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WATFORD – POLICY DEVELOPMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 23RD OCTOBER 2006

For those who do not know me, I am Jonathan Brett, Artistic Director of English Classical Players and Classic Concerts Trust, which together produced the professional orchestral concert season here from 1996 until the hall closed in 2005.

I should like to preface this address by stating that in what follows there is no element of criticism intended, either of Watford Borough Council or of ACT Consultant Services. I think that the brief provided and the resulting report were absolutely reasonable and understandable: the council asked for an analysis of the possibilities given certain funding assumptions and these were provided.

But it does seem to me that in the creation of this brief a critical stage in the development of ideas was missed: surely, in considering the future of this building, the first issue is to ignore all constraints: to look at what, if anything, makes the hall special and, in the light of this knowledge, to consider how it might best be utilised.

If we do this then I contend that there is only one possible conclusion: if we are honest about it, for almost every possible conceivable usage, it would be straightforward to replace this building with something better: the site could provide for a fantastic, state-of-the-art multi-purpose facility with a multi-storey car park underneath and a roof garden on top.

Not only is it far from ideal for most purposes but to my eyes, listed building or not, it is of no particular visual value either inside or out. Unless there were something special about this particular hall then I for one would not care what happened to it but, if asked, I would argue in favour of its demolition and replacement.

Despite its lack of physical beauty though, there is something very special about this hall. Very special, incredibly rare and not just extremely precious but beyond price: it is an exceptional hall for music, one of the finest of its kind in the world.

Whereas for every purpose other than music something better could easily be provided, even given an unlimited budget and access to the best technicians the world has to offer there could be no guarantee of producing anything anywhere near so good for music. This hall is not a disco, nightclub, wrestling ring, trade hall, casino or carpet warehouse. Whilst I must acknowledge that it may not have been the intention of those who built it, what they produced is actually concert hall – and one of a quality which puts it on a par with the best in the world. Musically speaking it compares with the Vienna Musikverein or the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and its value as a musical asset is beyond price.

There is a key misunderstanding in the report by ACT Consultant Services in that they fail to fully appreciate this. They took a scientific view and measured everything with scientific instruments but failed to understand that musicians and their audiences do not overly care about ambient noise, external noise and the like. You cannot measure what makes a hall great in scientific terms. This is why we still find it so difficult to create halls of a quality to match those of former eras. The fact that this hall is loved by great performers and revered by the finest sound engineers proves its worth irrespective of technical judgements.

There is one technical judgement we can easily make concerning sound, though: one of the features of a hall ideally suited to live acoustic music is that it is profoundly unsuited to anything else. Musical performance is the only one of this hall's various uses in recent years for which it is genuinely ideal and difficult to improve upon. I would argue that this is not a question of opinion but a simple and objective fact and that it is time for it to receive due consideration.

You may think that the acoustic quality been discussed a great deal but I contend that that is not the same as real attention to its importance. Indeed I am sure that all WBC Councillors are tired of hearing about the value and potential of the hall for music but if this is a problem then there is a simple and expedient solution: to exploit this potential! I believe that unless and until the hall functions primarily as what it truly is its musical potential will inevitably be thwarted. As has been the case for years now, the consequence will be that councillors will eternally be plagued by complaints about the missed opportunity of its musical potential.

I believe that any objective consultation undertaken free of financial constraint and taking the special quality of the hall into account would propose that the hall be developed as a concert hall and music education centre. Of course to actually do this would be a bold step; without doubt it would be expensive and there is no obvious operating model – the nearest equivalents are the Anvil at Basingstoke and the Sage at Gateshead, but these are both ventures which have enjoyed a good deal of success.

Not only do we have some precedent indicating that such developments can succeed, but the ACT report includes statistics which indicate that development of this particular facility as a musical centre could be extremely successful. The report states that 2 million people live within 12 miles of Watford. Of that 2 million, ACT estimate that the potential attendance for classical music events is 612,000 per year. That equates to 115% of capacity, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year!

ACT suggest that these are pessimistic figures, but I must concede that anyone who has worked in the music industry might raise an eyebrow concerning their achievability. Against this, though, comes the known fact that people travel to concerts from much further than 12 miles. Up to 26 miles is common, and over that radius the theoretical attendance almost certainly doubles again.

These are demographics that concert hall managers across the world would kill for. The combination of a great hall and a huge potential audience represents an exceptional opportunity for development of a musical resource and we have a growing body of evidence showing that artistic regeneration brings huge economic and social benefits. Add to that the fact that the value of musical participation and study has now been proved to enhance mental capacity and I think the potential benefits of following the path of artistic development start to become clear.

Of course I understand that such a path would be beyond the immediate resources of Watford Borough Council but with perhaps 4m potential beneficiaries it would seem entirely reasonable that other sources of funding be found. The critical point is that the contribution from Watford

Borough Council could have a much higher effective value as part of a partnership and I have a practical proposal as to how this might be achieved.

But first lets consider the other options. I think these are very limited since attempts to demolish or sell the hall for commercial development, even if they were not politically suicidal, would almost certainly lead to years of protest and chaos and ultimately probably fail.

So, if we ignore the unthinkable what else is left? Only, it would seem, the operation of the hall along the lines suggested in ACT's report, the only questions being whether this is done through direct management, commercial operation or a local trust. In any of these cases the financial implications would seem to be expenditure of £1.5-£6m on renovation and an operating subsidy of £250k per year.

Likely operating models suggest that the resulting output would be around 90% commercial. I cannot deny that this is a common operating model, adopted by local authorities all over the country, but in my personal view to follow such a path would not only be inappropriate for this hall but contrary to its essential nature and qualities; it would, moreover, be to fall squarely into the common trap of low cost and poorer value and represent a sadly missed opportunity.

I have an alternative suggestion. I understand that the present situation is:

- that the hall is currently operating at a surplus,
- that £250k per year subsidy has been allocated henceforth and
- that the BBC CO would be interested in staying beyond the current contract.

If these assumptions are correct then taken together they mean that it could be feasible to shape the creation and development of a state-of-the-art centre for musical performance and education through:

- extending the BBC contract to 2010, thus allowing the continued operation of the hall at a modest surplus,
- transferring operation and possibly ownership of the hall to a trust dedicated to developing the musical potential of the hall
- providing the planned level of subsidy of £250k per year with the aim of achieving two key objectives:
 1. Creation of a management team dedicated to developing the profile, infrastructure and funding necessary to take the development forwards
 2. Performing, educational and community music events of the highest quality

There is an opportunity here to develop a musical resource of world class, one which could bring huge benefits to the town as well as to the region. Personally I think that if the council were to embrace this vision and help it move forwards then it could hardly fail to succeed. But the best thing about this option is that even if it were to fail to achieve a sufficient funding base for renovation and long-term operation by a mutually agreed date, every other current option for the future development of the hall would still be available.

It seems to me that there is everything to gain and little to lose.