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A VISION FOR WATFORD TOWN HALL

- a musical asset of incalculable worth

- Watford Town Hall (currently known as The Colosseum) is arguably the UK's finest hall for the performance of orchestral music. Considered by leading musicians and sound engineers as comparable in quality to Vienna's Musikverein or Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, there is no doubt that, for acoustic music and for orchestral music in particular, it compares favourably with the best concert halls in the world.

A perfect location

- As well as being of immense musical value, the hall is in a ideal location for development as a major regional artistic centre: close to the M25, M1 and other major roads, with a mainline railway and an underground station within easy walking distance.

An exceptional opportunity for artistic development

- The hall is in need of complete renovation and a long-term operational strategy. Watford Borough Council¹ (which owns the hall) is currently seeking proposals.²
- According to a review³ commissioned by Watford Borough Council from ACT Consultant Services, taking the lowest projected average per annum from Target Group Index analysis for the UK as a whole then, within a radius of only 12 miles, the potential attendances for classical music are 612,964. At the current capacity of 1,437 seats, this would in theory be enough for the hall to operate at 115% of capacity for 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year.
- In view of its musical qualities and location, the hall could be developed as a major regional concert hall and arts centre, generating significant economic and social benefits not only for Watford but for an entire region.

Threats

- In order to reach the critical mass required to operate with a substantial programme of high quality musical output, artistic goals must be the principal objective of the management and the main focus of all promotional work. To pursue such goals would cost more than Watford Borough Council is in a position to provide, both in terms of renovation and in terms of operating subsidy.⁴
- Developing the hall as a major artistic centre would fall outside existing Arts Council strategy.
- Watford is the smallest authority in Hertfordshire and the council is ultimately accountable only to its own residents.
- Other interests for developing the hall exist: for use as a wedding venue, disco or other commercial forms of entertainment or through redevelopment of the entire site.

Conclusion

- Without significant external encouragement, funding and assistance, Watford Borough Council will probably be forced to support a primarily commercial operating strategy via a level of renovation and refurbishment insufficiently extensive to achieve artistic success or long-term financial stability.
- Although this may still allow for some limited musical activity, it would mean that a fantastic and rare opportunity for artistic development and economic and social regeneration would have been missed - and that one of our nation's greatest musical assets remains largely wasted for the foreseeable future.
- This situation presents an opportunity for the entire music industry to work together to achieve a highly worthwhile aim. Support can be registered through www.watfordmusicalheritage.org.uk

Notes

¹ Watford is a Borough Council with an elected mayor and 36 councillors (Liberal Democrat majority). The elected Mayor is Dorothy Thornhill – email themayor@watford.gov.uk.

² Submissions to the Policy Scrutiny Committee concerning the review can be made in person or in writing:
Public meetings: At the Colosseum on Monday October 23rd / Tuesday November 7th at 7pm
Address: Town Hall, Watford WD17 3EX
Tel: 01923 226400
Fax: 01923 278499
Email: Oliver.Pearce@watford.gov.uk / Mike.Thomas@watford.gov.uk
More information: www.watfordmusicalheritage.org.uk / www.watford.gov.uk

³ The full report and appendices are available from www.watfordmusicalheritage.org.uk

⁴ Watford Borough Council commissioned plans for three renovation schemes costing from £1.5m to around £6m. The cost of fully developing the premises as a state-of-the-art concert facility is likely to be at least £12m. The future annual operating subsidy which Watford Borough Council might reasonably be expected to provide is in the region of £200k-£400k. This would necessitate a programme of around 90% commercial output. The annual operating subsidy required for running a significant artistic programme is likely to be around £2m.