

Submission from Welsh National Opera to the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Select Committee on “The role of Arts and Culture in addressing poverty and social exclusion”

Background to WNO’s Engagement Programme

Having grown from a voluntary singing ensemble in 1946, Welsh National Opera’s mission has always been about challenging traditional views of what opera can be in the heart of Wales’s community. As the company’s vision and reach has expanded, we have built up an internationally recognised reputation to reach those who are often excluded from taking part in the arts. Our Youth and Community Programme is over 45 years old and was initially established to create more opportunities for the communities across South Wales to access opera beyond attending the theatre; particularly in communities that wouldn’t otherwise have the chance.

Our youth, community and digital work, led by our Director of Partnerships and Engagement, has grown extensively over the last three years with a remit to deliver across the whole of Wales and England. We now have one of the largest outreach programmes of all national opera companies in the UK, reaching over 37,000 participants in the last financial year, across 74 projects, reaching a further 58,000 people through our digital light exhibition in 2016. In 2017 our touring Virtual Reality ‘pop up opera’ reached just under 12,000 people and also toured to the Hong Kong Arts Festival. For 60% of these visitors, this was their first taste of opera. We receive an average of 20,000 downloads to our primary school singing teaching resources per month and will be expanding this offer to include secondary school resources in addition to training resources for music workshop leaders.

Our aim over the next four years is to create even more opportunities for harder to reach communities to actively engage with opera. Be it through direct participation in workshops or events, or by using digital technologies to author their own content, inspired by opera. Our digital programme has grown to the extent that we can use our expertise to encourage groups to harness their creativity and share this with wider networks around the world, connecting the otherwise unseen smaller communities of Wales with the international stage.

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With this expanding remit, our youth, community and digital strategy also focuses heavily on how we can effect change on the ground as cultural ambassadors. How we can reach out to communities and involve them in our projects whilst constantly pushing the boundaries of what can be achieved by opera. How we can be relevant whilst dealing in an art form that is defined by its history, where we create lasting impact in cities we only visit for a few days at a time.

Culture Poverty and Social Inclusion

On this basis in 2014 we made the decision to work in communities that had previously be defined as Community First areas in Wales, and those that ranked high on the deprivation index in England. The focus was on expansion of our offer (reaching more people across broader geographical boundaries), and therefore increasing participation and the promotion of inclusive practice. We have extended our offer in include early years through to older people in retirement and everyone in between; and we no longer run projects that are time limited instead programming opportunities to engage with WNO throughout the year. By expanding the programme in this way we have achieved deeper, more meaningful relationships with the communities in the cities we tour, that aren't simply about one off activities, but that promote sustainable outcomes to reinforce the wider benefits of cultural participation, particularly in areas of low engagement.

To support this approach and to develop long term partnerships on the ground we have a team of producers based at local venues in a series of hub areas in Wales and England. There is a team at our home theatre at the WMC in Cardiff working across South Wales including the Valleys and Swansea. A team of 3 based at Venue Cymru in Llandudno working across the North East Wales area, a team of 2 in Birmingham, and soon to be a Producer based in Southampton working across the South West of England.

The driving force of this provision is around regular and sustained access. We run weekly schools and special schools programme in areas of Cardiff and the South Wales Valleys that rank highly on the deprivation index or that do not receive any music provision directly in the school. This means that every child from these schools will get to work with Welsh National Opera for over 12 months and will attend an open dress rehearsal and meet some of the cast. We also offer the children and their family subsidised tickets and have a wider discounted ticket scheme for young people under 30 years.

Our regular schools programme currently runs in 17 schools and 8 of these have been assigned because they are in areas of deprivation: Splott, Ely, Llanrumney, Maesglas and Pentwyn. We are also offering this programme in Valleys schools in in Pontypridd, Abercarn and Newport and we will be expanding to more Valleys schools in the next financial year. Through this programme we offer places to young people who are based in the formerly assigned Community First areas, who want to take part in our youth opera sessions, but without support wouldn't have the opportunity to join in. To remove barriers to access completely, we provide transport each week for the young people by way of mini bus, waiver the fees and provide a chaperone and youth opera buddy, so that they instantly feel part of the group. This has enabled us to diversify the group of young people we work with and open up youth opera to a much larger pool of young singers, particularly those from challenging socio economic backgrounds. This opportunity will also extend to young people of 18 – 21 years who are not in conservatoire training and who again are from areas that are socio-economically challenged or from BAME communities, who will have the chance to be part of our youth artist programme, where they will not only have focussed training programme around singing and performance skills but will also have the opportunity to shadow back stage areas such as stage management, lighting, set design, costume and wigs and make up.

In the last 3.5 years we have worked with around 1,640 pupils across our schools programme. Teachers complete feedback forms each year explaining the benefits of the programme;

"It's hard to put into words all the benefits. It's been huge. It's broadened the children's horizons. They have a better understanding of music, language, emotions... the world. They have developed creatively and have improved discipline... They now consider bigger dreams – not only considering music but to consider jobs they've heard from the lessons – i.e. art, literature and psychology – La bohème. My class have improved their attendance in school this year. I consider that WNO lessons have had an impact on this too. Children look forward to the lessons. It has had such an impact on our school. We feel extremely fortunate to have been made a part of such a wonderful scheme."

Looking to the future of the regular schools programme we aim to target areas described as "most deprived" on the WIMD with preference given to specific schools whose pupil population has higher percentages of FSM than the national average, whilst also taking into consideration targets surrounding geographical location, ethnic diversity, Welsh language use and current music provision and access.

We run a similar programme in our North Wales hub and recruit young people for youth opera from Wrexham, Mold, Bangor and Caernarfon.

As well as weekly provision we also run a 'special projects programme'. In South Wales this has been specifically targeted to Bute Town through our Family Concerts programme and the Valleys and Swansea for wider access, where in the last two years we have used digital technology and composition as a way of engaging young people, involving over 850 pupils. 5 of these projects have taken place in areas of Pontypridd, Abercarn, Abercanaid, Cyfarthfa, Ystrad Mynach and Merthyr. Our School dress rehearsals are open to primary and secondary pupils (production dependent) for free, with free travel provided for the majority of schools where appropriate, over 2,530 pupils have attended these rehearsals over the last 3 years.

Recently in Swansea we have worked with the 850 intergenerational participants in Townhill, Sketty, Bryn Mellin, Castle Ward, St Helens and Morriston, on a project bringing young people together with older people experiencing Dementia in partnership with Dementia Friends and Age Concern.

Across our special projects programme we have entered into a five year relationship with the Refugee Council in Wales and we will work with charities including Amnesty International, Red Cross, Forget Me Not Chorus, Pen Cymru and Save the Children Cymru and National partners such as the Children's Commissioner for Wales amongst others as part of our Freedom programme. This has enabled us to introduce young people to issues around human rights; they have created their own commission around the issue that will be performed at the Senedd later this month.

A recent project with the Oasis Centre in Cardiff working with up to 20 refugee participants who have been writing their own music and songs working with WNO will be performed in July by members of the WNO orchestra and chorus; and we are welcoming them, their friends and families to an open music event at WNO next week, which will also be supported by free transport.

We are running an artist in residence programme working with 4 refugees who have been developing a piece called 'Beyond the Rainbow', working with musicians and writers in our studio and also offering opportunities for refugees to work as producers and project managers across our youth and community programme. This opportunity will continue for the next three years.

Around health and well-being, we are working in partnership with the Heath Hospital, Llandough and Morriston hospital in Swansea delivering weekly singing sessions with older patients and their families.

How effective has the Welsh Government been in improving participation in and access to culture for people in poverty?

The Baroness Kay Andrews' report 'Culture and Poverty', highlighted excellent practice across the arts and heritage sector in terms of tackling poverty, particularly cultural poverty, but also identified areas where real partnership could be brokered towards future change. Our inclusion in this report has been influential when seeking new partnerships for our continued programme in the Valleys.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 has also shaped some of our thinking around how we engage with young people and the opportunities we offer them particularly around skills development and around the objectives of our more recent programme working with hospitals.

Working with organisations like schools and head teachers, training organisations like Cultural and Creative Skills Council with whom we have had a five year partnership, and more recently the Refugee Council for Wales and the Children's Commissioner has helped us to see how we can better support young people who may be excluded from the arts or living in extreme poverty.

Barriers

A major barrier for communities accessing our provision is transport links, particularly when we cover such a wide geographical spread across Wales. The continued investment that is needed to support sustained community engagement across our hub programmes is significant, and benefits cannot always be measured in terms of tackling poverty or supporting job creation opportunities; and whilst we provide free transport for both our youth opera programme, dress rehearsal programmes and in some cases to attend our shows, this has considerable cost attached to the organisation. Partnership programmes around improved transport links or providing affordable and connected transport across Wales but particularly to Valleys communities and across North Wales would be a huge benefit. Simply travelling from North to South, a journey which our producers regularly undertake can take almost a day, which has an impact on resource and capacity. Equally, some of our youth opera singers in North Wales travel over 40 miles to access provision.

Another barrier, in terms of infrastructure, is that austerity has led to local music services being decimated and therefore that element of the infrastructure is now very patchy. This means that for arts organisations who have something to offer, it can be very difficult to know where to access those who need our work most. For example, in our work in Birmingham and Southampton, we liaise closely with the Music Education Hubs there, and a structured approach is taken to provision from arts companies across the cities. This ensures that we are not duplicating work, and also are going into areas where the need is greatest. It is also worth pointing out that the significant decrease of individual music tuition formerly provided by all music services is leading to a crisis situation where only children from privileged backgrounds will be able to learn musical instruments, thus actively working against the government's wish for equality of access to the arts.

A challenge for us, rather than a barrier per se, is that there is a dearth of trained amateurs to lead this work. We are very lucky in having some brilliant freelancers who we work with, but they are few and far between and in demand. We have taken a proactive approach to this and have engaged with a programme formed by the Spitalfields Festival to train new amateurs; we are now in early stages of planning of a project to create a similar programme in North Wales, and then Birmingham, in collaboration with the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama.

A final challenge for us is that there is a massive demand for our work. Whilst this could be seen as a "nice to have" problem, it actually has opened our eyes to what a responsibility we and other companies have in terms of this type of provision. We know this stuff works (although see evaluation below) and despite constantly being on the look-out for funding opportunities, we have to prioritise where we go,

What impact has the Welsh Government's Fusion programme had on using culture to tackle poverty?

Whilst we recognise the significant potential of the fusion programme and have consulted with the team and attended an information session, we have not as yet looked to directly benefit from the programme in terms of funding through a Local Authority partner. We can see where this support would benefit our programme particularly in North Wales around the volunteering opportunities that we are beginning to set up and which could be linked to qualifications and accreditation, but in the shorter term we have been working hard to establish this programme and the overall strategy before making a case for funding.

Some of partners on the North Wales programme, Can Sing for instance, have benefited from the programme and we have seen the impacts first hand and through verbatim evidence,

particularly around highlighting the benefits of cultural participation for young people and the communities they are from, however, we haven't had direct access to formalised evaluation and monitoring at this stage to understand how this benefit is measured and across what baseline.

There is limited published evidence available around the programme and its impact. Greater visibility of the scheme could achieve improved collaboration particularly amongst the national arts organisations and we believe we need to take a more active part in seeking out how we can work with partners to champion this approach and be more involved in future should the opportunities become available to be part of the Fusion programme.

Evaluation

There have been many programmes trying to assess formally the impact of arts education on young people's life chances but there is still no nationwide method of evaluation. We do evaluate our work – by form-filling, vox-pops and other qualitative methods - and have our own Quality Principles that we adhere to, and for the assessment of practitioners we use Artworks' principles (a major partnership programme on participatory practice we are part of funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation). We have recently engaged an evaluator to work on our Schools programme so it will be interesting to see whether there is a more robust method that we can use into the future. However, there is very little doubt, from the feedback we get from partners such as Head Teachers that our work is fulfilling a valuable role, increasing the confidence, discipline and well-being of the people we interact with, and thereby making a significant difference to their chances in life.

Leonora Thomson

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