

Response to Let's Create: Opera and Music Theatre Analysis

1 Introduction

This paper is not about the Arts Councils decision to move ENO to the North of England but about the most effective response to the Arts Councils latest document Lets' Create: Opera and Music Theatre Analysis.

2 Background – opera policies

The Spheres of Influence policy, jointly conceived by the National Opera coordinating Committee and the Arts Council in 1978, has formed the basis of opera touring since the 1978/79 season and been implemented through Arts Council Touring. Spheres of Influence Policy (for Opera) agreed in July 1982 Under the terms of the policy the country has been divided into areas for which responsibility is taken by specified companies with the aim of:

- ensuring as fair a spread as possible of opera throughout England;
- giving the companies the opportunity to plan well-balanced annual touring programmes, stemming from home-base operations, and through subscriptions or regular visits of building audiences, and of introducing less familiar and new works;
- giving audiences a well-considered diet of operatic fare;
- giving the companies the opportunity of providing an 'in depth' service for their regions through ancillary and educational events;
- improving the economics of touring; and
- avoiding repertoire clashes.

The policy can be seen [Here](#)

The Arts Council England's analysis of its investment in large-scale opera and ballet undertaken in 2012 produced the following conclusion:

"On 1 July 2014, we will confirm to the companies that in all cases that they have been awarded grants in line with the planning figures that they have been given. As with all our national portfolio organisations, these grants will be provisional and will be subject to negotiating a funding agreement and agreeing a satisfactory business plan.

"That process will take up to six months and will require the Arts Council to approve specific strategies and objectives within the business, audience development and equality plans of each organisation. The suggestions of the opera and ballet analysis will form the basis of a number of objectives to be agreed with each of the companies. The opera and ballet steering group, area management teams and the Arts Council's Executive Board will have quality assurance and overview roles in approving the final funding agreements of these seven companies, by April 2015." ¹

3 Suggested response to Let's Create: Opera and Music Theatre Analysis

The Arts Council England's Let's Create: Opera and Music Theatre Analysis was published in March 2024 and can be found [Here](#)

Everyone could spend all day arguing the toss on the analysis and it will serve little purpose. Talk has been bandied around in the broadsheet press that their needs to be an overarching strategy. Strategy is one of the most slippery words in the English language and also one of the most frequently abused words. Simply; strategy gets you from where you are now to where do you want to be. A business plan is how you will move from where you are to where you want to be. A strategy is the route by which goals and objectives can be reached and business and action plans are the means of transport to get you there.

To formulate an "overarching strategy" on top of "Lets Create" is the equivalent of a foolish person building their house on sand - it will fall. The Arts Council has no artform policies so the simplest way forward is for the entire opera community, small and large scale to come together in a national opera planning exercise and develop a national action plan for opera. The first step is to nail where you are

¹ Arts Council England, Anthony Blackstock, The Audience Agency, Prue Skene, Thoughtsmith, Arts Council England's analysis of its investment in large-scale opera and ballet (Arts Council England 2013, available at: <http://bit.ly/2nOn3U4>, Accessed 27th August 2018) p13

now, secondly, where do you want to be and thirdly how are you going to get there and with what resources.

As part of the exercise, you tackle all the “future opportunities and challenges” laid out in section 9 of the executive summary of Let’s Create: Opera and Music Theatre Analysis. The first step is to rewrite it in plain English. All or most of the points from 1 – 9 are actions opera organisations would want to do.

- **Audiences** – there is clearly a need for audience research. The Arts Council used to provide TGI and then Taking Part which gave a good picture of the national audience and the TGI stats provided regional analysis. The Arts Council and the DCMS have knocked that on the head and their research is so broad as to be useless. A Freedom of Information inquiry to the DCMS revealed:
“The 2021/22 Participation survey has figures for live music event attendance and respondents that had written or performed music available in our data tables. However, this does not include a breakdown of individual art forms for music”.
This would be a crucial piece of work for national opera planning meeting – ets call it National Opera Planning Forum (NOPF). Classical music will be in the same boat so a good chance to get together on a joint exercise – it is unlikely that jazz and folk will have the resources.
A crucial if not the crucial goal and objectives should be growing the audience for opera building an audience that is as diverse as it can be
- **New Work** – New product development is high risk. In the commercial world something like 60% of new products fall by the wayside. There are small scale opera organisations doing valuable work.
Darren Henley quoted in the Guardian (14th November 2023):
“We don’t want to bring down the curtain on ENO, but opera has to change. The future of opera is in car parks, pubs and on tablets rather than in lavish productions in grand venues, the chief executive of Arts Council England has said, amid a growing row over its removal of funding for the English National Opera”.
Clearly the Arts Council has lost the plot, is all at sea and has forgotten the notion of economies of scale. However small-scale opera companies could act as “incubator partners” for large scale companies – the equivalent of a regional repertory company transferring to the West End - the case of opera transferring to any of the major opera companies in the UK.
- **Existing repertoire** – new repertoire is important but equally important is the existing repertoire. The Arts Council conveniently forgets in its egregiously obsessed way with all things new that they forget that swathes of the population have not been to an opera, heard it on radio, or seen opera on television. Taking Part data for 2019/2020 gave the audience figures for adults over 16 years of age attending opera, 2.9% of respondents attended opera and 48% of the audience were aged 65years age plus. So, a vital part of any national plan is reaching new audiences with existing repertoire – initially if the audience won’t come to you take it to them. The power of opera through the right channels is immense. British Airways and the Flower Duet from the opera Lakme or Nessun Dorma from the World cup are two perfect examples.

There are a few more but time eludes me at the moment to write them and they will need prioritising.