership with one individual community partner and therefore work in the relevant age group / language.

We will focus content on work which is possible with limited technology and Internet bandwidth to ensure that participation can be as wide as possible. During the first 4 months of 2021, TRACTION will run two workshop series with each community partner. One series will focus on creative writing, with each community working with a different facilitator that



would work well within this demographic. The second series will be focussed round composition and will be led by the opera's composer Finola Merivale, based on a successful workshop models developed with INO outside of TRACTION. We are also looking into the possibility of using the media vault as a key component facilitating Communication between participants and artists during this phase of the project.



5 COMMUNITY DIALOGUE IN THE SAMP OPERA TRIAL (PORTUGAL)

5.1 The Leiria community and the opera trial

There are several communities involved in the SAMP opera trial, but at the heart are the inmates and their families.

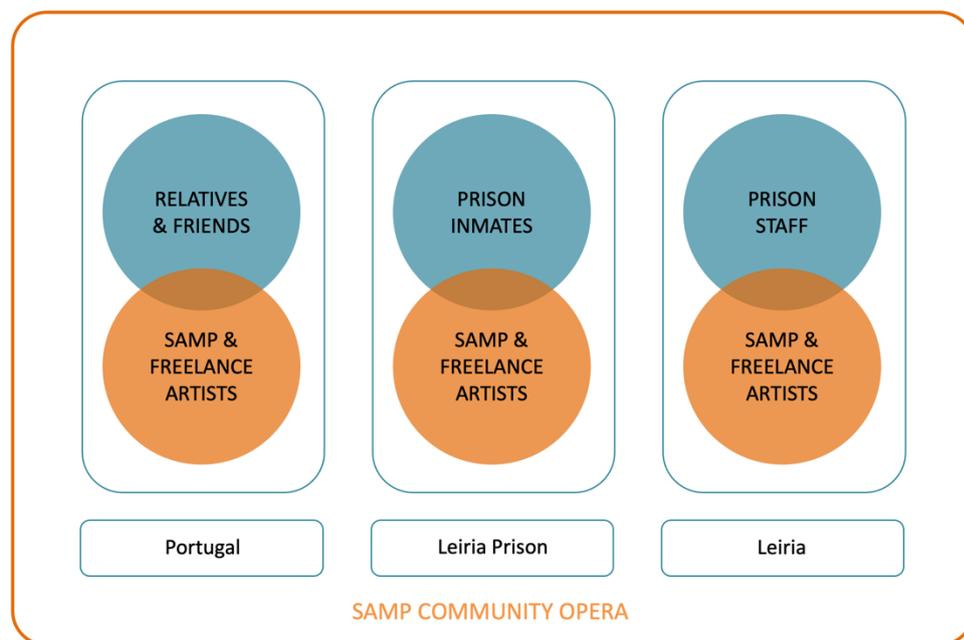


Fig.4 Schematic representation of the Leiria Prison communities and the SAMP Projects

Inmates

Most of inmates are between 16 and 20 years old, and more than 80% are of African descent. Most participants are from disadvantaged social classes, and the great majority come from poor neighbourhoods in the Amadora and Sintra areas. The majority of the group did not complete compulsory schooling (12th grade), including one young man who did not attend school at all. Compared to previous projects there is a larger proportion of participants of Gypsy origin and from Brazil.

In general, the prisoners are willing to express and discuss their ideas, which is very positive and more than in previous work SAMP has done in the prison. However, these discussions need to be managed by the artists so that everyone present can express their opinion in some way, and some participants have to be encouraged to intervene and participate.

Most of the participants currently attend professional courses offered in the prison, but only 6% report having any previous experience of artistic activity.



Families

The inmates' relatives often live in very unstable circumstances, in unstructured families whose members have precarious, low-paid and shift jobs, which makes it difficult to schedule meetings. Due to the pandemic restrictions, it has so far only been possible to have one meeting with the relatives of the prisoners, in which the project was presented. However, the family members present at the meeting showed great interest in participating in the project with their detained relatives.

In addition to their interest in the project, they have hopes about the impact of the project for their incarcerated family members, and showed confidence in the artists' work with their relatives. Most do not have experience on stage, nor do they have practice in the artistic environment (music, dance, theatre, etc.), except for one mother.

5.2 Community dialogue activities

5.2.1 The SAMP model for community opera productions

SAMP first ran prison artistic projects in 1981, but it was from 2004 onwards that a more permanent relationship developed between this music school and the two prisons in the city of Leiria. Having been run 100% by volunteers, 2014 was the turning point of this project, when financial support was granted by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. A more systematic and regular project arose as a result, in which an orchestra and professional singers got involved with the entire prison community. Since 2014, the following methods have been tested and developed in the *Opera na Prisão* programme.

- Each project is run for three years. In the first year, **the focus is placed exclusively on establishing bonds between all the participants** – it is during this time that we create the relationships of trust necessary for the participants to work together. The second year is spent rehearsing and performing an opera, and the third year is dedicated to bridging the experience of the programme and each prisoner's future.
- Before the project begins, **it is essential to ensure that the whole prison technical and security teams are involved in dialogue**. Meetings were held in which the project was presented, but, more importantly, every technician and guard was invited to attend an opera at the São Carlos National Theatre in Lisbon. Informal talks and meetings were held in which opera was discussed, along with the entire universe of classical music, a subject which is utterly foreign to almost all prison technicians and guards.
- **In order to get the guards involved**, some were invited to play musical instruments, others to use their weapons (and even fire them) in the performances, while still more got involved in set building and constructing the stage.
- The technical team was brought into the project through **the creation of a choir made up of prison psychologists and governors**. Weekly rehearsals were held in which scenes from opera were practised, which the choir would go on to sing with the prisoners. They also spent time rehearsing for small concerts held at key celebrations in the prison (Christmas parties, birthdays, visits from government officials. etc.). In one of



the first productions, the governor himself took on a leading soloist role, playing the part of 'commander' in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

- **In order to involve the wider community**, the municipality of Leiria became a partner in the project. This means it has granted access to its resources, such as both theatres in the city, where some recitals are held outside the prison. Other companies were also invited to join the co-creation project as partners, including three art companies (dance, theatre, and video); each worked with the prisoners in sessions supervised and monitored by SAMP.
- **Getting prisoners' families and ex-prisoners involved is the main key to this project's success.** As such, relationships are always maintained with participants from previous editions, and mothers and girlfriends of ex-inmates are asked to present the project to the mothers and girlfriends of current offenders. We have started making contact with the families of TRACTION prisoners, going on to take photos with their mothers, grandparents, nieces and nephews, which we later show younger inmates inside the prison. We also take photos and shoot short videos of rehearsals with prisoners and show their families when we pay them a visit; in this way 'dialogue' takes visual form.
- **The work done with prisoners' families** is varied, but can be divided into two main types of activities: rehearsals of scenes from the same repertoire as those rehearsed by the prisoners, allowing their families to join them on stage at a later date, as well as more standard meetings in which casual conversations are had about their lives.
- It is essential that any project carried out inside a prison has a **vital component in the outside world**; not only in preparing families to take prisoners back when their sentences are up, but also in increasing the whole community's awareness of the reasons behind these young people committing the crimes they do.
- For the first time, **with the TRACTION project, original operas are being composed** rather than Mozart operas being used. To make this possible, creative work sessions were conducted with three composers and a librettist, providing spaces in which young prisoners and prison technical staff were able to share the themes they wanted to approach in their own opera. This approach is taking our community dialogue into completely new areas.
- All sessions, from those held with inmates, to those conducted with family members and technicians, to those inside and outside the prison, start with a **ritual** in which each person starts by singing their name. This welcome routine is both that and a vocal session (in which participants' lyrical vocal technique is developed), with each session ending with the same goodbye song.
- In order to provide prisoners, technicians, guards and family members with an introduction to the world of classical music, and opera in particular, the SAMP team had to familiarise itself with the world of **fado, rap, and other musical styles** the members of the prison community enjoy and produce. Fado and traditional Portuguese music was sung with the guards in their spare time, but original rap songs written by inmates were also added to the scores written by our own guest composers;



- **Final performances are always held inside the prison**, it being the inmates' own territory, and because it is crucial that the community is given the chance to feel the walls, experience the rules, smells and living conditions of a prison. This choice is also vital due to its effect in the broader prison community, as in addition to the 50 inmates directly involved in the project, over 150 other young people are also present, and while they don't participate directly on stage, they are being involved in the whole process, seeing personal growth as a result. Performances are also held in theatres in Leiria and in the Capital, Lisbon, however, as a means through which to extend the reach of, and impact made by, the project on the entire community;

Throughout the project, efforts are made to unite the entire community involved into one whole, placing artists, prisoners, family members, journalists, technicians, politicians, government officials and patrons, both those inside and outside the prison, all on the same level, so that they may engage with each other and their dialogue can lead to change in individuals and eventually in the institutions themselves.

5.2.2 Implementing the SAMP model in the TRACTION trial

Introducing the TRACTION project

The meetings for the TRACTION community opera trial began in 2020 and so far, have been oriented in two stages of dialogue: first to present the project and the team of artists, and secondly with the objective of knowing the working groups and their interests, enhancing the discussion between the group on various topics, introducing theatre dynamics through games and understanding the dynamics of the prison.

In the first phase, videos of the previous shows in the *Opera na Prisão* project were shown to new participants enrolled in TRACTION, to make the project better known and bring it closer to the prisoners. A small number shared their experience in previous projects. This enabled a greater understanding of the project and fostered connections between the new participants and between them and the professional artistic team. It also enhanced the dialogue and debate between the artistic team and the prisoners by starting the process of trust for the artistic and other work to be developed. The meetings of this first phase were important to motivate and raise awareness of the process and type of work to be developed, as well as establishing a work routine marked by the beginning and end of each meeting by a moment of music and song.

In addition, it was followed by the visualization of excerpts from contemporary operas, to share artistic references and also in order to discuss them, between and with the groups and to be able to raise some ideas and interests of each group.

Beginning co-creation activities

In the second stage, more practical work meetings have been held. These were also proposed by phases, to respect the individuality of everyone, considering that theatre and music, in practice, can expose the participants to strong emotions and their own vulnerabilities. As the work and its demands grew, it was necessary to take care to manage everyone's participation sensitively.



Initially, work involved simple proposals, inspired by creative writing shaped by the librettist, and based on some words that had great meaning for individuals. Simple games of exchanging words were held; for example, inmates were asked to translate these words with the body, in a relaxed dynamic that provoked the sharing and debate of ideas and enhanced the experience in pairs, and the first sharing of body work, in a moment of presentation. The dynamics generated reflection and some discussion of ideas, which guided starting points for the opera capsules. The activity revealed the interests and perspectives of the participants, contributed to the better individual knowledge of each participant and took the first steps to know the dynamics of the groups, the relationship between the constituents of each group and their position in relation to the project and the arts.

Currently, each session follows a logic of activities that consist of creating routines and promoting moments common to all sessions, as if ritually, which allows and contributes to the generation of a collective energy appropriate to the work process, for the creation of the final artistic product. Sessions always start and end with a musical moment, have a second moment with the game of activation and concentration (to support the collective focus); then a proposal for group dynamics, to stimulate group work and cooperation between participants and introduce some scene concepts. This builds trust between prisoners and between them and the guiding artists.

Later, a moment more dedicated to improvisation is developed, stimulated by themes, objects, drawings, in order to introduce some rules for the realization of the scene (Who? Where? What is it? Why?) and work the action itself. These plans are always shared with the group, to discuss ideas and interests, promote the feeling of sharing and belonging, highlight and value the work of each participant and foster learning about theatrical work. These ideas are later discussed with the team of professional artists, being made and reformulated sketches of scenic ideas from this work.

Parallel to this work, which involves listening and paying attention to the other, there are outbursts and moments of personal sharing that have been starting points for improvisation, led by prisoners with the support of the guiding artists of each meeting. It has been a process of true co-creation, whose stakeholders approach the work with increasing confidence in the process, contributing to a constantly evolving and delivering work process, although slow, due to various factors.

Activities with families

The work carried out with the relatives and friends of the prisoners is still in an embryonic phase, since it has been possible to have only one meeting with family members. This consisted of the presentation of the project and the work team, through a musical moment shared between artists and family members, showing excerpts from previous works of the Opera in Prison and sharing by a mother who participated in the previous event. This meeting was held in the Amadora, and the families present stressed the importance of the project and valued the work that artists are developing with their families in the prison.



5.3 Results of community dialogue activities

The principal needs, hopes and expectations that have been expressed in those meetings can be summarised as follows:

- The young inmates have shown interest in learning, having new experiences and are very curious about everything they imagine will be involved in creating a show.
- Some express interest in acquiring artistic skills, with a view to use them in their future life after release.
- They hope to have experiences that break up their day-to-day routine, so that they can share them with family and friends when they meet. It is possible to understand their need to engage in new experiences whether artistic or not.
- They reveal they are still curious about a theatre.
- Alongside these interests they hope that the project will be an opportunity to leave the prison temporarily, and that the opera will also provide moments to be with family and friends.

The SAMP team has reviewed these expectations and has planned a number of actions in response. Through the sessions, SAMP artists will:

- include challenging activities that combine learning with art and provoke interaction between prisoners, so that they can develop individual and group work skills through play and music.
- Balance disciplined and free encounters in an environment of sharing.
- Promote a range of artistic experiences that allow prisoners to be in contact with various arts professionals who share their professional and personal experience, providing access to different perspectives on art and other subjects, and supporting the personal development of each inmate.
- Develop mostly practical, concrete proposals: all the themes or ideas to be discussed at this initial stage will be introduced in a practical way, such as through a dramatic game before being debated verbally.
- Mobilize resources to make public presentations, facilitating meetings between inmates and family members. Throughout the co-creation process (and before the final presentation of the capsules and the Grand Opera) part of the artistic work created will be publicly presented so that inmates can share their work inside and outside the prison and understand its impact on the public. This will also enable meetings between family and friends outside the prison facilities during the creative process and offer an experience of working in the theatre and its equipment (light, sound, projectors).
- Perform several presentations of both the capsules and the Grand Opera, to generate varied experiences and perceive the differences between them because, although the work presented is the same, performing in different places requires changes and adaptations, fostering rigour and adaptation to new situations in the working group;



- Bring the family closer to prisoners through various artistic initiatives developed by professional artists, including co-creation meetings;
- Provide an artistic work room (Mozart Pavilion) with equipment (light, sound, screens), that offers comfort to project participants and distances itself from the normal environment of a prison. Throughout the work process it is intended that the participants acquire tools to manipulate the technical material and experience to take responsibility for it. Being able to be responsible for the space in order to create a cultural dynamic in it (carrying out artistic activities, using the technical resources available to them, being able to culturally boost the prison of Leiria in a more autonomous way).

5.3.1 Successes

The following results of the dialogue established between all community members can already be pinpointed from the TRACTION project.

After much initial hesitation by the Leiria Prison Directorate and the Directorate-General of Prison Services, the project was given the green light, and the Head of Portuguese Prison Administration himself even attended the conference at which the TRACTION Portugal project was presented. Leiria youth prison has designed a better method to monitor the project, and has participated actively and enthusiastically in sessions held inside the prison with prisoners. Contrary to expectations, the Portuguese prison system approved a project that requires an internet connection to be made available inside a prison, to be used by prisoners, and which makes use of new technologies that are generally not authorised;

Despite the circumstances faced due to the current pandemic, we were allowed to visit the prison regularly, having held sessions three times a week since July 2020 (with some unforeseen hitches, as is always the case), thus working with the prisoners in their own environment.

The momentum gained by the TRACTION project shortened deadlines faced by everyone involved. Work on the Mozart Pavilion has finally been completed this December; an area within the prison designed to be exclusively dedicated to artistic creation, and where art sessions are held with prisoners, as well as performances that will be open the community at large.

Much joy was brought to the project when two mothers of ex-inmates and two ex-inmates (unrelated to the mothers) joined the Portuguese Local Advisory Team, alongside a public prosecutor, a director of the Gulbenkian Foundation and other senior state officials;

Another great achievement experienced by the TRACTION Portugal project involved the Gulbenkian Foundation making its Orchestra available to accompany the final opera, which will be performed in 2022, as well as the Foundation providing its large auditorium in Lisbon, where two of the performances will take place.

5.3.2 Challenges

The most significant difficulties faced by the Portuguese trial so far have been the following:



Objections put forward by the prison system regarding the use of technologies, specifically relating to prisoners having internet access during the project; these have been resolved successfully, as described above. Both corporate and labour struggles faced by correctional officers, who use the TRACTION project to impose their rights and shine a light on the deplorable working conditions to which they are subject;

The COVID 19 pandemic had a significant impact on the entire schedule and some of the content produced and provided within this phase of the project:

- Practical sessions held with prisoners only started in July, and as a result, we were unable to carry out a more relaxed initial phase due to the numerous security regulations imposed;
- Rather than using dedicated rooms or outdoor areas, these sessions were held in the cellblocks where the inmates sleep and spend every day, therefore impoverishing the results when compared to those that could have been gained under other circumstances;
- We are no longer able to hug each other, and this loss of that physical contact delayed the process of bonds being established between each member of the team;
- We were no longer able to meet, and sing, as one large group. Instead, sessions were held with between 5 to 8 inmates, which meant the same work had to be repeated for many days, thereby slowing down the pace of learning and results;
- Wearing facemasks made much of the work harder, from activities involving vocal techniques to the varied drama-related games used in the co-creation workshops geared towards writing the librettos used by the three capsules, which are to be presented in June 2021;
- Work with families started very late; safety precautions had to be adhered to, hindering the building of mutual trust between those involved. Likewise, we were unable to hold group singing sessions involving mothers, fathers, grandparents and girlfriends, an essential tool for the project;
- Guards, prisoners and SAMP staff involved in the project testing positive for COVID19 impacted our ability to hold meetings, as well as the involvement of all participants in activities that, naturally, bore some risk of contagion.

In the light of these challenges, we are satisfied with the progress made to date, and confident that we have been able to adapt our plans to meet the new conditions.

5.3.3 Lessons learned

This is the first time SAMP, a small music and art institution in a Portuguese village with connections to a wind band, has been involved in such a large-scale European project. It is therefore to be expected that the most significant lessons learned so far have been as a result of the work conducted as a consortium, with the involvement of very experienced, inspiring people and institutions. Particularly valuable learning includes:



- Learning to dialogue and understand worlds as diverse as those present in the consortium's technological, research and evaluation teams, as well as those we encountered in the Barcelona and Dublin Trials, has been a very stimulating and a transformative challenge for the SAMP team;
- Some areas, which we had never particularly invested in or nurtured previously, such as ethics, participants' rights and disclosure, started to gain much more investment, which then spills over into other parallel projects;
- We are now much more sensitive to all different types of technology, and the role it can play in enhancing this and other past projects;
- By using the TRACTION project to write an original opera, we were forced us to seek and establish contact with other creative agents, composers and librettists, which expanded the universe of partners with whom we work, and, as a result, our own perspective of what we do.

5.4 Plans for 2021

For the year 2021 the SAMP team will put as a priority in the dialogue with the community the involvement with the teams of guards and technicians of the prison. We know these are the members we most need to talk to. For the team of technicians, educators, psychologists and management, the Choir that will prepare some of the moments of our three opera capsules will be the main space for sharing ideas about the progress of the project. With the prison guard corps, we will try to work on the opera's argument, and try to help us bring to the stage some of the concerns and possible good moments in the day-to-day life of a prison guard.

Our second group with a special focus on work in 2021 will be that of the relatives of the prisoners. We know it is important to strengthen the bonds between family members and the prison community, and of the family members themselves. It is important that mothers can talk together about how they feel about their sons' prison status. For this we will start the trials with family members, in their communities, but also during their possible visits to the prison.



6 CONCLUSION

6.1 Building on community dialogue

6.1.1 Community dialogue in the time of Covid 19

As will be clear from the preceding pages, the COVID-19 pandemic that coincided with the start of the TRACTION project has had a profound, inescapable and challenging impact on our work. In some areas, such as technology development, it has been possible to minimise this, although even here lockdown and laboratory closures has made everyday activities far more difficult. But in the area of community dialogue, which we know from experience to depend on time spent together building confidence and relationships, the effects have been serious. They range from relatively simple difficulties, such as contacting people who are struggling with crises and travel bans, to more subtle questions about people's needs and priorities which have change so greatly as a consequence of the pandemic's effect on work, housing, education and social services on the everyday organisation of daily life.

Participating in the co-creation of a community opera was never an obvious priority for people facing marginalisation and social exclusion, and having little spare capacity for artistic activities. The additional difficulties they now face inevitably make it less important. On the other hand, being involved in something that takes someone away from their usual problems and gives them a role in an inspiring collective effort of creation does have potential to rebalance a situation with positive, hopeful activity. That is a hypothesis that remains to be tested in the TRACTION project.

For artists and performing arts companies too, the pandemic is an existential crisis. When concerts and plays are banned, or audiences restricted to numbers that are not financially viable, the future of an entire industry is under threat. The British Musicians Union reports that a third of musicians are considering leaving the industry⁵ because they have no work. With revenues suspended, orchestras, opera houses, concert halls and theatres are faced with an impossible choice between laying off staff and insolvency. Again, the crisis pushes the need to make the opera more socially inclusive to the margins: in 2020, the challenge for most opera companies has been to survive. The three music organisations in the TRACTION consortium are not immune to this. In different ways, the Liceu, Irish National Opera and SAMP have all had to make difficult decisions to protect themselves in recent months.

It is in this context that the project's progress must be understood. We are certainly not where we hoped to be after a year's work: Liceu and INO in particular have been unable to begin co-creation activities that were planned for autumn 2020. SAMP, because it was able to build on existing relationships with the prison and wider networks, has undertaken a lot of work there, but has only just started involving the families of inmates. On the other hand, we are pleased with the foundations that have been laid in such challenging conditions, and encouraged by the enthusiasm for the project that has been expressed. People are keen to take part in the community operas and excited by the prospect of helping to create such ambitious work. This section provides a brief summary of the three trials' immediate plans



for community dialogue and co-creation as we move into the second year of the project. They have been made in the assumption that that the present conditions will be in place for months to come, with most activity having to take place remotely. The silver lining, if one can call it that, is that TRACTION technology (such as the media vault), expertise and competences will play an even more valuable role than anticipated.

6.1.2 LICEU

At the end of December, the management of the Liceu Theatre will take a decision about whether to postpone the planned performance of Opera Prima Raval, from November 2021 to the autumn of 2022. If this happens, it will be because it has not been possible to develop the piece sufficiently during 2020 and in the continuing uncertainty over the theatre's opening and audience capacity. Such a postponement does not in itself present a difficulty for TRACTION because we have been developing a proposal to present a 'work-in-progress' version of the opera in the foyer space for an invited community audience. In some ways, this approach would even have advantages. A reduced scale production could enable greater community participation and more experimentation with the technology. It would also help the artists to see the strengths and weaknesses of the piece and allow them to create a better work for the main stage in 2022. This approach, if it is adopted, will keep the LICEU trial on course and ensure that the project meets its anticipated outcomes.

6.1.3 INO

In light of the problems they have faced in connecting and working with the communities identified in their plans, Irish National Opera have restructured their approach to dialogue and co-creation so that they can be implemented despite the restrictions of the pandemic. Between January and April 2021, INO will conduct a series of creative writing and composition workshops entirely online with three enlarged communities: Irish-speakers from the Gaeltacht, secondary school students living in the rural Midlands, and adults in Dublin (with an emphasis on people who have migrated to Ireland). These workshops will aim to build online communities invested in the co-creation process, using the best experience of a practice that has developed rapidly during the pandemic. In the spring, when sufficient material has been created for the VR opera, participants will be invited to take part in the next stage of development and/or to join other areas of INO's outreach and education work.

6.1.4 SAMP

SAMP has already made good progress inside the prison, with inmates, guards and management, and will continue to work there in 2021 as it has since July 2020. The success of the work to date, and its increased status as part of a European project, has helped advance long-standing projects including the preparation of a permanent, dedicated space for art and music activity in the prison. The Mozart Pavilion, as this has been named, will be opened in January 2021, and provide a safe, secure space for co-creation work, leading to the presentation of three opera 'capsules' (short, small-scale pieces from the evolving main opera). However, working with the families and relatives of inmates remains a difficulty, because they mainly live some distance from Leiria and restrictions on gathering remain in



place. The process of community dialogue, which in this situation involves a lot of time on the phone, will continue in the early months of 2021.

6.2 Guidance for community dialogue

What do we mean by community dialogue? What are the best ways of undertaking it? It will be evident that TRACTION is still some way from being able to answer these questions. The priority during this crisis has naturally been more on doing the work than on reflecting on it or developing guidance for others. Still, we recognise the importance of developing a coherent theory through which to understand, approach and analyse the processes by which artists and cultural organisations can build the relationships on which co-creation activities depend. At the simplest level, social inclusion begins with a dialogue capable of building trust and mutual understanding. Through the activities undertaken so far, and the past experience of some consortium partners, we are starting to consider what that might mean in practice for cultural institutions wishing to open themselves to new audiences and different partners in co-creation.

During the first half of 2021, TRACTION will begin a process of discussion and reflection to share experience of community dialogue between the partners and distil the key lessons that emerge. This will lead to a paper on the subject, with guidance on principles and practice, as part of the public outputs of the project.

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- ⁴ The founder of Streetwise Opera, Matt Peacock, and the Executive Director of Birmingham Opera Company, Richard Willacy, are members of TRACTION's international advisory board.
- ⁵ <https://musiciansunion.org.uk/campaigns/invest-in-musicians>