

CLASSIC CONCERTS TRUST

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Watford Borough Council
Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday, February 13th 2007

Dear Mr Chairman

Future plans for Watford Colosseum

I understand that it is possible to comment on the text of the final report published recently.

Having attended as many of the meetings as was possible I was pleased to witness what seems a very positive view concerning the future of the hall. I still have some concerns, however:

- Although the committee seems to understand the importance of the quality of the acoustic there still seems to be some hesitation in accepting the consequences of this. Personally I have no doubts about the fact that, whatever its original design brief, intrinsically this is the best concert hall in England and musically on an equal level with the best in the world. Whilst I fully appreciate the value of the building to the local community and the need for access and events, surely the best future for the hall would be likely to be achieved through promotion of its musical qualities?

The unique nature of the Watford Hall also significantly limits the relevance of examining venues in other places. Although there is no doubt that this is an interesting process, the demographics of the Watford area, combined with the qualities of the hall, make this an exceptional situation requiring an exceptional solution. I outlined my own suggestions in this regard at the October meeting and I have to confess that I am disappointed that there seems to be no interest in my essential proposal of maintaining the current status quo in order to allow the possibility of pursuing an ambitious development programme.

- In any case, any true understanding of the value of the acoustic mitigates against any form of commercial operation. The conflicting needs of commercial management and an artistic resource mean that one or the other is likely to be significantly compromised, not least because of the vastly differing lead times for event planning. I have seen this attempted time and time again and in my experience it never works. It increases the costs of producing an artistic programme and removes the possibility of subsidising it from more commercial events. Quite simply, where there is any artistic aspiration at all, this is a more expensive management solution.

In connection with this I am also extremely concerned that the report quotes misleading financial statistics concerning Southampton and Cambridge: the operating costs for Cambridge include the cost of a substantial professional concert series – probably the most significant single area of expenditure on programming - whereas the much lower costs in Southampton do not. It would be interesting to see a detailed breakdown concerning operating costs and subsidy since this would give a much truer picture of the state of affairs.

Artistic Director Jonathan Brett Trustees D G Lees, P L Money

Although in the longer term I believe that it would be possible to find alternative sources for funding for professional concerts in Watford this only has any real chance to happen in the context of a long term planned programme including a sustained council investment. There is simply no likelihood of a scenario like Southampton where it seems that an arts council funded institution simply provides the commercial operator with professional concerts.

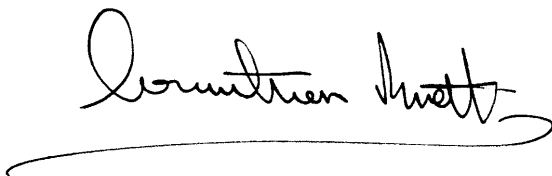
- I am also concerned by the apparent enthusiasm for tiered seating. Unless there is going to be a major redevelopment, the auditorium is the one area of the building which in my view should be left alone. Such a huge change could have significant implications for the acoustic and cannot be considered in isolation: it might be that a careful re-building of the stage (necessary in the long-term in my view) could alleviate many of the currently perceived problems with sight lines. In any case, making such an alternation to the hall without previously seeking advice about the acoustic implications from leading experts in the field is likely to be a major mistake. The fact that halls which are not musically "special" – like Southampton and Cambridge – have added tiered seating does not make it right for Watford; elsewhere good halls have been ruined by misguided renovation and in the case of a hall of this quality, to spoil it would be an act of appalling cultural vandalism.
- Finally I should like to reiterate my opinion that, whatever happens in the short term in order to pursue it, the long term objective for the development of this hall should be its development as not so much a concert hall but as a major regional resource for music: one which provides musical events of all kinds of the highest standards and aims to bring musical activity and involvement to every area of society. I applaud the committee on their view that the hall should be for everyone – this exactly mirrors my own views about music, which is becoming more and more the preserve of privilege in the UK, due in no small part to the continually declining provision.

There is a real opportunity to do something really great here and I believe it would be a great shame if the council were to miss it.

As I said in October, pretty much all the options have been explored and found wanting in the past so why not try this one?

If any clarification or amplification of these thoughts and ideas would be helpful I should be happy to provide it.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Brett', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Jonathan Brett
Artistic Director