

The Royal Society of Edinburgh
Cultural Flagships Series Discussion Forum (1)
Cultural Flagships: being a 'National' – *Music and Opera*
21 February 2008

The seminar was introduced by RSE Vice-President Professor Jan McDonald, who then handed over to Professor Simon Frith as Chair for the evening. Professor Frith reminded the audience that the idea of a 'national' music had always been a problematic one, but that there was nonetheless a substantial history of the use of music to give weight to feelings of national identity. He said that he felt the role of major musical events and institutions in the nation's cultural life would provide a very rich subject for debate, and introduced his two main speakers, Mr Jonathan Mills, Director and Chief Executive of the Edinburgh International Festival, and Mr Roy McEwan, Managing Director of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. For the debate following their initial contributions, the speakers would be joined by, Mr Alex Reedijk, General Director of Scottish Opera.

Jonathan Mills said that he felt very honoured to be invited to take part in such a distinguished and valuable forum. As an Australian, brought up in one of Britain's former 'colonies', he had always taken the stereotyped view of Britain as a place of ancient, stable and unchanging institutions, and had therefore been relatively unaware of the pace of constitutional and cultural change - notably devolution, and the coming of the Scottish Parliament - until he arrived in Scotland in 2006. For him, these are very exciting times, not only in Scotland but throughout Europe. The Europe in which the Edinburgh Festival was founded in 1947 is unrecognisable today. Power is being devolved in many countries, the European Union is developing and expanding, and borders are shifting, with new nations emerging from old power-structures. He is, he said, impressed by the European Union as a huge political effort, involving a formidable degree of trust and goodwill; he was also struck by the forces of expansion and fragmentation currently working within it. In the last 20 years, we have seen Czechoslovakia split in two, the Baltic states emerge, the Balkans torn by war, the emergence of strong regional forces in countries such as Spain, and - just this week - the emergence of Kosovo as a self-declared independent state. And if the audience wondered why he was talking of such matters instead of focusing on the Edinburgh Festival, it was because of his profound belief that culture does not exist in a vacuum, but represents an expression of the ideals and ambitions of a civilisation in its totality.

Mr Mills then reflected on the ambitions of the Edinburgh International Festival itself, since its foundation. He recalled the words of the Lord Provost at the time of the first Edinburgh Festival, who said it should be "a Festival to embrace the world." He also quoted George Steiner, who, in his Edinburgh Festival lecture of 1996, said that the Festival had been founded as "an enactment of European re-union." Today, the Festival is not one thing, but many. The Tattoo, the Festival Fringe, the Film Festival, Book Festival, Jazz Festival, Television Festival, Asian Mela and now the Festival of Politics all contribute to an event without parallel in the world of culture and the arts, and Mr Mills hoped that the imminent move of the Film Festival to a June date would not diminish the overall impact of the August festivals. Last year, the Festivals sold 2.6 million tickets to 875,000 festival-goers, to a value of £30 million; and their total economic impact on the city is estimated at between £125 million and £130 million a year.

Mr Mills felt it is therefore self-evident that the Festivals has a national role in Scotland, both culturally and economically. He wanted to make a distinction, though, between the importance of the Festivals' national role, and the idea that they should have some kind of nationalistic agenda. He believed that it is possible to make a tremendously meaningful contribution to national life without being nationalistic, and that Scotland provides rich examples of how a plethora of arts organisations contribute in that way. He felt that this is not a time for any arts organisation to be self-limiting. It is a time for open societies, open places, and open prospects; and he was concerned that the discussion of these should not be diverted by nationalistic ideas. Arts organisations should not be constrained by nostalgic or parochial considerations.

He reminded the audience that we live, in any case, in a time when there is considerable debate about what constitutes a nation, and that that debate has always been with us in various forms. Edinburgh, he said, is a city which constantly reminds him that there is nothing new under the sun, and he sees evidence of international exchange everywhere in its fabric, as it has evolved through the centuries. The Edinburgh Festival, he reflected, has the word 'international' in its title, and is

perhaps best defined as a prism through which cultures of all kinds can be reflected in and through Scotland, and where the world's greatest artists can contribute to that reflection. In his view, it forms part of an exceptionally rich artistic environment in Scotland today.

Mr Mills closed by considering the difference between European and what he called "Anglo-Celtic" approaches to support for the arts. In some European countries, the arts are regarded as an essential part of the infrastructure, and funded in such a stable and generous way that they could become indulgent, and disconnected from audiences. The more commercially-minded Anglo-Celtic model, on the other hand, runs the risks of mindless populism and banality. He felt that the debate about how to strike the right balance between these approaches is a vital one; and that it is therefore all the more essential that we take every chance to define the value of creativity in our time, and to articulate a role for it. He hoped to see the role of art and artists embedded within our community, both national and international.

Roy McEwan opened his remarks by reflecting on the crises that has affected many of Scotland's flagship national companies since the mid-1990s, with major threats to the future of, for example, Scottish Opera and Scottish Ballet. He said that those crises have perhaps been associated with a feeling that the traditional bastions of classical art do not deserve their privileged position, in terms of the huge proportion of arts funding dedicated to them. However, what had seemed like a chronic problem has been transformed into an opportunity; and today, with direct funding from the Scottish Government, the status of those key companies is more clearly defined in government policy than ever before.

Mr McEwan pointed out that Scotland's five 'national companies' - Scottish Opera, Scottish Ballet, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and the National Theatre of Scotland - have all emerged in very different ways. The NTS was developed as an idea by the artistic community, and brought to life by a government decision to invest the necessary funds; Scottish Opera was very much the creation of one inspired leadership figure, Sir Alexander Gibson; Scottish Ballet was created by invitation of the Scottish Arts Council, out of the shell of another company based in the west of England; the RSNO's roots lay in a civic initiative at the end of the 19th century; and the SCO was entirely a player-led project, created by orchestral musicians with an interest in the chamber repertoire. In no case was the emergence and survival of these companies inevitable, and they have all, in various ways, trodden a rocky road over the past 15 years. Now, the change in the funding system brings some aspects of the national companies' role into sharp focus, both in terms of the scale of their operations across Scotland, and in terms of new opportunities to demonstrate national achievements in the arts.

So far as music is concerned, Mr McEwan said he believes that there is a widespread recognition that music crosses borders. The SCO, for example, competes for audiences, artists and recognition with opera companies and orchestras throughout the UK and beyond. He believed it is perhaps easier for music organisations in Scotland to articulate national cultural aspirations, and to be recognised in that role, than it is for cultural organisations in England. He thought there is therefore a need to be very ambitious in terms of standards, and to attract world-class artists, as well as to develop the orchestra's recording profile and its opportunities for international touring. He also thought it imperative that the highest standards be delivered at home, in every aspect of the SCO's work in Scotland.

He acknowledged that the delivery of the wide range of services required of a national company could be seen as creating conflicts of priorities. However, the SCO feels that its summer activities across Scotland, often in rural areas, are strongly complementary to the winter concert seasons in the cities. Artists and repertoire can be shared across both activities, and also in the orchestra's recording work and international touring. International touring, said Mr McEwan, is essential in helping create a critical mass of activity to sustain the orchestra's year-round operation, and also in generating a critical mass of high achievement. Every small nation, he argued, needs to open out to the wider world, and to make strong efforts to avoid parochialism.

Mr McEwan also highlighted the role of major national companies in the training and development of new talent. All arts organisations play a role in education and training, but the national companies have the resources to be ambitious in this respect. He felt that national companies and

arts funders should see education and training as a kind of research and development activity, essential in pushing forward the development of the art-form itself. He also felt that national companies are part of the support mechanism for creative artists at every stage of their careers, and that they should act as key hubs in the network of relationships between producing organisations and creative artists.

He commented on the SCO's continuing pattern of mixed funding - mainly from the Scottish Government, but also, in some areas, from the Scottish Arts Council (soon to be Creative Scotland) and from local authorities. He said that all five Chief Executives of the national companies had gone before the Scottish Parliament's Culture and Media Committee the previous day, on an occasion that could hardly have been more different, in its positive tone, from some previous encounters. He finished by pointing out that organisations such as the SCO need not only money, but also the opportunity to be partners in a continuing, live national debate about hierarchies in the arts and the relative importance of art-forms, including debates about profligacy, about elitism, about definitions of high quality and excellence, and about new forms of enterprise and innovation in the arts. He also remarked that internationalism is a two-way process, and that it is as important to invite major artists to work in Scotland, as it is to ensure that Scottish artists have opportunities to travel and tour abroad, and to develop international links.

In the discussion which followed, Paul Henderson Scott opened the questioning by asking about the 'national component' in the work of our flagship cultural organisations. Is there a sufficient commitment to including and developing Scottish work, such as the famous Festival productions of *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaites*, which have made such an impact on audiences?

Jonathan Mills said that he didn't feel any obligation - for example - to stage a series of operas based on the Waverley novels, or to include Scottish material in any such tokenistic way. However, it is clear that Scottish artists, orchestras and companies have made massive contributions to recent festivals - he listed the presence of several of them in last year's Festival, including the NTS, Scottish Ballet, the SCO and the RSNO. He said that he had been excavating the layers of connection between the Festival and generations of Scottish artists since 1947, and felt there has been a rich connection throughout. He would continue to include the work of Scottish companies on that basis, not fixing any kind of quota, but developing relationships which will result in joint working and co-productions. He added that while Paul Scott drew attention to the *Satire of the Thrie Estaites* as the Festival event that had made the greatest impact on audiences, he felt that visiting companies could, on occasions, make as great an impact on Scottish audiences and artists. He said that the theatre production most often mentioned to him, since he arrived in Scotland, was Ninagawa's *Medea*, presented at Old College Quad in the 1980's.

Alex Reedijk, of Scottish Opera, drew attention to the company's forthcoming *Five:15* project, an evening of five short new operas made in Scotland by teams of contemporary writers, composers, and directors. He said that national companies have an obvious duty of care towards the development of the art-form within the country, and that includes a commitment to commissioning and developing new work made here.

Roy McEwan said he felt that it was difficult ever to do enough in this area. The SCO routinely commissions four new works a year, mainly from Scottish-based composers, but he felt that national companies should never be let off the hook. They should always be under pressure to demonstrate their commitment to art-form development in Scotland, perhaps through growing co-operation among the national companies, a subject which is increasingly under discussion.

Richard Witts of Edinburgh University asked what the panel thought of EU-sponsored projects to create supra-national performing organisations, such as the Chamber Orchestra of Europe.

Jonathan Mills said that as far as he understood the situation, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe is entirely a player-led initiative, and the European Commission is simply jumping on the bandwagon because of the success the orchestra has enjoyed. He suggested that the dead hand of European bureaucracy might actually cause what has been a very successful initiative to wither and die, but he felt that so long as the enthusiasm of individual artists lies behind such projects, they can be immensely rewarding. He cited the example of the EU Youth Orchestra, driven by the vision and charisma of its founder, Joy Bryer.

From the audience, James Irvine said that it was important for flagship national cultural organisations to have a strong presence in the media, in order to strengthen their relationship with the widest possible public. He asked whether the panel believed that the EIF receives enough media coverage. He also asked whether the lack of a permanent conductor at SCO - which currently has a team of associate conductors - is making the year-round working of the orchestra more difficult.

Roy McEwan said that all orchestras were facing the fact that it is now more difficult to get world-class conductors to commit to a full-time relationship with a single orchestra. He felt this situation is unlikely to change, and was certain that so long as the orchestra has a clear artistic policy and a stable relationship with players, the experience of working with different conductors can actually be an advantage.

Jonathan Mills said that he had serious concerns about the media coverage of the Edinburgh International Festival. So far as theatre is concerned, he felt that that the EIF has a job to do in reclaiming coverage from the Fringe, which tends to dominate the drama pages, despite the fact that the EIF now often represents far better value, and presents more exciting cutting-edge work, than the average commercial Fringe venue.

His main concern, though, was over the increasing failure of broadcasters, and the BBC in particular, to give serious coverage to the Festival, including broadcasts of major music events. He said that the BBC's growing tendency to focus entirely on its own BBC Proms Season in London during the late summer calls into question its remit and purpose as a national broadcaster for the whole of the Britain. He drew attention to the work of the recently-set-up Scottish Broadcasting Commission, chaired by Blair Jenkins, and said that he had recently given evidence to the Commission on this subject.

In a final round of questions, Ian Yeoman asked the panel how their organisations were responding to the huge changes in demography, technology and national identity now re-shaping Scotland and the world. American composer Chip Clark offered an observation rather than a question, pointing out that the Edinburgh Festival is hugely recognised beyond the UK as perhaps the world's premier arts Festival. He felt that it was vital to continue to bring international artists to Scotland, and to make sure that Scottish artists are enabled to perform internationally.

Alex Reedijk commented that the huge success of the NTS's *Black Watch* marks a change in the relationship between Scotland's national companies and the nation's developing sense of identity. The Scottish Government is now taking it upon itself to use culture as a means of articulating the idea of a confident Scotland. In that process, Mr Reedijk believes it helps to have the national companies in the right place, clearly defined, and with a new funding system in action. He thought the Government is beginning to understand the value of the arts as a way of articulating the presence of a country that punches above its weight - as Scotland punched above its weight in previous centuries, in areas such as medicine and science.

Jonathan Mills acknowledged the scale of the challenges faced by the Edinburgh International Festival, in a world completely transformed since the 1940s. He said that the Festival can no longer assume it is alone, in an age when every city on earth seems to have its international festival. He said that the only way forward is to be genuinely ambitious and innovative, and to seek to make intelligent and appropriate responses to developments in the world beyond the arts.

He felt, for example, that the British arts community should be making a creative response now to the coming of the London Olympics in 2012. He said that these Olympics would cost 7.5 times more than the Sydney Olympics of 2004, and that the whole issue of resources for sport and the arts is going to be at bursting point in the run-up to the event. He therefore felt that the arts sector should be doing everything it can to galvanise interest in a summer-long, UK-wide festival of culture, running alongside the Olympics, that can become part of the strategy to maximise the positive impact of the Olympics across the UK.

Mr Mills also felt that there are huge opportunities in the current changing world scene. In 1992, for example, when his predecessor Brian McMaster became Director of the Festival, almost no-one in China or India had any disposable income at all; today, there are millions if not billions of people in

Asia now willing and able to travel, and to become involved in cultural experience and exchange. He was also determined to develop the online presence of the Festival in innovative ways.

Roy McEwan was also interested in the SCO's evolving online presence, and in new ways of distributing musical experience using the internet. He said that the definition of western classical music is becoming more complex and the boundaries less sharp, and that there are increasing interactions with other musical traditions worldwide. He said that the market for electronic media is extensively international, and that techniques such as remote access and webcasting mean that an organisation such as the SCO can begin to develop a world-wide network of enthusiastic fans and supporters.

Simon Frith summed up the evening's discussion, saying that it had demonstrated the truth of the observation that the role of national flagship cultural organisations is not to resolve issues of identity, but to provide the arena in which they can be most interestingly debated. He felt that the national companies' economic role as key hubs of professional training and opportunity is of great importance and should not be ignored. He also felt, as someone who has been observing the Scottish cultural scene since he arrived in 1987, that there has been a gradual but marked shift from pessimism to optimism in the arts. He believed that the embedding of the position of the national flagship companies, as a serious part of what Scotland's government is about, represents a very important moment, which this first seminar in the national flagships series has helped to capture, debate, and record.

**Joyce McMillan
Edinburgh
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