

An open letter to the Mayor of Watford concerning Watford Borough Council's plans for the renovation and management of Watford Colosseum and the future of Watford Concerts.

I feel obliged to write an open letter because I know that concerns I have about the council's future plans for the Colosseum are shared by others who also believe that it is important that certain issues are addressed before the council becomes irrevocably committed. Over a long period I have endeavoured to ensure that this happened but without any positive result. In consequence I feel that I have only one option: to start to bring the issues to the attention of the public.

I am sure that you are aware that in the years before the first hall closure in 1994 there had been a considerable decline in interest in music there: for the 1993/4 season the average attendance for professional concerts was under 350, revenue generation was minimal and the net council subsidy required was extremely high. Since its inaugural season in 1996/7, Classic Concerts Trust has generated a huge revival of interest, which the council has encouraged through grant support. After the introduction of a new financial model in 2007, growth became even more dynamic in terms of attendance, revenue and audience engagement as well as widening access – season ticket prices start from just £5.00, an offer we believe to be unique in the UK for a concert series of this quality. It is open to all, without discrimination concerning age or employment status; the only exception is that, thanks to support from the John Lewis Partnership, tickets for those under 25 are free.

Being involved in such an immensely rewarding process of development has enabled the trust to fulfil its mission to share great music more widely and to do so to maximum effect through working in one of the finest concert halls in Europe, a building of truly exceptional musical quality as well as an interior of great architectural merit. For me personally it has been a great privilege and pleasure to lead this process. At the same time though, it has been increasingly challenging to come to terms with the increasing dichotomy in terms of vision for the hall between where I believe things should be going and the reality I have observed unfolding.

The degree of exclusion of Classic Concerts Trust and others with both relevant expertise and a willingness to help in the process has also been deeply disturbing in view of the clear commitment we have made to the hall and the town. In terms of both financial support and physical effort, we have devoted substantial resources towards a better future for music in the Colosseum and consistently outlined what I believe to be reasonable concerns about the future of the hall; we have also encouraged the council to be more ambitious in its aims in order to gain the full value which could be derived for the community from this priceless musical asset. On the basis of what I regard as inaccurate risk analysis, however, the council has chosen options concerning the renovation and future management which I believe will generate results of a far lower order in terms of artistic and community development than are acceptable or appropriate, especially concerning a building of unique importance. If this proves to be the case the council will also have failed to provide local taxpayers with the value for money they deserve.

Many people will be extremely disappointed to learn that, after fifteen years of involvement, we now have no basis from which to plan future seasons at the hall at all, let alone pursue what has been our goal from the start: that of a steadily developing artistic programme bringing the joy of music to an increasing cross-section of the local and wider community. Naturally, unless something changes, I must explain how we could reach such a position to the many people who have supported these objectives over many years.

Artistic work of all kinds is exceptionally fragile: it is very challenging to develop but extremely easy to destroy, either through intention or simply through neglect. The difficulty of regaining lost ground means that allocating blame once it has gone is generally completely fruitless. Although reaching such a position of confrontation could serve no useful interest, however, there is no doubt in my mind that if all proceeds exactly as planned, the council will at some point be held accountable for actions involving substantial sums, especially when used in the pursuit of what I believe an increasing number of people will understand to be questionable objectives on the basis of an even more dubious rationale.

This would seem particularly undesirable when I believe that solutions are at hand. Although we are now at a dangerously late stage, with an element of compromise it should still be possible to provide for the interests of all. In order to achieve this there is first of all a clear need for the council and the new operators to convince all those with doubts of the sustainability of the plans as well as their community and artistic merit. Unless the council demonstrates some willingness to do this openly and before reaching the point of no return, I imagine that many will conclude that it has something to hide.

As I understand it, the intention is to sign contracts very shortly and present the plans to the public at the Colosseum soon after. In view of the extent of concern, I strongly urge you to delay signing the contracts and change the launch event to an open meeting at which the proposals are presented and the opportunity provided for all concerns to be openly aired and clearly addressed. Provided that it is shown that the plans represent the best options then contracts could be signed. In view of the importance of what is being done – and in the context of a process which has involved more than five years of continuing uncertainty and will seal the fate of the hall for years to come – a matter of less than a month is surely hardly material.

I offer this proposal in the earnest hope of a positive outcome on the basis that it represents the best interest of all parties and therefore hope that you will give it your most serious consideration.

Jonathan Brett
Artistic Director, Classic Concerts Trust
Artistic Director, English Classical Players
Email: jb@watfordconcerts.com
Web: www.watfordconcerts.com