

Alfred Dennis, John
Carpenter's opera
*The Ghosts of
Hutchins* was cut from
the programme of
the New York
Metropolitan Opera

A photograph of three opera singers in elaborate 18th-century costumes performing on stage. The singer on the left is a woman with a large, powdered wig, wearing a dark, ruffled dress with a white bodice, holding a white feather. The singer in the center is a woman with a large, powdered wig, wearing a dark, ruffled dress with a white bodice, holding a white feather. The singer on the right is a woman with a large, powdered wig, wearing a dark, ruffled dress with a white bodice, holding a white feather. The background is dark with gold curtains.

End of the aria

Declining funding, disappearing donors and shrinking audiences are affecting opera houses on both sides of the Atlantic – although the British scene remains surprisingly resilient in the face of ongoing economic pressures. By Fergus O'Sullivan

'There is no safe repertoire; even the handful of most popular operas wears thin eventually. If you just programme the chestnuts, audiences get bored – and our biggest risk is to lose excitement and momentum'



In a corner: Peter Gelb (left), general director at the New York Metropolitan Opera, and John Berry, artistic director at the Met

How does a notoriously expensive art form such as opera stay healthy when the economy itself is sick? This is the pressing question faced by opera companies across the world as funding shrinks and audiences dwindle.

From Baltimore to Berlin, opera houses have been ailing as private and government donations dry up. Of course, compared with the bang of the current recession, the troubles faced by opera houses are something of a whimper. But with closures, cancelled productions and more empty seats, the challenge is working out a sustainable future for themselves now that the boom has gone.

Both the European and US opera industries are in crisis, with house directors frantically trying to plug funding holes ripped by the recession. While Europeans reel from government funding cuts, Americans struggle to cope with shrunken endowment funds, disappearing donors and a drop in ticket sales.

Nowhere has the crash been more devastating than in the US. Reliant upon wealthy private donors and endowments, which have slumped, opera houses face the new decade with a serious lack of cash. Usually more expensive than their state-subsidised European counterparts, their high ticket prices have also thinned out the middle market, emptying a worrying number of seats in the stalls.

The Baltimore and Connecticut opera companies have already lost the battle and been forced to close, while almost all companies have seen cuts and cancelled parts of their seasons. Major players such as the Washington and Los Angeles operas – both have the star tenor Plácido Domingo as their general director – have junked productions and trimmed staff, with Los Angeles soliciting a \$14m state loan to tide it over. The New York City Opera, meanwhile, saw its new director, former Paris Opera head Gérard Mortier, leave before he had even brought anything to the stage when he felt unable to accept its recession budget of \$34m – after requesting a still relatively low \$70m.

Even the New York Metropolitan Opera is feeling the pinch in spite of its prestige and opulent patronage. With its endowment shrinking from \$300m to \$200m at its lowest point in 2008 (it has since started to rally) and donations faltering, the Met's general director, Peter Gelb, has been forced to act. In an attempt to cut costs, administration staff have taken a 10 per cent pay cut (union-protected backstage staff and musicians settled for a pay freeze) – but it is Gelb's alterations to the programme that are more controversial.

"When the market was bottoming out, we had to make some tough choices," he admits, "so we pulled some of the more expensive revivals

and saved a few million dollars." Out went four productions, among them John Corigliano's 1980 opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* and Strauss's rarely performed *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, and in came Strauss's spiky but better-known *Elektra* and that much-loved populist workhorse, Verdi's *La Traviata*. These changes might have been painful, but in a hyper-critical climate in which the New York Post, a US tabloid, dubbed him "the most hated man at the Met" for little more than cutting an old production of *Tosca*, Gelb's caution is understandable.

He is also keen to point out that despite a deficit of \$1.3m in 2009, the Met is still successful in drawing in new audiences. With its groundbreaking and profitable scheme to broadcast opera live in cinemas copied by opera companies around the world, the Met remains firmly in the operatic vanguard, while this season's new productions of Shostakovich's whimsical *The Nose* (about a man without one) and Verdi's

obscure *Attila* prove the house is not content simply to weather the storm by relying upon old favourites.

As Gelb notes: "There is no safe repertoire; even the handful of most popular operas wears thin eventually. If you just programme the chestnuts, audiences get bored – and our biggest risk is to lose excitement and momentum."

While this impressive balancing act between popularity and innovation seems to be paying off, he still strikes a rather weary note: "It's an uphill struggle. If we weren't pursuing all possible avenues, we'd be sinking."

While the recession has knocked especially large holes in US private-donor-based funding, the European situation gives little cause for complacency. Germany's cash-strapped opera houses are in increasing disarray, with Berlin's three opera houses in particular still stricken with variable audiences, threatened cuts and creative turf wars. In Italy, meanwhile, many opera houses are close to bankruptcy, with some likely to close their doors for good in the near future. While there is a small amount of sponsorship money out there to compensate for government cuts, private donors remain rare and can be viewed with suspicion.

The opinion of Mortier, the former director of the New York City Opera now overseeing Madrid's Teatro Real, essentially sums up the continental attitude towards the US private funding model: "In Europe, there are discussions in parliament about opera and its funding; it's an open, transparent process," he says. "In the US, you're always at the whim of lady X. If she wants *Madame Butterfly*, that's what she gets. Of course, I think people like Peter Gelb are doing a lot to refresh the repertoire, but you still get stories like the lady in Chicago who wanted

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A director who has always tried to push opera away from period frofrouf towards political commentary, Mortier sees the crisis in European opera as one of ideas rather than funding.

“The problem in Italy is that [prime minister Silvio] Berlusconi’s government cares about nothing but TV. Also, Italian houses engage their singers far too late and pay them much too much. A production at the Scala can cost up to €2m (\$2.7m). At the Teatro Real, we usually spend about €400,000. As for the opera houses in Germany that are failing, they are doing so because they are not innovating.”

When it comes to innovation, Mortier is certainly prepared to take risks. Refusing to stage Puccini and only happy to mount the classics with a substantial twist, his premier production in Madrid will be the unlikely *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s ragtime- and jazz-influenced satire on untrammelled capitalism. Whether this unconventional approach in a major house will prove successful remains to be seen.

But where does Britain lie in all of this? World experts in self-deprecation, the British combination of private and public funding has often come in for criticism from the arts media for being a rather woolly compromise. Caught between the two, we are unwilling to lavish on opera either continental Europe’s total state funding or American donors’ private munificence. This is partly due to suspicions of elitism that still dog the genre in this country.

As Colin Tweedy, chief executive of Arts and Business, a consultancy that promotes arts sponsorship, points out: “Despite the huge importance of people like Britten and Purcell, we don’t really have a native opera tradition in this country. The Opera Garnier is absolutely the centre of Paris’s cultural life – it overshadows the Comédie-Française – but in comparison, Covent Garden is never going to be as much of a focal point in London as the National Theatre.”

In spite of this ingrained wariness, the British opera scene – or at least its London flagships – boasts a dirty little secret. Quietly and cautiously, it is actually doing rather well. Houses are often full, reviews are glowing – and money continues to flow in. Instead of collapsing, donations to opera houses by individuals went up by 10 per cent in 2009, with donations by businesses rising 7 per cent. Last year’s overall figures show a drop in private donations, but the figures for the preceding year were artificially spiked by a massive one-off bounce – a £10m donation from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to Covent Garden. If Britain’s donors are relatively hard up, they are not showing it.

The reasons for opera’s continuing popularity among donors are various – consistent artistic success and attempts at popular outreach have certainly helped show Britain’s opera companies in a good light. Fully recovered from its notorious internal power struggles and string of flawed productions in the 1990s, Covent Garden is now basking in critical praise. Its reputation for gilt-edged elitism has also been softened

with the opening of its more informal studio space, and by projects such as *Twitterdämmerung*, an opera cobbled together from tweets submitted by the public on Twitter, the social networking website.

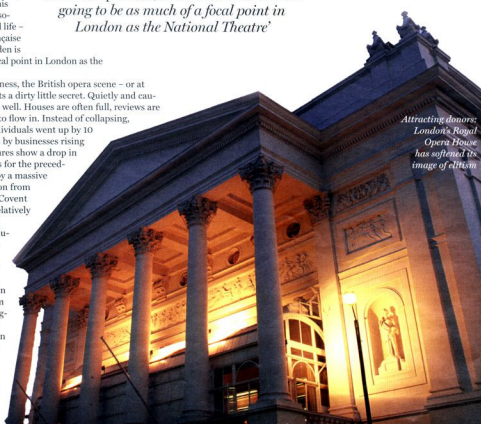
Meanwhile, the more low-key English National Opera has been extremely successful, winning all four British Opera Awards for 2008 and, so far, the South Bank Show Award for its superlative 2009 production of Britten’s *Peter Grimes*. Complemented by a few discreet top-ups by the Arts Council’s Sustain Fund (designed to tide arts bodies over the recession), both institutions have balanced their books with relative ease.

So why is the system working despite the constraints of the recession? Tweedy explains: “Private and public money are hit by recession at different times. Private money tends to disappear the moment a slump happens, but reappears fairly quickly once recovery kicks in. Government cuts, meanwhile, can take years to be implemented but once they are there, they stay for a long time before fresh funding gets earmarked.”

These two revenue sources have given British opera a degree of relative stability that its continental and transatlantic colleagues lack. As Covent Garden’s chief executive, Tony Hall, puts it: “Because we’re British, we don’t like to crow about things we do well, but the fact is the British system works.”

That system remains precarious, however. With a funding freeze at the very least likely during the next government, opera still risks being limited to, in Tweedy’s words, “more revivals, more co-productions and a lot more *Traviata*”. But, for the moment, it seems Britain’s modest, make-do-and-mend approach may just provide a template that European opera houses, at least, could do well to follow. ■

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Attracting donors: London’s Royal Opera House has softened its image of elitism