

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales
Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee
Cyllid Celfyddydau nad yw'n Gyhoeddus / Non-public Funding of the Arts
CWLC(5) ART05
Ymateb gan Opera Canolbarth Cymru / Evidence from Mid Wales Opera

Firstly, we would like to thank you for your interest in this vital issue and in the balance between the role of revenue funding from Arts Council of Wales and the need to diversify funding sources for the arts in Wales through earned income, philanthropy and investment.

As a sector, we are well aware of the challenges faced by the National Assembly and the Welsh Government in terms of funding, and equally of your Committee's on-going commitment to supporting and valuing the Arts and Cultural Industries.

In response to your consultation, we would like to use Mid Wales Opera's work as an example of the efforts, and challenges, involved in trying to diversify the funding base of revenue funded organisations. As a company, MWO is a revenue funded client of ACW – however, the funding we receive (£104,000 per year) is sufficient only to support our core staffing and to meet the costs of producing one show per year and presenting it at our home theatre in Hafren, Newtown. As it only makes financial, logistical and artistic sense to create a new production if we also tour it, we inevitably have to generate additional revenue from a range of sources to make our overall operation viable.

Our annual budget for the coming year is £292,000 – with our work including:-

1. A sixteen venue community scale tour of William Walton's The Bear in Autumn 2017
2. An eight theatre tour of our core production of Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin in Spring 2018 with Ensemble Cymru.
3. A week's residency in Montgomery Church in Wales School – creating an opera from scratch with the entire junior school.

Our work over the next year is supported by:-

- The Foyle Foundation and Ashley Family Foundation – each contributing £20,000 towards the costs of The Bear
- Nidec/Control Techniques – sponsorship for singer on The Bear tour £1500

- Arts Council of Wales Lottery – Eugene Onegin tour (£75,000 grant National Touring)
- D’oyly Carte Charitable Trust (£3,000), Fenton Arts Trust (£3,000), John Lewis Charitable Trust (£2,000) towards the costs of supporting Young Artists on our Eugene Onegin tour – we have applications in with the Garrick Charitable Trust, Oakdale Trust.
- ACW Creative Collaborations – schools residency.
- £8,000 of other income , predominantly individual giving from our Friends and Patrons

Non-public funding thus is expected to provide around a fifth of our total income with a further fifteen percent coming from earned income and ticket sales

We already have some funding in place towards our 18/19 programme which is based on a community tour of Ravel’s L’heure Espagnole and a main stage tour of Puccini’s Tosca– £7,500 from the Garfield Weston Foundation and £5000 from the Gwendoline and Margaret Davies trust – our lottery application has been submitted this month.

For an organisation with just four part-time staff, juggling this range of funders and the constant need to plan ahead is a challenge. For the first time in our history, we are working to a five year artistic plan which allows us to build on our successes – such as our Spring 2017 tour of Handel’s Semele with the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and Academy of Ancient Music – and plan our partnerships years in advance.

The foundation for all of this work is our revenue funding. It is the bedrock on which MWO is built and allows us to employ staff, including our Artistic Directors Jonathan Lyness and Richard Studer on contracts (albeit part time ones) working on a year round basis rather than sessionally during production periods. That means we can work together as a team, sharing our ideas and plans around each production and creating marketing and fundraising programmes which are fully integrated into our artistic vision.

Having managed organisations reliant on annual lottery applications for their core costs, I am well aware that the luxury of revenue funding is one which we cannot take for granted. We work in partnership with our lead officer at the Arts Council of

Wales, and while she is taking voluntary redundancy in the current round we are already establishing a relationship with our new officer.

We are part of a far wider eco-system across the arts in Wales (and to some extent into England). By working with Ensemble Cymru as our orchestra for the next two main stage productions we are able to partner with an organisation which shares our vision of bringing exceptional quality, chamber scale music and productions to audiences outside Cardiff – making more work for their players and taking their music to new places.

We're also in close and regular contact with all our theatres – we understand the financial pressures they face, that opera is a tough sell (particularly outside metropolitan centres) and our fees reflect that – as does the level of marketing support we give our theatres for our touring work.

Opera is of course, the most expensive of art forms, and if we are to make it accessible, we cannot hope to recoup more than a modest proportion of what it costs to mount a show. As a company, we are focussed on taking opera to places where it is never or rarely performed – for example our mainstage tour will visit Llanelli, Milford Haven and Newport. Our tickets cost around £15–£20, with some theatres offering special deals such as Pontardawe Arts Centre's £1 tickets for children to see *The Magic Flute*.

In the past, venues who were funded by the Arts Council and local authorities were prepared to pay a fee which exceeded the income they were likely to generate from ticket sales, as part of their mission to present the widest variety of performing arts, but with funding cuts to their budgets, this is no longer the case: our fees have stagnated over the last ten years, meaning that, earned income now meets only around 15–20% of the costs of each performance. This clearly represents a huge challenge.

The four star reviews, and high critical praise for our 2017 Spring tours have confirmed MWO's work is exceptional quality by any standards. The price of our tickets, our decision to cast 50% of our performers from those under 30 and/or less than four years out of college and our touring venues reflect a commitment to supporting young artists and our desire to share our passion for this extraordinary artform. We choose to sing in English and we have chosen to take our SmallStages tour to Aberdaron, Cilgerran and Cwmbran on ACW Night Out programme because we genuinely believe opera is for everyone.

As a company we're working hard to diversify our funding base but we do face some considerable challenges, over and above the inherently challenging proposition of mounting a show which requires some 25 professional performers plus stage and technical crew in small and medium sized venues around Wales – some specific to our commitment to working from a base in Mid Wales.

- Sponsorship works well for some companies, and we have had some small success ourselves, but in rural Wales there is a limited range of private companies which we can approach – realistically this is not a solution for many arts organisations.
- We're working hard to increase individual giving through Friends and Patrons – as a small company we need to find new ways to connect with those willing to personally support our work and we're working with our Board to do that. But as a touring company, it can be challenging to develop embedded relationships and many of the areas to which we tour are characterised by low incomes.
- London based critics are often reluctant to travel beyond Cardiff to see work – and London based funders likewise. We contribute to the Wales Critics Fund which can support those based in Wales to review our work but we need to find a way to get national press reviewers to see our shows, and opening in Newtown presents us with a challenge on that level!

We'd be happy to attend the Committee in person if that would be useful – or to be used as an example of the efforts being made by revenue clients to diversify their funding, alongside the challenges that presents.