

19th Century artforms at the dawn of the 21st

Throughout the 20th century, the pinnacle of the performing arts was generally considered to be the big lyric forms which dominated the 19th – opera, ballet and orchestral music. But is it a given that these will continue to occupy the same position in the 21st? Many question that premise, concerned that the large permanent organisations which have been considered necessary to perform this work on stage or in the pit are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

Why is that? After all, the Royal Opera House plays regularly to 90+% houses, the Proms remain the largest music festival in the world and ballet performances of The Nutcracker are packed every Christmas. All the companies and orchestras have made serious and successful efforts in recent years to reach new audiences. Television programmes like **Flashmob** and **Operatunity** have helped to demystify the opera; community opera such as Glyndebourne's and initiatives like WNO MAX have put opera performances in new settings. Ballet and classical music also have a range of exciting and innovative education and outreach initiatives. The Royal Ballet's **Chance To Dance**, for example introduces children, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, to ballet, thereby encouraging them both to become audience members and, on occasion, to train for the profession; similarly orchestral programmes such as the London Philharmonic Orchestra's **Renga** bring together orchestral players with music and musicians from other cultures.

Despite all these successes – and many public expressions of confidence about these organisations being on a roll - many involved at the sharp end will privately admit to some nervousness about the future health of these artforms. David Whelton, Chief Executive of the Philharmonia since 1988, interviewed in **Prospect** in January 2005 said that “*we're in a period now where the broad population of this country is totally unfamiliar with orchestral music and reluctant to enjoy anything that requires some investment of time and thought.....most people's only relationship with orchestral music these days is in the cinema and occasionally on television*”. He also says, of the orchestra's programme at the Royal Festival Hall: “*The majority of people who come to our concerts are [mainland] Europeans because they come from a more culturally aware background..... at any Festival Hall concert given by a big orchestra, you'll hear seven or eight languages spoken and if those people weren't here, it would be almost empty*”

A number of factors combine to create this precarious environment. Many of these arise from the historical place of the ‘high arts’ (especially lyric theatre) in British society; others from current perceptions of the relevance and accessibility of those forms and still more from the fast-changing nature of that society at the beginning of the 21st century.

The Historical Background

The first public opera house opened in Venice in 1637, presenting commercial opera so successfully that, by the end of the 17th century the city had sixteen opera houses open to the general public, attracting customers from all social classes. This popularity was more or less sustained throughout the next two centuries (with even English audiences packing out Handel performances). This period roughly coincided with the hey-day of the creation of new popular operas – from Mozart (**Idomeneo** 1781) to Puccini (**Turandot** 1926). This vigour and popularity ensured that opera was a vibrant mode of communication and entertainment. As a result, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, opera played a pre-eminent role in the cultural life of Europe. The opera was a widely available form of popular entertainment consumed by people of all social classes. enjoyed and understood by a broad cross-section of urban Europeans (and Americans).

Ballet also gained a place at the centre of Western culture in the nineteenth century from about 1830 onwards with the development of the Romantic Ballet movement, the creation of *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* and the commissioning of popular, major composers to provide the scores. Orchestral music was, at the same time, reaching its apogee with the development of the symphony through composers such as Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert and Mahler.

At that stage, there was also a degree of audience ‘crossover’ with popular culture. It was not unusual, for example, for a night’s entertainment at the theatre to include a miscellany of stage melodrama, farce, and opera excerpts. The international popularity (and commercial potential) of opera at this time is also clear from the fact that it was the circus entrepreneur P. T. Barnum who in 1852 organized and successfully promoted the first major concert tour in the US - by opera’s first superstar, the soprano, Jenny Lind. As a result of that tour’s success, *Putnam’s Magazine* suggested that Barnum should become manager of the New York Opera since “*He understands what the public wants, and how to gratify that want. . . . He comprehends that, with [the American public], the opera need not necessarily be the luxury of the few, but the recreation of the many.*”

It would be idle, however, to pretend that opera and ballet have ever enjoyed the sort of popular appeal in this country that they have in parts of mainland Europe; certainly by the second half of the 19th century, a process of differentiation had begun. Professor Janet Wolff in “**The Ideology of Autonomous Art.**”¹ has characterised this as the replacement of pre-industrial cultural pursuits, enjoyed on a cross-class basis by a class-specific culture. In this process the high arts of music, theatre and literature became the province of the upper-middle and middle classes whilst the popular cultural forms of music hall, organized sport and popular literature provided the entertainment of the lower classes.

According to this thesis, the emergent industrial ruling class used its attendance at opera and other ‘high’ art events as an indicator of a shared culture which provided both pleasure and a sense of social identity. Unsurprisingly, this development was

¹ *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, Cambridge University Press. 1988

accompanied by a more refined prescription of the sort of behaviour appropriate for attending such events (including a dress code) – and from this emerged the rest of the rituals deemed essential to the appreciation of high culture and the conclusion that the aesthetic products of that culture could be only appreciated in a clearly defined environment of formality, reverence and disciplined seriousness. Cultural occasions thus became as much about social validation as aesthetic experience. Certainly, you do not have to be too much of a committed class warrior to recognise that the rituals and codes of attendance at high art events help establish a sense of common culture and solidarity which complement other social, political and commercial ties.

Despite – or perhaps because of - this exclusivity, there was, throughout the 19th and most of the 20th Centuries a consensus in Britain, at least among the educated classes, as to what constituted the central cultural canon. In the performing arts, this could be characterised as a British (and to a lesser extent, European or American) tradition of text-based drama, stretching back to Shakespeare, his contemporaries and immediate predecessors; the European concert music tradition which reached its most complete expression in the symphony orchestra; and a more or less agreed body of great operatic and ballet works.

To many, this core canon remains at the heart of cultural life. Changing times and attitudes, however, require us to question the extent to which those assumptions remain valid. Does such work still resonate with the experience of a broad cross-section of people? Is it central to a common culture?

Undoubtedly, at times in the past, the answer to both questions has been a resounding ‘yes’. Shakespeare’s plays combined high poetry and classical allusion with gory melodrama and attention-grabbing plot-lines in order to achieve popular success. Mozart overtures were famously whistled in the street by delivery boys within days of premiering and opera, for many years, could be a commercial winner.

Today, however, only a few examples of ‘high art’ can be said truly to register in the national consciousness. Perhaps 12 Shakespeare plays, around 10-12 operas and the three major Tchaikowski ballets (**Swan Lake, The Nutcracker and Sleeping Beauty**) are safe bets at the box office. As a result, the answer to the questions posed earlier is now, for many people, “no”.

A Question of Perception?

Despite the tradition of the 'high arts' throughout Europe, many Britons have historically seen opera, ballet and classical music as being 'not for them'. In the not so distant past, certain arts professionals have sometimes encouraged that perception. It is not very many years ago that a respected international singer felt free to say: "*We cannot compromise. . . We mustn't smear the line between art and entertainment. . . . You cannot bring art to the masses. . . . You never will.*"

In general, however, this attitude - which assumes there is an irreconcilable conflict between 'access' and excellence' - has become increasingly unusual. Throughout the 20th century, great pioneering work by many artists set out to disprove that polarity. Thomas Beecham's orchestras, the dedication to the English regions of Dames Alicia Markova and Beryl Grey with Festival Ballet, the education work of the major opera companies and a host of other education and outreach projects have all, over many years, set out to de-mystify the process and bring new audiences and participants to the 'high arts.'

Over the last thirty years, almost every classical arts institutions in Britain has sought to broaden its audience base. However, the perception of the 'high arts' as an exclusive pastime survives. And that might well be a particularly dangerous characteristic in a society where attitudes to artistic endeavour are changing.

Historically, the hegemony of the dominant culture, identified in the previous section, has helped mould our understanding of what constitutes 'great' art, with the 'high arts' being seen as an aspirational model for the rest of society and popular forms of culture being seen as less important, less worthy of support, less 'excellent'. But that perception of the intrinsic value of different forms of artistic expression seems to be changing. In the early 21st century, there is a growing sense of aesthetic relativism that recognises that no string quintet or DJ, no comedian or ballerina sets out to be second-rate but, rather, that most art (and entertainment) strives for excellence in its own terms and should be valued accordingly.

That perception helps to raises the status of artistic activity that previously would have been dismissed and, conversely, calls into question the automatic position of the 'high arts' at the top of the cultural pyramid. And that new vulnerability is exacerbated by ever-faster changes in the cultural environment which make the world, in many ways, increasingly less hospitable to the 'high arts'.

The Changing Environment

The place of culture in society and the public realm has changed immeasurably since the mid-nineteenth century flowering of opera, ballet and orchestral music. And the pace of that change continues to accelerate.

In 2000, the Henley Centre undertook an exercise that explored how leisure patterns were changing and to extrapolated into the future. The principal conclusions are now well known: potential arts consumers in the 21st Century are more affluent and more educated than before. They value quality of life but profess themselves to be less happy than previous generations. Most importantly, perhaps, they register an unacceptable level of stress and resentment that work commitments take up too much time. As a result, their principal aspirations are less to do with material possessions and more concerned with time, sleep, holidays and 'a rest'. Overall, Henley found that potential arts audiences were cash rich and time poor.

What does this mean for the classical arts audience? In a world that is strapped for time, many will not voluntarily commit themselves to a long evening in the theatre or concert hall. Many in the performing arts frequently ask how it is that the contemporary visual arts have made such an impact in recent years and achieved such high visibility and attendance figures. I would suggest whilst there are a number of reasons for this phenomenon - including the increasingly visual nature of our culture and the star status and media profile of artists such as Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin and the Chapman brothers - perhaps the most significant are free entry and the related capacity to spend as much or as little time in an exhibition as you wish. If you walk into a gallery and see nothing there to engage you, you are able to turn on your heel and leave immediately. Positioned in the middle of a row in the theatre, you do not – without making a very public statement - have that opportunity, at least until the interval.

So, one factor in the reluctance of many to acquire the opera/ballet/concert-going habit is a concern about the time commitment involved. And that combines with other considerations. Visits to large scale lyric performances are expensive: cost remains a factor despite the 'cash rich' analysis. And potential audiences may not know what to expect. Arts pundits muse over why it is that few will pay the occasional £20-25 for an opera performance but many will fork out £30+ on a regular basis for a Premiership football game. At least part of the reason must be that the football fan is sure that s/he will enjoy the game (even if masochistically on losing afternoons) whereas the opera or ballet attender is taking a risk so does not know whether the investment of time and money will be rewarded.

This uncertainty is probably an important reason for the comparative conservatism of audiences for the classical arts and the consequent reliance by many companies on a handful of reliable regulars. There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule: Opera performances at the Royal Opera House have a cachet that attracts audiences to a wider range of fare and Birmingham Royal Ballet has developed a loyal audience in Birmingham for the work of its artistic director, David Bintley. Other companies such as

Opera North have developed a range of innovative programming and marketing approaches.

Notwithstanding all these success stories, however, the evidence from most opera and ballet indicates conclusively that Repertoire is king and that the popular core of operas, full-length ballets and orchestral pieces is not expanding (indeed, may even be contracting). This pattern seems to hold across all of the lyric forms and is also apparent in classical drama where even the Royal Shakespeare Company finds it increasingly difficult to sell the less well known works.

This is a worrying situation for the opera and ballet companies. Their economics demand that they present repertoire that sells well but an endless reliance on a small number of warhorses such as **La Boheme** or **Swan Lake** is unrewarding artistically and ultimately risks turning them into performing museums. This danger is compounded in ballet by the reluctance of some exciting and innovative choreographers to work on the largest scale. Across all the high arts, the challenge is about developing a new repertoire that is relevant to today and is capable of really engaging both artists and audiences.

A number of other factors combine to make the environment difficult for the professional classical arts. The recent collapse of the classical recording industry, for example, has significantly impacted on the economics of the orchestras and the increasing dominance of the popular music industry threatens to marginalize classical music. In December 2004, for instance, more than two-thirds of the music reviews in English broadsheet newspapers were of rock, rap and dance acts. This is a far cry from 1963 when The Times's William Mann controversially contributed the first broadsheet article about popular music, writing of The Beatles' "*flat submediant key switches.... the Aeolian cadence at the end of 'Not a second time' (the chord progression which ends Mahler's **Song of the Earth**) and the octave ascent in the famous 'I Want To Hold Your Hand'.*" [Incidentally, as a further indication of how the perception of music has changed in the intervening 40 years, it is hard to imagine a newspaper article now daring to use such technical terminology.]

David Whelton offers an interesting take on the rise and rise of popular music – and its capacity to sideline the Western classical canon – in the Prospect interview mentioned earlier: "*when I was a kid, although I didn't grow up in a musical family, you were always aware of orchestral music on the radio... The musical language you grew up with was the basic harmonic tonality that underpins music from the Renaissance until the present day. Now that language is almost entirely foreign because rap music and garage and house have no harmonic references at all. It's purely linear*". A further insight into the effects of the hip hop phenomenon has been offered by the American historian, Nelson George, author of *Hip Hop America*² who observed in a newspaper article in January 2005³: "*Historical memory, never highly valued in the US, has so completely broken down that for many young people, the world before hip hop is plain irrelevant... [and] what if you're not hip hop? What if you don't make MC-oriented music or your*

² Penguin books

³ Rhythmin' and Stealin', [The Observer](#), January 23rd 2005

books don't relate to that culture or your cultural orientation is more Bill Cosby than Ice Cube? Well then, it becomes very hard to find a platform."

It could perhaps be argued that the popular song-writing tradition of the first three-quarters of the twentieth century shared many technical devices with the classical form, thus helping initiate new listeners to more demanding work. But that continuity has been broken with the ascendance of hip hop with the result that classical music is now seen as very 'other'. Certainly, the language of the William Mann article quoted above would be incomprehensible to many Times readers today, in part because of the way that music education has changed.

The predominance of popular music – and its ever-changing relationship with classical – can be seen in a number of different ways. Just before Christmas 2004, for example, I was walking past a major classical music store in the West End of London, which was promoting opera CDs. Perhaps indicatively, the CD they had chosen to showcase in this campaign was Andrew Lloyd Webber's soundtrack of **The Woman In White**. This sort of 'crossover' between classical and popular music is increasingly common with albums such as Il Divo's selling 130,000 copies in the first week and artists such as Vanessa Mae, Charlotte Church and Andrea Bocelli all having chart success. However, there is little evidence that this targeted, customized work is addressing the challenge of attracting new audiences to the broader classical repertoire.

That challenge is exacerbated by the bewildering number of demands now made on the time and disposable income of the potential audience – not just from a wide range of traditional entertainment options such as the local cinema but also from new media opportunities, from the attractions of high street shopping and from life-style choices such as gym membership. Spare time, as we have seen, is precious and many different activities jockey to make a call on it.

In considering the plethora of choice presented by 21st century consumer society, market analysis has identified a number of specific categories of 'out-of-home' activity.

- The Big Night Out, which involves getting dressed up, meeting new people, drinking, dancing and food. The BNO usually takes place between Thursday & Sunday and may involve a variety of activities. These would not, however, normally include attendance at a formal 'high art' performance..
- Specific hooks: outings centred around targeted activities such as an arts event, a cinema visit, spectator sports; seasonal landmarks (such as bonfire night) or one-off events such as a motor show.
- After work - socialising with a mix of colleagues or clients (including 'leaving dos'). This sort of activity can precede a 'Big Night Out'.
- Catching up - leisure time focused on an individual's social circle, including maintaining relationships with friends or family, chilling out, 'quality time' etc.
- Family days out (usually with children): Typically this might include theme parks, ice skating or the beach.
- Self-development, including evening classes, the gym and other personal goal-orientated activities

Of these, the most frequent activity - consuming almost half the 55 going-out occasions that the average adult experiences each year - is "Catching Up", the principal purpose of which is to talk and 'have a laugh' with friends. That objective is only rarely likely to be compatible with serious, silent concentration on a performance. In a world of seemingly limitless choice but very restricted opportunities to exercise it, the classical repertoire - which is innately demanding - has its work cut out to stay in the game.

This challenge is compounded by the fact that the U.K. is no longer a mono-cultural society; it is, instead, a vibrant multi-cultural environment in which the 'high' western artforms co-exist with other traditions from around the world and with exciting new hybrid forms evolving in contemporary society. Orchestras, ballet and opera companies all recognize that their audience is graying and - given the richness brought to city life by the juxtaposition of white youth with peers from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere - it is by no means certain that the next generations will automatically default to the high art of the Western tradition. Moreover, a new emphasis on inter-activity - manifest in games, in DVDs with alternate endings, in multiple different mixes of dance tracks and in the habits of multi-task consuming bred by the t.v. remote control - promises/ threatens to generate a new approach to cultural consumption. In this environment, many have developed a habit of cultural 'snacking' which militates against their preparedness and ability to focus regularly on a longish demanding work.

These challenges are not unique to the United Kingdom. They currently provide the theme for much discussion in the USA where all the issues that are shaping British culture (multi-culturalism, the ageing of the audience, the challenge of popular culture, new media etc.) are, if anything, even more pronounced. The Chicago Sun-Times recently ran a piece about the difficulties theatres were facing in attracting young audiences. A survey by the National Endowment for the Arts has found that the median age of attenders for plays and musicals in 2002 was 45 and 46 respectively (up from 43 and 44 ten years earlier) In the same period, audiences for classical music, opera and ballet aged even more.

In pursuing this story, the Sun-Times interviewed Nathan Allen the 26 year old artistic director of the Youthful House Theatre in Chicago which, the paper reports, has had the greatest recent success in capturing a young adult audience. In talking about his approach, Allen makes some trenchant observations about the relevance of classic drama to his audience: *"Nobody our age really cares about Shakespeare.....I'm not saying that no one should produce Shakespeare of course but I don't think we should get upset when a 17 year old from the South Side can't sit through Romeo and Juliet. You're speaking the wrong language to them.....The style of the Goodman [Theatre in Chicago] has been around for 50 years and that's why their audience is 50 years old. I think the vocabulary that we use was sort of invented with E.T the Extraterrestrial and MTV and Star Wars and stuff that's about 20 years old. It's the language that we're using and I think the fact that we get more 20 year olds than anybody else is just them being attracted to the vocabulary that they know...Our language is pop culture, because young people have grown up with epic forms of entertainment - rock 'n' roll, cartoons, movies by Spielberg and Lucas and Robert Zemeckis."*

All of this adds up to a world in which the classical arts have to compete against many other cultural activities from clubbing to the garden centre. Yet – for the moment - they retain their financial privilege.

The financial implications

A very significant amount of public funding is dedicated to the support of the classical forms discussed in this paper. A major Arts Council policy document **The Glory of The Garden** acknowledged, as early as 1984, that this was becoming an issue - with opera, for example, receiving 24% of the Arts Council of Great Britain's total revenue funding. It further indicated that it saw *“no prospect in the foreseeable future of its being able to bring the funding of Scottish Opera, Welsh National Opera and Opera North to the level of English National Opera”* and that *“those companies – especially the regional ones – will find it almost impossible to maintain, let alone raise, their artistic standards. The Council will accordingly be initiating discussions with Scottish Opera and Opera North to investigate whether those companies might find ways of sharing costs, perhaps including base costs”*⁴.

Twenty-one years later, Arts Council England invests about £45.5m in the four major subsidised opera companies which work in England⁵ with the Welsh Arts Council investing a further c. £6m into WNO. This is a 27% real-terms increase over 1984. ACE also supports four ballet companies to the tune of £24.5m and provides c £14.8m to eight symphony orchestras. This combined investment of c £85m in 16 organisations represents exactly one-third of the total which ACE distributes to its 1,400 regularly funded organisations. The arguments expressed earlier in this paper raise concerns that, even with the increased level of subsidy now available to the high arts, these major companies may struggle to maintain their audience or to retain their capacity to develop the repertoire. If they are to prevent a downward spiral, they will need to anticipate and overcome a wide range of challenges.

In a difficult market-place, the large performing companies find themselves in a constrained position, especially on tour. They all have high fixed overheads; BRB and ENB, for example, have between 60 and 64 dancers on staff and tour with 46 or 47 musicians.

In this situation, financial pressures have tended to lead to reduced numbers of performances. BRB and ENB gave, between them, about 290 performances per year between 1992 and 1995; by 1998-2001 that had dropped to 229. In that declining situation, the companies tended to rely on the core repertoire with 55% of their performances between 1993 and 1998 being drawn from the three major Tchaikowski ballets (**Swan Lake**, **Nutcracker** and **Sleeping Beauty**) and, in the case of ENB their successful **Alice In Wonderland**. Those 'core' productions played to c 80%; the rest of the programme achieved about 50% overall outside London and Birmingham.

⁴ **The Glory of The Garden, A Strategy for a decade**, ACGB 1994

⁵ Royal Opera, English National Opera, Opera North, Welsh National Opera.

The situation for opera companies is comparable. Whereas between 1990/91 and 1997/98, WNO, Opera North and Glyndebourne Touring averaged between them about 215 shows per year, by 1999/2000, this had declined to 185. In recognition of the difficulties faced by the companies, ACE admitted both WNO and Opera North into its Stabilisation programme so the decline in productivity has been arrested – and, to a degree, reversed. A side effect of this, however, is that the average real terms subsidy-per-performance across the three companies has risen by about 120% since 1990/91.

One way or another, therefore, the challenges facing the large lyric companies have tended, over time, to result in some combination of (a) restricting the repertoire (b) reducing the amount of work they can undertake and (c) an increased subsidy need. This situation is echoed, although not exactly replicated, in the world of the symphony orchestra. Although audiences for these remain fairly buoyant, the pressures of unavoidable high artist costs and declining recording income place ever-greater demands on the orchestras' fund-raising capacity.

The Future:

Most of the large British organisations referred to in this paper have recognised the nature of the dilemma in which they find themselves. Almost all have now been through the Arts Council's Stabilisation Programme and have developed strategies to address their difficulties. It may be that this approach will suffice and that each organisation will be able to overcome its individual difficulties in its own way. However, this paper is raising a question as to whether there may in fact be a set of socio-cultural factors at work that makes the long-term sustainability of these organisations very vulnerable. If that is the case, then some serious thinking will need to be done about ways in which this sort of art can best be sustained into the future, especially if the financial environment is shaped by a static (or declining) market for the work and limited public subsidy that must also respond increasingly to new arts organisations and artforms which reflect the evolving demography and needs of a changing population.

In considering this dilemma, I would urge the organisations and the funders to ask:

- How can the high arts really develop new repertoire that is vibrant and engages with the concerns of today?
- Are current and potential challenges (and possible solutions) being openly and honestly discussed nationally and internationally?
- Might there be different organisational models that would better address the changing cultural environment?
- Would more flexible working practices help?
- Could resources be shared more effectively?
- Are there new partnerships and collaborations that would help?
- Is the most convincing case currently being made for the public value of the high arts?