

COVID-19

12 August 2020

Governing opera

Governing opera is an even more fluid endeavour than even the most extravagant operatic plot line, but there are real lessons from the recent governance improvements in opera for boards of all kinds.

The UK's leading opera companies are characterised as having strong, effective boards and high standards of governance. This is a sector where, among the most senior companies, good governance has delivered real outcomes.

Huge challenges

The challenges for opera boards are complex. The nature of the art form involves bringing together large numbers of diverse performers: solo artists, chorus singers, dancers, musicians and even gymnasts. These performers are like athletes. They need focused training over many years. Like an athlete, to be stage-ready means a career of training, coaching, professional development and of course performing.

Then there are increasingly complex technical effects from computer-driven, mechanical stage sets through to video projection. And all this may be being done in a historical building, with all the limitations and covenants that entails.

The market in performers and productions is an international one, so Brexit again creates challenges. Funding is affected by the art form being seen as elitist and very London-centric, where our two principal opera houses are based. Then there is a rapidly emerging digital dimension too. Audiences sitting in a theatre in Bexhill-on-Sea can and do watch, in real time, the curtain rise at the Met.

Risk, money, talent, diversity and access are big issues for opera boards to think through.

"Without risk, opera will be in the museum", said Bernard Foccroulle, the director of the Aix-En-Provence Opera Festival as he received the 2018 Leadership Award at the International Opera Awards. Opera isn't like West-End musicals: find something with mass appeal and pump it out year-on-year. Lloyd Webber's wonderful *Phantom of the Opera* has grossed \$6bn since 1986, giving joy to many and pumping resources into the broader arts.

But opera is only truly successful when new thinking is applied and with this comes risks. The boards of arts organisations need to work through a carefully calibrated risk appetite. Salzburg Landestheater got the common mood right depicting the libidinous Count Almaviva as a Harvey Weinstein character in the 2019 production of *Figaro*, complete with 'Me Too' banners.

Complex funding

Opera is an expensive business. Funders often fail to recognise that there is an important interplay in terms of a country building up musical and theatre skills between different parts of the overall musical sector. The lighting director paid for by a performance of Jenufa at ENO is kept in business to go on and light a community theatre in Cornwall. So when opera funding is cut the broader development of the whole musical sector is affected too. And vice versa.

The entire UK opera sector's revenue was £240m in 2016. Arts Council England funding is, like most areas of the public sector, calibrated against efficiency rather than against risk, and the thinking behind state funding is not integrated. This means that funding objectives are expressed in terms of individual companies rather than a strategy to develop a vibrant overall national live music market, accepting that this means some organisations will run at an ongoing financial loss but they are developing talent that the whole national live music will benefit from. Small, local opera companies come to mind in particular. These support young talent during the early years of their careers.

“Other sectors have much to learn from opera about risk appetite, talent development and being serious about diversity and inclusion”

Good stewardship

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown many arts organisations into financial crisis. The UK's main opera companies have been in the hands of good stewards for some time though. To take one example, the chief executive of Glyndebourne wrote to members this summer to explain that building their reserves over the last 15 years to almost £50m will enable the company to weather the immediate storm, and – crucially – to support the freelancers that depend on the company.

Talent of all kinds in the arts are usually freelancers, and the financial shock to individuals has led many to consider whether they have any future in the arts, or at the least to lose a year of development and growth with no productions, rehearsals or joint practice.


Likewise, ENO honoured commitments to artists in productions halted by the lockdown. However, the pipeline of talent is fragile to such large shocks. In 2016 there were just 664 composers globally with an opera produced in the last five years, just one living composer (Philip Glass) in the list of top 50 composers by production activity. The average composition year of operas performed today is 1864. Literature depends on the JK Rowlings every bit as much as on the Jane Austens to stay relevant and inspire new readers. Live music is no different.

The access challenge

Audiences need development and building too; opera is seen as elitist and current audiences are not from a broad demographic. What is changing this are the leading companies that are insisting on diversity, with strong engagement schemes such as Glyndebourne's under-30s audience development programme or ENO's under-18s come for free. In 2019 10% of ENO's audience came from BAME backgrounds against 13% of the general population. 20% of their principal singers and 13% of the ENO chorus are from BAME backgrounds.

ENO states: “We want to commit to ensuring that everyone feels like ENO is their opera company. This means that we will commit to telling a wider range of stories on stage. We will continue to commit to diverse and inclusive casting on stage. We will ensure that our workforce represents the diverse makeup of the country we live in, at all levels of the organisation. And we want to ensure that everyone feels welcome when they step through the doors of the London Coliseum. ENO is for everyone, and always will be.”

One approach by the ENO is to screen auditions so those auditioning for roles are completely anonymised to the casting panel. They perform behind a screen, walk on a carpet, do not talk and do not have their gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity or physical ability status on any application form.



But of course opera isn't just performed on the radio; the physical characterisation by the actors onstage is an important part of the experience. And in performance – just as in organisational leadership, politics, teaching, and any other activity that puts people in an elevated position in front of others – what is reflected on stage is intimately connected to the feelings of self-worth of the audience member, viewer, student or citizen. People need to see themselves reflected in these elevated places.

Organisations would do well to ask themselves what approaches they have tried to address this important inclusivity issue. GGI would love to hear from you.

Call to action

Boards of the UK's opera companies have addressed the crises of previous decades well. In a delicate and complex international market the country's main opera companies built resilience over the last 15 years that has helped them come through the pandemic as viable, but the damage to their market will need similar effort over the next decade.

Other sectors have much to learn from opera about risk appetite, talent development and being serious about diversity and inclusion.

Our main opera companies have extremely transparent governance arrangements, and their websites include detailed information down to individual policy level that will be interesting to board members from all sectors open to learning from a national success story.

GGI's corporate and social responsibility programme currently supports both the ENO and Barefoot Opera, a small professional opera company in Sussex.

GGI also sponsors the Leadership Award in the International Opera Awards. This year's GGI Annual Lecture, part of the Festival of Governance 2020, is chaired by British soprano Nadine Benjamin.

GGI is also part of the Clore Cultural Governance Alliance promoting good governance in our arts sector.