

THE RADYR AND MORGANSTOWN ASSOCIATION

(A Civic Society affiliated to the Civic Trust for Wales)

GENERAL MEETING

Old Church Rooms on Monday 16th June 2014 at 7.30pm

Present: David Silver (Chairman), Tom Evans (Vice Chairman), Nick Hawkins (Secretary), David Cargill, Allan Cook, Cllrs Mike Diment, Judith Marsh, Rod McKerlich, and 35 members.

Apologies: Bob Roberts (Treasurer), Cyril Williams, Cllrs David Suthers and Clive Morgan, Caroline Noall, Anne Silver.

A Talk by Simon Davison

Mr Davison spoke about the history of Welsh National Opera (WNO). Founded as an amateur company above a garage, the first performance (of Cav and Pag) was in April 1946 in the Prince of Wales theatre (now the Weatherspoons pub near Cardiff Central station). The chorus consisted of miners, teachers, doctors and farmers and the company hired the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra for the music. With Arts funding, the WNO became a full time professional company; the chorus became full time in the 1960's and he joined the orchestra in April 1976. With further funding, the company expanded with the orchestra growing to 65 contract players in 1980. This gave the WNO the opportunity to put on larger scale performances, such as Richard Strauss and Wagner.

Mr Davison spoke of some of the early limitations of the venues. Bristol used to have gas lamps; Southsea theatre had a bridge to get into the pit as the understage area flooded at high tide; the passageway to the pit in Birmingham was below the sewers, so that also flooded after heavy rain; Swansea Grand had no backstage area so the company had to use the loos and offices of the bus station across the road. Many theatres did not have pits, or only small ones, so the orchestra played in the stalls. Bristol Hippodrome and Oxford are now the only theatres the WNO goes to without pits and therefore the only chance of the orchestra has of seeing anything of the show!

Finance has always been difficult. Opera is very expensive to put on and very labour intensive. An Opera company is in the strange situation that it inevitably loses money on each performance - ticket income only covering between 20 and 25% of running costs. Therefore, to save money, the WNO has to do fewer performances as opposed to the usual business practice of producing and selling more. Touring is also very expensive. The WNO is the largest touring company in the world and one of the few touring Opera companies. With the Orchestra, Chorus, Crew, Dressers, Wigs & Makeup girl, about 170 people tour in all - not including casual workers, extra chorus and orchestra. And, as each theatre is different, lights, sets, props, costumes, washing machines etc have to follow as well, not forgetting percussion instruments, harps, pianos, harpsichords, cellos, basses etc - plus a tea urn. In all there are about 20 trailers moving around the country.

Finance is now even tighter, and a significant issue. Arts Council grants have not kept up with inflation and local authority grants have disappeared. The WNO is funded by Arts Council England and the Welsh Arts Council., both of whom have had significant cuts. However, the Arts councils have instructed the company that they cannot put up ticket prices - when VAT went up to 20% the increase had to be absorbed. The Arts councils also do not want the number of performances cut if possible; overall, an impossible scenario, but solved by cutting the number of tours, implementing pay freezes etc. Mr Davison mentioned that he had been a member of the WNO for 38 years and his pay had halved in real terms. The shortfall used to be made up by recording fees, but even that has dried up. And jobs have been cut. The orchestra is now officially 55 full time (down from 68 in its heyday), with the shortfall made up of freelancers. Freelancers are cheaper, no holiday or sick pay, and no one has to be paid if there is an empty week. This is not just the case for the WNO; Opera houses are closing across the world. But musicians still want to join. Where, 20 years ago there might be 20 or 30 applicants for a post, the WNO now get 250 to 300 from around the world; recently an American flew over with a double bass just for an audition.

Arts Councils also stipulate that the WNO cannot put on just safe shows; La Boheme and Carmen are not sufficient; Berg, Donizetti and Schoenberg are more acceptable. To save money, shows have to be shared, with productions borrowed from abroad. This means the WNO does not have control over what the audience sees - the production has to be taken as it is, lock stock and barrel; the WNO Musical Director is not happy but cannot change things.

Funding remains an issue. Nowadays the WNO is forbidden to run up a deficit and, if it does, each board member is personally responsible for that debt. The Arts Councils say the void should be filled by sponsorship, and the WNO does manage to raise about £1.5 million a year this way. But Arts companies outside London struggle to get sponsorship. Geraint Talvin Davies recently went to a London Art Gallery re-launch after a modernisation. It had asked for £69 million in donations and got it easily within a few months; St Fagans museum is trying to raise £3 million and struggling, he said. A recent report showed London receives £41 per head from private donors whilst the regions receive 84p; Government funding is £69 a head for London and £4.60 for the regions.

However, Mr Davison remained optimistic. To earn revenue the WNO orchestra is hired out for other performances, there is a significant education element, both locally and around the UK, and the WNO has a wholly owned subsidiary called Cardiff Theatrical Services which makes sets for the WNO, Covent Garden, West End shows, many foreign companies, as well as sets for TV. The company has started to advertise a few rank and file jobs; this gives the orchestra a sign that the management have confidence in the company's future. He had seen the draft tour for 15/16, and the WNO is back to five shows a week. His basic message is that the WNO is a fantastic international company, known and respected throughout the world; it's paymasters, the two Arts Councils, expect and demand challenging thought-provoking shows not just the safe and tried and tested. It is difficult at the moment for the WNO only to put on its own in house productions, so it borrows what it can and what is available, and makes ends meet. And he reminded everyone that WNO productions can be seen for the cost of two pints of beer!

In response to questions, Mr Davison agreed that the WNO had lost a degree of freedom by being forced to take on other company's productions but starting a new show was so expensive. 'Difficult' shows (to satisfy the Arts Council) were sometimes hard to promote but audiences could be encouraged by clever marketing - like 'buy one, get one free'. Some other orchestras survived via a subscription arrangement, but most were struggling. Touring has to be subsidised by the receiving venue; the Arts Council will not even pay the expenses of going to London. And leave for a musician was non-negotiable - sometimes tough on family commitments. Nevertheless, enthusiastic (and naïve) new singers and musicians continued to come along and had to be given the facts of life!

At the conclusion of the talk, the Chairman thanked Mr Davison for his very interesting talk and presented him with a bottle of whisky.

Minutes of the previous General Meeting on 3rd February 2014

The minutes were approved. There were no matters arising.

Festival 2014

David Cargill reported that Association's 27th Festival had gone well. Three events (Gymkhana, Cool School Boules and Cricket) had to be cancelled due to inclement weather, but the Cricket match had been run later and a donation made to the LATCH. The Golf Club had lost their marquee in the high winds, but the Hog Roast had taken place nonetheless. The Arts element had been of a high standard, thanks to Allan Cook. The Concert in the Parc had been a wonderful conclusion to the two weeks. He expressed his particular thanks and congratulations to the LATCH team and for Sue Thomas' support. Everyone had worked extremely hard and, with links being formed with schools, clubs etc, the Charity would be receiving in excess of £12,000 from the R&M Community.

NSPCC were now the Association's Charity for 2014/15 and he hoped they would make full use of bucket collections, the prize draw and the forming of similar links to LATCH. He emphasised that, in effect, the Association's Charity was no longer a Festival Charity, but a Village one.

Treasurer's Report

In the absence of the Treasurer, the Chairman reported that financial outcome of the Festival was still being determined but the surplus retained by the Association would be around £450. The total unrestricted amount held on the Association account amounted to £6340.

General R&M Matters

LDP. Cllr McKerlich reminded everyone that he produces a monthly report which covers many R&M issues and people should contact him if they were not already on the circulation list. Regarding the LDP, he said that the process had been running since 2012 and the main impact to NW Cardiff - the building of 12,000 houses putting traffic onto the Llantrisant Road - had remained unchanged. No relief road would now be built, as originally proposed, and the only possible solution to traffic chaos was the proposed Metro which is not formally linked into the plan and is therefore badly timed in terms of the desired build rate. In his opinion, the current LDP is technically 'unsound'; it is a missed opportunity not to have linked the plan with the Metro; and the result may well be a blighting of the future of south-east Wales. Nevertheless, the LDP would shortly be debated by Cardiff Council and, with the full backing of the ruling party, he was confident it would be agreed. The need for an LDP was paramount, however. Without one, any development could be suggested. There had already been a pre-emptive application for the building of 1500 dwellings north of Junction 33 on the M4 and he knew that Redrow would soon be submitting three planning applications - two on the far side of the Llantrisant Road and one on the Radyr side.

In discussion, the suggestion was made that R&M (and other local) Communities should 'rise up' and oppose the LDP in no uncertain manner. However, Cllr McKerlich warned against trying to get the LDP thrown out for the reasons already given. He said that the solution, if it can be effected, is proper phasing of building in line with the Metro proposals.

OCR. On a more positive note, the Secretary briefed the meeting on the proposed redevelopment of the OCR in 2015, assuming that sufficient funds could be raised for the work. The R&MCC had already appointed a lead Architect for the work.

Christmas Lighting Ceremony, 5th December

The Secretary reported that planning for this event was about to start. He was particularly keen to know of anyone who might be interested in running a stall at the event or in providing entertainment.

Any Other Business

Post Office. It was noted that, following opposition from the R&M Community, the merging of the Post Office and Newsagent functions had been postponed for a re-design. However it was still going to go ahead.

PACT. It was noted the next PACT meeting was scheduled for Tuesday, 15th July at 7.00pm in the OCR.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Monday, 15th September 2014 at 7.30pm in the Old Church Rooms when the speaker will be Mark Drakeford AM.