

2 The business of opera

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The purpose of a business is to make a profit. Opera has a reputation as one of the most effective methods yet invented of losing money. A connection between the two is surely a contradiction in terms?

Daniel Snowman, in his *Social History of Opera* series for the BBC, argued that the history of opera tells the story of who picks up the deficit.¹ Private or public funders; idealistic artists or intrepid entrepreneurs; individuals or consortia: these are the players with the power to shape the way opera is made. Nor is it a story with a straightforward chronological progression from a primitive example to the complex model(s) of today. At different times during opera's four centuries and in different places, different practices may be contrasted. Sometimes they are locked in combat, at others one or other is in the ascendant. While there is no blueprint of best practice, judgements may be made as to how well the opera business adapted itself to the needs of its creative forces. And questions may be asked about how the opera has been moulded to the needs of the business.

Opera's business model is, therefore, not structured to deliver a profit, but rather towards generating enough income to cover the costs of production. There has always been a tension between how much may be derived from 'earned income', from ticket sales and commercial exploitation, and how much from 'contributions', either public or private. The relative strength of each element determines where the economic and artistic control lies.

A selection of enduring management models may show how a precarious balance is sought between the need to market the creative work of the artist and the demands of the audience.

Absolute monarchs

How much did opera, at its beginning, owe to the will of an absolute ruler? The Medici in Florence and the Gonzaga in Mantua wielded the economic power to bring opera into being as an art form, but to what extent did they shape it? The early experiments were disdained by the Medici Grand

Dukes, who preferred more spectacular indoor and outdoor entertainment, but their court provided an ambience in which private individuals such as Jacopo Corsi and the proto-dramaturges of the Florentine Camerata could operate. The banker and merchant Corsi and his salon were both the patrons and the brains behind the emergence of opera at the end of the sixteenth century.

Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua was more hands on. His engagement of an ensemble of singers and provision of elaborate stage machinery provided the necessary conditions for the creation of opera's first masterpiece, Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, in 1607. The following year, Monteverdi's *Arianna* was performed before a temporary structure seating five or six thousand people in the grounds of the ducal palace. After this extravagant display, operatic production declined sharply in Mantua. In 1612, Monteverdi was dismissed as part of a general programme of court cutbacks by the new Duke Francesco, who had commissioned *Orfeo* in the first place. Could this have been the earliest example of financial strictures curtailing the business of opera?

The French king Louis XIV acknowledged no such limitations. At the age of thirty, he granted letters patent to establish 'Académies d'opéra ou représentations en musique en langue française sur le pied de celles d'Italie',² which was the foundation of the Académie Royale de Musique, otherwise known as the Opéra. Three years later, in 1672, the patent was acquired by the composer Jean-Baptiste Lully, who over the subsequent fifteen years established the new form of *tragédie lyrique*. Lully managed his fiefdom down to the finest detail, even obtaining the rights to any profits of the enterprise at the Palais-Royal theatre, but the king remained the ultimate boss. As patron, he was consulted about the subjects of the operas and under suitable disguise his attributes were celebrated in them. He expected to be the first to be shown the completed scores, and to be given previews in his private theatres at St Germain-en-Laye or Versailles before they were presented to a wider public at the Opéra.³

Louis XIV's omnipotence is an extreme example of the patron prince's control over the operatic process, but it was copied in varying degrees throughout much of Europe. The Elector of Saxony, Friedrich August I, modelled his early eighteenth-century court on Versailles. The Hofoper in Dresden became one of many court operas supervised by German princes, and this model is the foundation for the unequalled richness of Germany's operatic life today, albeit with the financial responsibility for its maintenance transferred to the state and its constituent *Länder*. Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia from 1762 to 1796, maintained a court opera primarily staffed by Italians, alongside which she encouraged comic opera in the vernacular. She even wrote six opera libretti herself. The flowering of Russian

opera during the next century, in opposition to the imported Italian model, took place under the benign despotism of the crown monopoly of the Imperial theatres.

Constitutional monarchs of more recent times lack the power to be more than titular patrons of the opera. Yet proof that money translates into power and that the hereditary principle survives may be found in the enduring success since 1934 of Glyndebourne, where three generations of the Christie family have housed, sold to the public but effectively underwritten a high-quality festival, which has become a model for private-sector-funded opera. If one of the new Russian billionaire oligarchs were to choose to found and fund an opera company, as the railway magnate Savva Mamontov did in Moscow at the end of the nineteenth century, who knows what he or she might achieve? The Moscow Private Russian Opera, which Mamontov created after the crown monopoly on theatres was revoked in 1882, was artist led and able to operate with greater creative freedom than the institutionalized Bolshoi. It foreshadowed the challenge to St Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre from Sergey Diaghilev, the most influential impresario of the twentieth century.

Impresarios

The first public opera house was opened in Venice in 1637. The instigator at the Teatro Tron in San Cassiano was the librettist Benedetto Ferrari, but the business was run by a collective of members, primarily the participating artists. Two years later, the Teatro di SS. Giovanni e Paolo was converted for opera by the aristocratic Grimani family and initially leased to the Ferrari collective, until they conceded it to a company led by the composer Francesco Cavalli and moved to the new Teatro San Moisè. In 1641, a fourth theatre, the Teatro Novissimo, was built by a group of noblemen willing to finance their cultural interests. While boxes were leased to regular supporters, tickets were also sold to a socially mixed paying public, following the example of the popular *commedia dell'arte*. The competition to sell opera to the public increased the pressure on both prices and costs.⁴ Monteverdi, who had moved to Venice in 1613, composed his later operas in this environment. The two which survive, *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* and *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, are scored for smaller forces than his earlier work for the Mantuan court. Unlike *Orfeo*, the choral contribution is minimal, and the solo voices are accompanied mainly by continuo instruments, with the strings reserved for the ritornellos and sinfonias. This economy of resources also enabled the operas to be toured beyond Venice. In contrast to *Orfeo* and *Arianna*, *Ulisse* and *Poppea* are closer to sung plays, the economic

background to their conception having contributed to the development and ‘modernization’ of opera.

The precariousness of opera as a business led to the companies of artists – composers, librettists, singers – hiring an impresario to manage negotiations with the theatres. The word derives from the Italian *impresa*, meaning both enterprise or initiative and exploitation or business. Originally the impresario may have been the librettist or a company member with legal training. An early survivor was Francesco Santurnini, who in 1674 revived the flagging attendances at the Venetian theatres by halving ticket prices at the Teatro San Moisè. His compensatory cost cutting impacted on quality and hastened the trend towards comic operas which could be cast with inferior singers. By contrast, the rival Grimani family at the Teatro di SS. Giovanni e Paolo spent more on singers, composers and stage decoration, but kept prices high. The conflict between popular and elitist opera was born early.

The most influential impresario of the early nineteenth century was Domenico Barbaia.⁵ His enduring legacy was his management of the royal theatres in Naples during their heyday between 1809 and 1840. His business success was built on gambling, which was permitted in theatres for the first part of this period. As early as 1806, he acquired the lease of the gaming tables at La Scala in Milan. It was the granting of the same concession in Naples which generated the profits that enabled him to build up the orchestra to its pre-eminent position, to engage a dazzling roster of soloists, and to obtain the contract for rebuilding the Teatro San Carlo in 1816. But what especially distinguishes Barbaia’s tenure was its creativity. During its golden age, he presented over a hundred performances a year and many of the operas were new. The zenith was the period between 1815 and 1822 when he engaged Rossini as artistic director. The security of tenure and the quality of resources enabled the composer to expand his range both musically and dramatically. Rossini’s contract gave him an annual salary plus part of the proceeds of the gaming tables, reinstated by the Bourbons but finally prohibited in 1820 on the grounds that they encouraged bad behaviour.

After Barbaia’s death in 1841, the role of leading Italian impresario was assumed by the Milanese publishing house of Ricordi, which commissioned Verdi’s *Nabucco* in 1842, establishing him as Italy’s leading composer and La Scala as the successor to the San Carlo as Italy’s premier opera house. By controlling the rights to performance, Ricordi exerted a powerful influence over the artistic policies of the theatres. The publisher could both dictate the manner of production and advise on the choice of singers. Nonetheless, the burgeoning ensembles of the Italian theatres, with their very different resources, also played a part in determining the shape of opera. Verdi offered

his cherished *Macbeth* to Florence's Teatro alla Pergola in 1847 partly because they agreed to engage Felice Varesi, the leading singing-actor of the time, and also because he was able to write extensive music for a three-part female chorus of witches. By contrast, *Rigoletto*, written with the same baritone in mind four years later for La Fenice in Venice, does not use a female chorus. The poor quality of female choral singing in many Italian theatres may have reflected the chorus's semi-professional status, but also the legacy of the Vatican's ban on women in church choirs.

The growing superiority of French orchestral playing, along with the higher fees, was part of the lure which drew Verdi to Paris, as Rossini before him, thus contributing to the city's cultural hegemony during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Yet it is a salutary lesson of the limitation of economic power that, despite the unequalled resources deployed by Parisian managers, French grand opera has left too few enduring masterpieces, both of which are by Italian composers. A theatre manager operates a building, whereas an impresario presents a programme, though the functions can overlap. In mid-nineteenth-century Paris, Offenbach was composer, impresario and sometimes theatre manager as well, but not of a huge institution like the Opéra. The pre-eminent theatre director of the age was Louis-Désiré Véron, whose success lay in building a subscription list of fashionable and rich punters, who used the Opéra to network during the lengthy operas of Meyerbeer and Halévy.

Barbaia would not have survived the disciplines of the French bureaucracy, which exerts a strong influence on theatres. The Paris Opéra, today as under Véron, reports directly to a government commission. But the impresario's trade was not plied in Italy alone. For much of its history, Covent Garden in London has been independently managed. The present theatre, the third on the site, was opened in 1858 by Frederick Gye, whose family managed the Royal Italian Opera for over thirty years. Augustus Harris, a theatrical businessman of the old style, was in charge for the latter years of the Victorian period. In an echo of Ricordi a century earlier, the music publishers Boosey & Hawkes acquired the lease of the Royal Opera House during World War Two, and altruistically made it available to the new Covent Garden Opera.⁶

Today's impresario operates in a commercial field outside the traditional opera houses. The concert promoter Raymond Gubbay has profitably mounted a succession of operas staged 'in the round' in the arena of the Royal Albert Hall in London, where he relies on a hard core of six operas which can attract large numbers to a concentrated series of performances. His initiative has found a new audience who were not being reached by the established opera companies.

Composers

An impresario's job is to stay in business. If avoiding bankruptcy is only to be achieved by curtailing creativity, so be it. But what if the creator cuts out the middle man? What if the composer seizes hold of the means of production?

When Handel arrived in London in 1710, and was commissioned by the dramatist and impresario Aaron Hill to write *Rinaldo*, he was awakened to both artistic and business possibilities. These culminated in the formation of a private joint-stock company, underwritten by guarantors or subscribers, to organize opera in London. The Royal Academy of Music, though its title echoed the French precedent, was a model of eighteenth-century English capitalism, offering a 25 per cent return on investments and with its directors elected by its members, one vote per £200 subscribed. Handel was appointed to the salaried position of Master of the Orchestra, the equivalent today of musical director, but his responsibilities encompassed programming the operas and recruiting singers. His artistic direction of the First Academy lasted from its inception in 1720 to its demise in 1728, a golden age which brought Europe's greatest singers to London and gave birth to a baker's dozen of his operas.

The sixty or so subscribers to the First Academy may have lost their money on the venture but they benefited from nearly five hundred performances over its eight seasons.⁷ Handel, as a recipient of a royal pension, was financially unscathed and in 1729 entered into partnership to launch the Second Academy at the King's Theatre Haymarket, where he created a further seven operas in addition to revivals over the next four years. Ousted from the Haymarket by the rival Opera of the Nobility, he transferred his operation to the new theatre at Covent Garden. By 1737, the Covent Garden venture had lost Handel both money and his health. He had also declined a proposal from Aaron Hill to work towards the foundation of true English opera, a lost business opportunity partly mitigated by the oratorios of his latter years.

Handel belonged to an age and society which encouraged the risk-taking entrepreneur. He exploited the conditions to create an unparalleled body of work, but he did not seek to revolutionize the form of opera. A century later, Richard Wagner dedicated his life's work to creating the 'art work of the future'. He also served his apprenticeship as musical director of opera houses in Magdeburg and Riga. Frustrated by his experiences of operatic routine and the difficulties of securing adequate performances of his operas – even in centres as important as Dresden, Paris and Munich – he determined to forge a new model. His inspiration came from the drama festivals of ancient Greece, where a community gathered to share a cathartic

experience over several days. Atop a green hill on the outskirts of the provincial town of Bayreuth, he built himself a 'perfect' theatre, an indoor Greek amphitheatre in which he buried his orchestra so as to achieve an ideal relationship between actor and audience. Like Handel, he depended on convincing kings to part with money to realize his dream; but, unlike Handel, there was no pretence that it was a commercial venture. The site was donated, and Wagner undertook conducting engagements to spearhead the fundraising campaign.

The Bayreuth Festspielhaus was topped out when Wagner was 60 years old. He controlled every aspect of the venture. He wrote the words as well as the music. He chose the artists, coached them musically and directed their every movement. He set the ticket prices and he met and wrote the letters to the sponsors. The first production of the tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in 1876 was, and remains, the most ambitious undertaking in the history of opera. After the triumphant reception at the conclusion of the third cycle, Wagner sank into a 'deep distress' at the inadequacies of the performance and the financial deficit to be recovered.⁸ Yet, although business compromise forced him to abandon his ideal of free entry and to build only a 'sketch' of his imagined theatre, it has remained the last truly revolutionary building for opera.

Benjamin Britten's Aldeburgh Festival is, in many ways, the antithesis of Bayreuth, yet it was also conceived as a place of pilgrimage in a secluded location where ideal artistic conditions might be attained. Two hundred years after Handel, Aaron Hill's challenge was grasped. Alongside his 'grand' operas for the large public opera houses, Britten developed a parallel strand of chamber operas for a small cast, no chorus and only thirteen musicians in the orchestra, which could be more easily assembled and toured. His artistic direction of his festival and leadership of a group of trusted artists and administrators established a new business model for opera, which thrived until his death in 1976 and was to remain an inspiration for others. His English Opera Group lasted from 1947 until 1975, when it was subsumed into the shorter-lived English Music Theatre, but other ad hoc seasonal companies such as Kent Opera have continued to wax and wane in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. They demonstrate that an opera company does not have to reside in a building or trade on a 'permanent' basis in order to achieve quality and status, though the savings on overheads are replaced by the costs of touring.

It is tempting to speculate what might have happened if Britten had accepted the offer of the musical directorship of Covent Garden in 1952.⁹ Might the creative presence of a composer have transformed the burgeoning national institution into a continually creative force for new opera, or would the responsibilities of maintaining a company and a heritage have proved an

overwhelming burden? While it is undeniable that the influence of Handel, Wagner and Britten as ‘managing directors’ of operatic enterprises in their respective centuries resulted in golden periods in the history of opera, it may also be argued that the work involved broke their health and brought each of them to an early grave.

Interpreters

Handel’s First Academy also performed operas by his rival Bononcini; Wagner was a noted interpreter of Beethoven; Britten was a superlative pianist and conductor; but it is for the performance of their own music that they are primarily remembered. By contrast, two other great composer-interpreters found time to lead the vast institution of the Viennese opera during its glorious years in the early twentieth century.

Mahler did not write his own operas, but his decade as director of the Hofoper from 1897 to 1907 is remembered for his restitution of the classics as well as for its thirty contemporary premieres, for building an ensemble of loyal singers and for insisting on serious production values. Mahler’s contract for ten months a year enabled him to impose his will on every aspect of the opera house, from hiring and firing musicians to renegotiating the conditions of the stage hands. During the Great War, the businessman Hans Gregor presided, but, despite Austria’s political humiliation and economic struggle, a further flowering followed from 1919 to 1924 when Richard Strauss became co-director of the newly reorganized Vienna State Opera. While Strauss, whose contract covered only five months a year, did not match Mahler as a driving force for change, his skills as an interpreter and enabler reached well beyond his own music. He was also a partner to the founding of the Salzburg Festival by the theatre director Max Reinhardt in 1920 as a haven for European culture.

Toscanini’s two periods at the helm of La Scala Milan were likewise the highest peaks of Italian opera, with exemplary performances of Verdi and Puccini matched by a strong commitment to Wagner and to contemporary opera. Toscanini reorganized everything at La Scala, insisting on making the singers study and rehearse to his exacting standards and on educating the public in serious appreciation of opera ‘not as something for amusement but as something with a moral function, which enters into the life of a society’.¹⁰

The interwar period was the era of dominance by the great conductors. There was a time during the 1920s when Berlin’s three opera houses were led by Erich Kleiber, Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer. The latter’s four-year tenure at the Kroll Opera from 1927 to 1931 was a beacon of modernism which challenged traditional operatic practices until prevented by the

gathering political clouds of the 1930s. The maintenance of three artist-led opera houses has remained an emblematic but expensive investment for the City of Berlin.

Klemperer's legacy was picked up by the stage director Walter Felsenstein when he launched the Komische Oper in Berlin in 1947. The emphasis on the hegemony of the director, which he established during long rehearsal periods with a chosen ensemble, became the model for post-war German theatre, the most productive operatic environment of the second half of the twentieth century. The structure involved an *Intendant* or managing director (often the stage director but sometimes the musical director) at the head of a team whose other leading players were a business manager and an artistic administrator. The equivalent triumvirate in Italy comprised a *sovrintendente*, a musical director and an artistic director, but, whereas the German *Intendant* usually appointed his subordinates, the Italian system often threw together conflicting chiefs nominated by opposing political parties.

These organizational models of the pre-eminent operatic countries of the third quarter of the twentieth century delivered strong artistic leadership, but depended on the public sector underwriting the finances. Insofar as that support has become more precarious with the rise of the mixed economy, its erosion has compromised the artistic director's authority. The global market place, which is the opposite side of the same coin, means that a top artist will be in demand worldwide and not always available to micro-manage the more local details, a cause for complaint that goes back to Mahler in Vienna and Klemperer in Berlin.¹¹

The most powerful musician of the twentieth century was Herbert von Karajan, who in his heyday combined the positions of chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, artistic director of the Salzburg Festival and, from 1957 to 1964, director of the Vienna State Opera. Karajan foresaw the future. In partnership with Deutsche Grammophon, he engineered for his productions to be recorded for posterity. His anticipation of the opportunities offered by technology gave him unrivalled control over the business of producing opera during his lifetime. Since his death in 1989, no one figure has approached the extent of his empire; but the Internet, multiple TV channels and high-definition cinema relays have ensured a more plural and democratic diffusion of opera. This may also create more business opportunities for opera, and even a resolution of the usual conflict between the public funding imperative of accessibility and the business imperative of profit, but for the time being few such business models are self-sustaining.

One of the few interpreters to retain full executive power over a leading opera house is Valery Gergiev, Musical and General Director of the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. Gergiev operates an almost

superhuman schedule, which has enabled him to establish the Mariinsky as a worldwide brand, while insisting on minute control of all major (and some minor – such as approval of contract negotiations, tour schedules, dinner invitations) artistic and budgetary decisions. In addition to learning repertory, recruiting personnel and planning productions, he negotiates subsidies with the state and secures significant funding from the private sector in and beyond Russia towards his ambitious plans for performances and new cultural buildings.

Trustees of the state

State support brings with it democratic accountability. It is one of the great progressive achievements of society after World War II that access to education, healthcare, public transport and culture should have become recognized as the fundamental right of citizens. Although state support exists to enable artists to fulfil their potential for the benefit of the public, government bureaucrats can be wary of artists' personal agendas. They therefore impose checks and balances to monitor the director's executive power.

In some European countries, the position of head of an opera house is essentially a political appointment. A change of government means a new Culture Minister, who in turn nominates a candidate for director of the opera. Others employ more sophisticated means but, as the primary financial stakeholder, can insist on budgetary and structural disciplines to ensure that a management bends to their demands. The leading theatres in countries as different as the Netherlands and Spain are bound by four-year contracts with their public funders. In Britain, the 'arm's-length principle' has provided a buffer between government and artistic institutions. An independent board of directors is usually elected from within, but sometimes by public appointment, as an oligarchy to represent the interests of multiple stakeholders (public and private sectors, artists and audience) and to hold the executive management to account. One consequence has been a relatively new breed of general manager, whose role is to balance artistic and business concerns.

When Covent Garden established its opera company after World War II, it appointed as General Administrator David Webster, a businessman from Liverpool, much to the chagrin of Sir Thomas Beecham, the doyen of English conductors who had dominated the provision of opera in Britain for three decades. Whereas Beecham's occasional opera seasons had been financed by speculative capitalists, in a spirit not so very different from Handel's two hundred years earlier, the new Covent Garden Opera was

a permanent company on the German model, supported to a degree by the state through its newly created Arts Council. During the 1960s, the proportion of public funding averaged around 50 per cent of turnover, but today it is less than 30 per cent on a budget of £100 million. There was a responsibility to deliver a full and varied programme at reasonable prices to the public which had paid for it through their taxes, and the conditions of subsidy were negotiated and set down in an annual 'offer letter'. Webster, who held the post for twenty-five years, was a man of taste but primarily an expert manager of people.

Hugues Gall, who was brought in to rescue the Paris Opéra after the chaotic opening of the Opéra Bastille, a political event which the commissioning Mitterrand government insisted must commemorate the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989, was an opera professional with experience in Paris and Geneva. His achievements and decisive manner compelled the respect of the international opera community and of the French government, and transformed the productivity of the largest lyric institution in Western Europe, employing more than 1,500 people, operating two large theatres, offering 350 performances of opera and ballet and receiving €90 million in subsidy per annum.

Ioan Holender was a leading artists' agent and knowledgeable opera professional before taking charge of the Vienna State Opera in 1991. His success in ensuring that his theatre consistently played to 95 per cent of capacity, through his clever manipulation of the old repertory system so as to accommodate the visiting 'stars' while preserving the traditional ensemble, made his position unassailable over a nineteen-year tenure, the longest in the history of a city noted for cutting short the tenures of its directors. For politicians of different parties, Holender became the man who delivered the required result.

Managing a modern opera company is a full-time occupation, involving the motivation of large numbers of people of diverse skills. With the exception of the apparently superhuman Gergiev, the multiple tasks can no longer be accomplished by a composer or conductor or stage director whose priorities must be artistic. While the general manager needs to earn the respect of artists, he or she also has to gain the trust of the opera's principal supporters, both private and public. In some countries this individual is literally a civil servant, but even when it is nominally an independent appointment the leader of the big national opera houses is *de facto* a trustee of the state. The leader of such a large institution, with a thousand or more employees, delegates specialist functions – artistic planning, finance, marketing, orchestral and technical management – to a group of lieutenants who combine to form the executive management of the company. Inevitably, tensions arise between conflicting interests, and it takes skill to resolve them. Sometimes,

the solution leads to a compromise between artistic ideals and business pragmatism.

Artistic managers

Better to protect the purity of artistic vision on which an opera company thrives, there is an alternative contemporary path. Instead of appointing a cultured pragmatist, the state may entrust the executive management to an artistic director capable of mastering the intricacies of budgeting and people management. Such people will be chosen primarily for the quality of their artistic judgement and ability to attract the best artists, and they will be expected either to acquire business skills or to surround themselves with competent support in those areas. This model has enjoyed notable successes in Europe during the latter part of the twentieth century.

The Belgian Gerard Mortier trained as a lawyer and learned his craft as an opera manager in Paris and Germany under the composer Rolf Liebermann and the conductor Christoph von Dohnányi. During the 1980s he transformed the reputation of La Monnaie in Brussels as an opera with a serious artistic and public purpose; the 1990s found him battling to re-establish the Salzburg Festival ideals for modern times; and in the twenty-first century he has imposed his strong artistic vision on the machine of the Paris Opéra. His next stop was to have been New York City Opera, but its dependence on private contributions at a time of severe economic downturn precipitated a retreat to Madrid and the safety net of public subsidy. Mortier challenges the belief that opera reached its zenith in the nineteenth century and has been in decline as a living art form since the first quarter of the twentieth century. He calculates that, whereas the nineteenth century produced forty operas worthy of revival today, there are sixty-eight such candidates from the twentieth century, and he is dedicated to teaching the public to love them as he does.¹²

While Gall was reforming the state-supported Paris Opéra, Stéphane Lissner was offering a rival aesthetic at the Théâtre du Châtelet backed by the City of Paris, and their competition expanded the audience for opera. Lissner took his skill at winning the trust of cherished artists to the Aix-en-Provence Festival, where he secured funding for a renewal of the theatres in the town and the launch of an academy for young artists. His success was even recognized in Italy, when La Scala turned to him as a saviour after a period of strife. It is some achievement for a foreigner to have restored peace, productivity and purpose to the temple of Italian opera. As a non-Italian, he could stand outside local politics; the incremental cuts of recent years left a vacuum to be filled by more performances; and he assiduously developed

ongoing relationships with some of the most important conductors and directors.

In Britain, the most consistent record over time as an artistic manager has been Brian McMaster's. He will be remembered for the changes he wrought during his fifteen-year stints at each of Welsh National Opera and the Edinburgh International Festival. He realized early on that, though he might not be able to afford the top singers in Cardiff, he could offer unrivalled rehearsal conditions to attract the very best international directors. The impact of a strongly European production aesthetic reached beyond opera to theatre generally. In Edinburgh, he was able to extend his range to the other arts. He employed a very personal taste to open the eyes and ears of a wider audience.

These three examples succeeded because they have been able to inspire colleagues and audiences to follow their individual visions, but they also shared canniness in convincing people to finance them. While those visions existed to advance the art, their management was by no means solely artistic. Mortier told me that 30 per cent of his time in Paris was spent on matters involving the unions.¹³ Despite significant cutbacks in opera funding by the Italian government, Lissner has managed to protect La Scala's pre-eminent status. McMaster has been adept at balancing the mixed-economy funding characteristic of the United Kingdom, by striking a judicious balance between wooing new sources of income and maintaining the social case for public subsidy. All three have spent their working lives as dedicated arts managers.

Business managers

Yet, despite the evidence of their achievements, the trend is away from the artistic manager as chief executive. Because opera has become such a complex business, involving advocacy, fundraising, human relations and management of buildings, appointment panels, as in other fields, are increasingly looking for a generalist as managing director, to whom the principal artistic positions report.

The timing of the shift of direction, when it occurs, illustrates one of its causes. The late twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen the building or rebuilding of significant new opera houses. Such capital projects, which are long-term investments, compete for resources with the artistic programme, which may by contrast appear ephemeral. Making the new or restored building work becomes the priority for the board and the major stakeholders, and they want it supervised by someone who shares their view rather than by someone with overriding artistic ambitions. Both London

opera houses have adopted this change of management structure in the wake of turbulent periods when their theatres were being redeveloped. The Royal Opera House Covent Garden appointed as Chief Executive Tony Hall, whose previous career had been spent as a manager at the BBC. He delegates artistic control to separate directors of the opera and ballet companies, but is accountable for balancing the budget and for the public face of the organization. He has also led the move towards expanding audiences through cinema relays and DVDs, acquiring the production company Opus Arte in the process. While the investment may not yet have yielded a business profit, it has proved a powerful tool in raising awareness of the ROH brand. English National Opera has followed suit by appointing a chief executive above its artistic and music directors, and has developed a funding partnership with SkyArts which included digital distribution of performance content.

Most of the leading Nordic companies now have a business manager in the senior position. The most recent changes in that direction have been in Oslo and Helsinki during major building projects. The Scandinavian model is dedicated to achieving harmony through a method of project management where different managers are given the responsibility and incentive of seeing through specific productions. At the other end of Europe, Spain's opera houses have experienced a renaissance of productivity and public support. Both Madrid's Teatro Real and Barcelona's Liceu are managed by a chief executive drawn from business or public service and to whom the artistic director and those responsible for the other functions such as finance, fundraising, marketing and technical services report. This model, predicated on a roughly fifty–fifty balance of public and private funding, has helped to create a stable environment in which the opera companies can grow.

The traditional opera countries such as Germany and Italy have so far proved resistant to the imposition of a controlling business manager, but it would not be surprising if, for example, a major rebuilding in Berlin or a financial crisis in Rome were to trigger changes there too. There is no single blueprint for the management of an opera house, but, for good or ill, twenty-first-century opera is more than ever a business.

Questions for study

A selective study raises questions about the relative importance of art and business and how they may be linked to their mutual advantage. Peter Drucker's dictum that the purpose of business is to create a customer¹⁴ may also be applied to art. The greatest artists have been eager to sell their works.

The questions are how and at what cost. Here are some topics worthy of study.

- 1 Since funding is essential to underpin the business of putting on opera, how important is the source of that funding? Mozart spent most of his short life chasing commissions. In his last year he wrote *La clemenza di Tito* to celebrate the emperor Leopold's coronation as King of Bohemia, and *Die Zauberflöte* for a commercial impresario to perform in a popular theatre. Which of the two was or is more successful, then and now?
- 2 Most creative artists address an audience. Lully wrote his *Thésée* directly for Louis XIV, but that does not prevent it speaking to a modern audience, as demonstrated by the production in 2008 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. Britten said that 'almost every piece I have written has been composed with a certain occasion in mind'.¹⁵ Like Hindemith, he wanted to compose *Gebrauchsmusik*, or 'useful' music. Is the economic imperative of writing for a customer a stimulus or hindrance to creation?
- 3 Britten also opined that 'until the nineteenth century, the composer was the servant of society . . . I believe in the artist serving society. It is better to be a bad composer writing for society than to be a bad composer writing against it'.¹⁶ Opera, by nature, is a social activity linking performers and audience, and this is reflected in the economic equation of its support. How do you convince the public of the value of this expensive venture?
- 4 When Britten contrasted his ideal with 'composers [who] began to blow up their egos' and the artist as 'the glorified mouthpiece of God',¹⁷ he was probably thinking of Wagner. Yet Wagner's overwhelming ambition and demands drove forward the art of opera and created the model of the dedicated festival. How dependent are the advances in opera on the ambitions of creative individuals?
- 5 The first quarter of the twentieth century must, on any assessment, be judged a golden age for the composition and performance of opera. It coincided with the zenith of the great composer-conductors and interpreters; but also with a period of tumultuous political and economic change, encompassing the Great War, the Russian Revolution and the Weimar Republic. Older Czechs still remember the brief period in the late 1940s between the expulsion of the German occupying forces and the arrival of Soviet-style communism as an unparalleled artistic flowering. What is the relationship of such seismic changes with the business of opera?
- 6 The reconstruction of Europe after World War II saw the beginning of a fifty-year age of dominating state subsidy for opera which has transformed it as a business. On the one hand, it has opened up access to opera for a much wider audience. All the great public services – education, healthcare, transport, culture – are the fruits of democratic socialism. On the other, it has given the artist – composer or director – a protection and licence to challenge public taste. As the certainties of continuing public sector support are challenged, can the democratic gains be maintained?
- 7 An opera house today strives to strike a balance between artistic and financial needs, and employs an army of specialist experts to help deliver the desired result.

Yet the choice of the leader to be accountable for that result sends a strong signal of intent. In France, Germany, Italy and Russia, the chief executive is still more likely than not to be the artistic leader. In other countries, the trend is towards making the artistic leadership report to a business executive. The latter may well see the task as enabling the artistic programme to flourish, but will also be influenced by the response to that programme from audience, critics and financial stakeholders. Chicago Opera Theater asked its patrons to vote with their dollars to select 'The People's Opera' for 2010. How long before a whole programme is chosen by public vote?

- 8 An opera manager in the twentieth century does not necessarily have a more difficult job than his or her predecessors, but it has become a more complex one. Labour is more expensive and more regulated, so casualization and outsourcing look like more economical solutions; competition from other forms of entertainment is more intense; obligations on matters such as health and safety are more onerous; business is increasingly conducted in a global market which never sleeps.¹⁸ It is hardly surprising that the big institutions should seek a managing director with proven business qualifications. Is the ability to motivate and control a team of experts now the prime attribute?
- 9 At the same time, there is a growth of smaller outfits – seasonal festivals, light-footed touring companies without the burden of the upkeep of a building, groups dedicated to new work or finding new audiences – which thrive on a less elaborate administrative structure. It is easy to see how they may appeal to creative practitioners, and indeed provide them with a freedom they may find lacking in the institutions. The phenomenon belongs to the twenty-first century, the Internet age, which prizes flexibility and multiple choices. Could such small businesses be a model for the future?

This chapter does not seek to prescribe ideal solutions for the business of producing opera. Nor does it argue that there has been a steady evolution in the making of that business. Rather, it looks to a selection of historical examples for guidance towards good practice. Always, we must ask what set-up enables the best opera to be produced; and the correlative question of how the best opera may reach as many consumers as possible. That is our business.

Notes

1 Daniel Snowman, *The Gilded Stage: A Social History of Opera* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), p. 6. Companion volume to the BBC series.

2 'Academies for opera or musical performance in the French language on the Italian model.'

3 Vincent Borel in programme for Lully's *Armide* at Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, 2008.

4 See Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, 'Production, Consumption and Political Function of Seventeenth-Century Opera', *Early Music History*, 4 (1984), pp. 209–96.

5 For more detail of the growth of the role of the impresario in Italy, see John Rosselli: *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: The Role of the Impresario* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

- 6 Harold Rosenthal, *Two Centuries of Opera at Covent Garden* (London: Putnam, 1958), pp. 556–7.
- 7 Subscribers list published in the score of *Admeto, re di Tessaglia, 1727*. Stanley Sadie, *Handel* (London: John Calder, 1962), p. 64.
- 8 Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, Vol. I: 1869–1877, ed. Geoffrey Skelton (London: Collins, 1978); abridged selection (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).
- 9 The Earl of Harewood in conversation with the author, 2006.
- 10 Gianandrea Gavazzeni quoted in Harvey Sachs, *Toscanini* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978).
- 11 See Peter Heyworth, *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times*, Vol. I (Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 12 Gerard Mortier speech to Opera America convention in Denver, 2008.
- 13 Gerard Mortier in conversation with the author, 2007.
- 14 Peter F. Drucker, *The Essential Drucker: Selections from the Management Works of Peter F. Drucker* (New York: Harper Business, 2001), p. 24.
- 15 Benjamin Britten, *On Receiving the First Aspen Award: A Speech by Benjamin Britten* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 11.
- 16 Benjamin Britten, interview with *New York Times*, October 1969.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 See Philippe Agid and Jean-Claude Tarondeau, *The Management of Opera* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).