

ALLIANCE MAGAZINE BREAKFAST CLUB: Panel discussion on why philanthropists should fund the arts. 31 March 2015. Hamlyn Foundation, London.

Question for John Nickson: HOW CAN ONE JUSTIFY SPENDING ON THE SO CALLED HIGH ARTS?

I am not sure I accept the distinction between high and low arts but I have accepted the challenge so will press on.

I also prefer to talk about culture rather than the arts because culture and creativity define humanity.

The Nazi leaders Goebbels and Goering were both credited with saying "When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun". In common with some but not enough politicians, they recognized the power of culture and of opera in particular.

Hitler banned what he called degenerative art and used film and Wagner's operas to serve Nazi ideology. Culture became a powerful weapon to forge social and political change.

The Second World War destroyed Germany's cities but not the belief of the German people in the power of culture to express what matters to them.

The crucial imperative for Germany was to rebuild civil society and so it was that many cities made it an absolute priority to rebuild their opera houses, emblems of creativity, culture and spiritual renewal.

How very different from Britain you may be thinking.

Yes and no. We are also a nation with a highly developed sense of culture and creativity. However, we find it difficult to talk about why culture matters. This becomes a financial and a political problem. Why fund what is not regarded as a priority?

Opera's particular problem is that it is so expensive. The ROH is seen as a bastion of elitism and privilege. One can see why although that is not accurate as I hope I made clear in my article.

The real problem is access. Should so much tax -payer's money and philanthropic donations be devoted to pleasing so few?

The ROH and other institutions devoted to the so -called high arts are doing more and more to broaden access. There are schemes for cheaper seats and millions may now enjoy their work rather than a thousand or two. This would be impossible without both public and, increasingly, philanthropic funding.

Without philanthropy, Tate Modern could not have become the world's most popular museum of modern and contemporary art in the world.

The other reason why I prefer the word culture to the arts is that it is becoming ever more difficult to distinguish between the arts and education. I am a trustee of two charitable organisations that are devoted to both. The Royal College of Music teaches the musicians of the future and London Music Masters is a small charity that teaches entire classes of primary schoolchildren how to play classical music on the violin.

LMM began as the vision of one philanthropist, Victoria Robey. I am a trustee of LMM. Our work with very young children in Lambeth and the most challenged parts of Westminster is a perfect example of how the “high arts” can stimulate creativity, enhance academic performance, transform lives by opening doors as well as eyes and ears.

Here is what some would call an elite art form empowering the disadvantaged young by enabling them to believe in themselves as well as their fellow pupils. What we are doing is extraordinarily powerful because it leads to both personal and social fulfilment.

Accordingly, part of me finds it strange that we need to justify funding the arts, whether by the state or by philanthropy.

A rather right wing friend of mine, an opera lover and a generous philanthropist, holds interesting views. He believes private education should be abolished because it preserves social apartheid. He also believes that the national subsidy for opera should be abolished because it is an insult to those who cannot enjoy performances. As a former public school boy, I have some sympathy with his views on education but I disagree vehemently about funding opera and the arts.

Love of opera and music is not confined to London. If public subsidy was removed, there are not enough people prepared to pay astronomical prices to keep access affordable for the many and insufficient philanthropy to fund orchestras, performers and all that sustains an art form that inspires millions here and all over the world.

As public funding is reduced and there is, inevitably, more and more competition for philanthropic funds, the cultural sector is going to have to learn how to make a much stronger case for the arts... and for arts education, without which our young will be impoverished.

I believe the case for the arts in Britain has not been well expressed, at least since the advent of the Arts Council, and some have still not yet weaned themselves off a sense of entitlement. To put it crudely, culture is now in competition with cancer.

Moreover, apart from some noble and notable exceptions, standards of fundraising in the arts are often abysmal. Too many fundraisers don't understand donors.

I was sent an email by a national arts organization from someone in the Development team who I don't know and she clearly doesn't know me. I was invited to attend a cream tea in order to meet the director of a forthcoming new production. Professional curiosity made me read on and so I learned that this "privilege and opportunity" would cost me £1000.

Call me old fashioned, but that is not the way to demonstrate need, inspire philanthropy or promote the understanding that without culture, life is not worth living.

John Nickson. 31.3.2015.