

2 ARTS

Ack by letter
17/3/05

163

67 other

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James Boyle Esq.,
Chair,
Cultural Commission,
Broughton High School,
Carrington Road,
Edinburgh, EH4 1EG.

15 MAR 2005


11th March 2005

Dear Mr. Boyle,

I enclose copies of recent correspondence that Ann Wells thought might be of interest to you.

May I take this opportunity to send the Cultural Commission my best wishes for a successful outcome.

Yours faithfully,





SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

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Education Department
Cultural Policy

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Your ref:
Our ref: 2005/0006569OR

8 March 2005

Dear Mr Doig

Thank you for your letter of 22 February to Jack McConnell, First Minister, enclosing a copy of your letter to the editor of The Herald newspaper, which you feel may be of some assistance to the Cultural Commission. Your letter has been passed to Patricia Ferguson, Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport, and I have been asked to reply.

Regarding the Cultural Commission, Ministers are looking forward to the body's report of its review later this year. The review provides a generational opportunity to look seriously and maturely at culture in Scotland and decide the framework for its support in the future. As you mention, Ministers are clear that it is vital that the cultural community takes this opportunity and engages with the debate, and the Commission's review. It is gratifying that creative professionals across the country have been willing to give the Commission the benefit of their views. It is not necessary for them to join the Commission in order to do this - what matters is that they do get involved.

In view of your strong interest and commitment to Scotland's arts and culture, I am sure that you will have a helpful contribution to make to those deliberations. If you have not responded yet to the Commission's written consultations I would encourage you to make contact with the body now (website address: www.culturalcommission.org.uk; address: Cultural Commission, Broughton High School, Carrington Road, Edinburgh, EH4 1EG; telephone number 0131 315 0262; Email: info@culturalcommission.org.uk).

Yours sincerely

Ann Wells



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COPY

Jack McConnell Esq.,
First Minister,
Scottish Executive,
Scottish Parliament Building,
Edinburgh.

22nd February 2005

Dear Mr. McConnell,

I have sent numerous letters to The Herald in Glasgow on the subject of Scottish Opera. I believe the editor has some very varied views on the subject and my type of letter is usually put to the bottom of the pile. I have taken this opportunity to send you a copy of my first correspondence to them (this letter was published in part by the Telegraph) as it may be of some assistance to the to Cultural Commission.

Unfortunately I have been diagnosed with cervical spondylosis and am no longer able to perform, although I still take a keen interest in the development of the arts in Scotland.

I hope you and your wife are well.

Yours faithfully,

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The Editor,
The Herald,
200 Renfield Street,
Glasgow, G2 3QB.

Dear Sir,

It was interesting to read the article by Phil Miller ('philistine' minister: MacMillan welcome to join us - December 15th). It is up to James MacMillan whether he accepts Patricia Ferguson's invitation to become involved in the ongoing 'cultural commission' - the body charged with forging a long term strategy for the arts in Scotland. I would have thought it more newsworthy had she extended the invitation to representatives nominated from the vast pool of professional musicians, singers, artists, actors etc., who are extremely knowledgeable and actively involved in the Scottish arts scene at the all important ground level.

It is all very well throwing around words such as 'philistine' every time the issue of the arts in Scotland is debated, usually aimed at the First Minister. I have spoken with Jack McConnell on occasion and he is certainly no philistine - his wife also happens to be one of the most forward thinking and visionary arts administrators in the U.K. in her role as Director of Cultural and Leisure Services (for Glasgow City Council). No more laying the sole blame for the state of Scottish Opera at the door of Bute House.

After years of warnings of overspend, did the management of Scottish Opera gamble the fortunes of the company on producing the Ring Cycle? To have the Ring Cycle performed in Scotland was an achievement, but at the cost of professional artist's livelihoods and job security? It was obvious to anyone with any knowledge of the state of arts funding at the time that it was absolutely the wrong time to do it and the company was seriously misguided. The plans for The Ring should have been stopped in their tracks and rescheduled for later years - there will always be the argument about the state of play regarding the booking of singers, costs etc., but look at the outcome now. Previous letters to this page seem to suggest that there was an agenda of personal ambition within the Company and nothing, but nothing was to get in the way, whatever the cost. The gamble was by no means each-way, it was simply on the nose. Maybe it went like this: for the very survival of Scottish Opera, the deficit accrued would be paid off by the taxpayers of Scotland through the auspices of the Scottish Arts Council with a one off jackpot payment from the Scottish Executive. Of course the gamble did not pay off (a seriously bad judgment anyway for anyone who thought it would) and the management seemed to shrug off any responsibility for the situation, simply laying the blame on the ongoing underfunding situation of the arts in Scotland. The one issue that is still hard to understand was the total lack of humility on the part of the management, for not publicly apologising to those in the Company whose security they seemed to put up as collateral, as it were. If this was the case, the gamble failed and the job losses were real. No apologies. Shameful.

Hugh Canning, music correspondent for the Sunday Times, who was witnessing not so full houses, reported last Spring that 'perhaps Scotland has fallen out of love with Scottish Opera'. This may well be true - the two words, now whenever uttered, receive very negative comments.

Perhaps the way forward is for Scottish Opera to come under the umbrella of the new National Theatre of Scotland, newly artistically headed by Vicky Featherstone. With joint funding and the emphasis on 'Scottish', as well as new plays being commissioned, we could also enjoy more compositions from our stable of fine composers in the form of opera and music theatre.

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While the exciting and innovative programme for the National Theatre is underway, we could also enjoy perhaps six mainstream operas a year, plus two commissions, plus two lighter productions - a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta perhaps and for Christmas, a traditional musical or west end type of show. This kind of programming would help eliminate the charges of elitism and open the doors for all who enjoy the many facets of theatrical entertainment. It certainly would not result in any loss of artistic merit, as the Company has already shown that high standards are achievable in all they do. It would be an opportunity to broaden the appeal and put the Company on a surer financial footing. Touring work could take the company all over Scotland and beyond, perhaps chorus and orchestra dividing in half - small scale opera, music theatre, children's productions. The excellent Opera for All and the ongoing educational work could be incorporated. It is possible that a well organised Company such as this could generate enough work to perhaps integrate the freelance Orchestra of Scottish Ballet to keep touring productions active while main productions are in progress in the main cities of Scotland. Perhaps Scottish Ballet itself would be enticed to join the fold, sometime in the future. Employees under threat could be reinstated and the Chorus could be immediately restored to their former finest glory and all artistically re-branded as The Orchestra and Chorus of the National Theatre of Scotland.

The fine orchestra may now be under constant threat of disbandment (already being mooted in articles in the press). As part of the NTS it could model itself on the excellent BBC Concert Orchestra, an orchestra that is not just revered because of its popularity with the public, but also because of its tremendous versatility - from Mozart to Lloyd Webber. It can be done. While adopting this course the Orchestra of the NTS could find itself having a new identity and building on one of their biggest assets - their own well documented versatility while maintaining the highest standards.

It is worrying that during the 'dark period' mentioned in the article, the present management promises some 'sparkle'. If this, apart from any other activities, involves the orchestra continuing to promote concerts for five pounds a ticket (allegedly some performances in the past have been heavily papered), this does not fare well for our other three full-time orchestras - the BBC Scottish, the RSNO and the peerless SCO (some pieces of music programmed by the SCO and the Opera Orchestra have already clashed in the past). Surely an operatic gala concert series featuring up and coming young singers (and young musicians, why not?) is the most sensible route at present. When all music organisations are dependent on a certain percentage of the Scottish population, the last thing needed is another full-time symphony-sized orchestra on the patch vying for the attention of the same audience. Dangerous times. (I wonder as to the thoughts of musicians and artists in all fields trying to promote their own activities, seeing money from the Arts Council earmarked for opera being used to pay for huge advertisements for these concerts in this newspaper and others). What would happen if another orchestra (whatever size) was created to serve rural Scotland for instance at the moment? Would the Scottish Arts Council refuse funding on the grounds of over-provision of the orchestral scene in Scotland and clash of interests etc.?

The present management hierarchy at Scottish Opera would hardly be interested in any of the aforementioned suggested options - to make it work it would need a brand new management team, working under or with Vicky Featherstone and Chairman Richard Findlay, with hopefully an official input from all members of the new Company. Seats on the Board could be made available to elected Company representatives, simply to ensure that the old ways of autocratic decision-making is confined to the artistic dustbin for ever. It would be within the Company itself, through the talents, expertise and experience of all members that the success of any new venture could be assured. Time to clear out the old guard, a new vision, a new music director, a new Board, but retaining the invaluable hard work and trusted opinions of the 'Friends Organisation'.

It may take a while to establish, it may not suit everyone, but at least it is a serious and workable suggestion, instead of the present precarious situation and the usual trading of insults thrown about whenever this serious topic is debated. All members of the Company of Scottish Opera (including the Chorus and all those whose jobs are lost or at risk) deserve some respect. In fact, the vast array of professionals involved in all aspects of the arts in Scotland deserve respect and the opportunity to be listened to. Seriously.

It is never too late and perhaps something of Alexander Gibson's great legacy can be saved and celebrated after all.

Yours faithfully,