

REFLECTIONS ON THE FESTIVAL BUSINESS

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MARCH 2011

At the outset of this set of general reflections on music festivals, I should at once declare that I am neither a historian, nor an academic nor a cultural theorist. I am a long-time arts worker, much of whose professional life has been spent in and around live music promotion – and a lot of that time has been around live music festivals. So my comments here are simply a few notions that have occurred to me as a result of my experience running or engaging with festivals – and predominantly festivals that are within, or are supported by, the public or not-for-profit sector.

In very broad terms, I think that the history of music festivals in the UK is aligned quite simply with the wider picture of changes in our social and cultural history. Although it's tempting to go back into 19th and earlier 20th century history to look at relatively rare examples of festival promotion – the Promenade concerts in London and the Three Choirs Festival in the English midlands would be at the top of any list although there were several more – the festivals movement of the kind we know today starts very obviously in the dark, depleted days of the mid 1940s. Because so much musical activity was, of necessity, closed down or suspended during the Second World War there was a considerable vacuum waiting to be filled.

Firstly, there were plenty of motivated and experienced people wanting to get back after the hiatus of the war to the business of forming orchestras, producing operas or promoting concerts. Secondly, audiences had been deprived of concert-going entertainment for a large part of the war and must have been more than ready to enjoy live music again as a distraction from the privations of those immediate pre-war years. And then, alongside the personal ambitions of promoters and audiences, there were the country's social and political aspirations driven by the collective experience of the war to the formation of the welfare state. Although very modestly and with a strictly limited outlook at first, the philosophy behind the welfare state prompted the introduction of state support for the arts and the formation of the Arts Council of Great Britain.

Within three years from 1945 to 1948, a group of festivals were established which still survive today – as do their arts council and local council subsidies. Edinburgh, Cheltenham, Bath and Aldeburgh – a capital city, two Regency towns and the adopted home of a leading British composer. Their festivals were all launched with a sense of a new age, a spirit of revival and renewal - Edinburgh's vision, for example, was to 'provide a platform for the flowering of the human spirit'. Each was backed and endorsed by the Great and the Good – perfect examples of the patrician spirit of arts provision, especially in the early post-war period. Edinburgh's Provost, the Reid Professor of Music at this University and the founders of Glyndebourne Opera were among the founding fathers here. Bath's Mayor and aldermen were also partnered by Glyndebourne, and the official programme for the first festival (then called the Bath Assembly) carried an introduction by the young Princess Margaret.

Today we think of the creation of new festivals and cultural events by public authorities – especially local towns and cities - as directly responding to the need to attract tourism, generate income and regenerate local economies. But although not expressed in such clinically instrumental terms, those early post-war festival had pretty much the same thought. In his wonderfully elaborate introduction to the 1948 Bath Assembly – headed with the flourish of the Latin title 'VENITE' - Horace Annesley Vachell of Widcombe Manor ended by proclaiming: 'Edinburgh rose and gripped a great

music from their favourite bands and make money – although as always in the music business, the gap between profit and loss was very often a narrow and dangerous one.

Some of the promoters, of course, were not commercial entrepreneurs at all but just enthusiasts who just wanted to get more of their favourite music– especially in the burgeoning number of folk festivals – out to a wider audience. And even the commercially savvy promoters were often initially motivated by enthusiasm for their music and the life-style that festivals could represent – the celebrated Somerset farmer Michael Eavis being the most obvious case in point.

And ‘life-style’ was an undoubted attraction for festival-goers of all kinds, often as much as the intrinsic attractions of the music. Whether sipping champagne and picnicking on the lawn at the Glyndebourne Opera Festival or spliffing up and dancing wildly at Glastonbury or downing a pint and joining in the choruses at Copredy Folk Festival, audiences, as ever, gravitated towards events that best suited their social attitudes and aspirations.

The growth of the festival scene has been threaded through with other factors that have influenced that growth. Technological developments – in amplification, for instance, made it possible to play live (especially in the open air) to very much larger audiences than the 500 who turned up to the first Glastonbury. Easier and quicker mobility of travel – motorways, car ownership etc – have allowed audiences to go further in search of their favourite places and sounds. The increased interest in ‘the outdoors’ encouraged people to camp out at festivals, in spite of the British weather and with a bit more help and home comforts from the range of camping equipment now available to them. The increased diversity of our own society, and our increased awareness of people and countries far beyond our own – coupled with the relative ease of international travel and mobility of artists – has made a range of musics and musicians available to enrich and extend festival programming - from the addition of international artists to any kind of specific genre of programme to the development of festivals, pioneered by WOMAD, that concentrate on presenting ‘world music’. And although there has been no specific formal training for festival organisers as such, the administrative and practical organising skills and knowledge that have been developed by a large number of people working on festivals over the years have made festival production an increasingly sophisticated and skilled business from which a considerable number of people have been able to earn a living.

Media attention, once limited to broadsheet newspapers and those early post-war festivals, has been given not only to the news value of festivals – ever since the devastation of the Isle Of Wight Festival and the ever-popular mudbath pictures of Glastonbury – but the media have also increasingly taken festival programmes as content. Newspapers and magazines have found festivals valuable for feature or special edition content – Edinburgh and Glastonbury, for instance, have been particularly well served by high profile special coverage. From its adoption of the Proms onwards, Radio 3’s has always taken a large part of its live recorded output of classical music from the festival circuit. (In fact the Controller of what was then the Third Programme, Sir William Glock, was also Artistic Director of the Bath Festival for ten years from 1975). And as Radio Three has expanded its range of music styles it has followed the same pattern and taken material from jazz, folk and world music festivals, to the point of becoming the main sponsoring partner of the London Jazz Festival in recent years. Other BBC radio channels have acted similarly with music festivals suited to their programming. Television, for which live music was never the strongest suit, has nevertheless been able to use more festival broadcasts in its rock and indie output and has become more prolific in festival coverage as channels have proliferated and needed more and more ready-made content to keep their schedules afloat.

Although a number of festivals have come and gone, since the 1980s the list and range of music festivals in the UK has continued to grow and grow. Independent, commercially viable festivals have

been created to explore new markets and audiences as new styles of music have evolved. It is probably possible to find a festival in the UK (and usually quite a selection) for just about any music you might be into. And this includes my personal favourite (although I haven't broken the spell of it in my imagination by actually visiting it yet) – the weekender near Leicester devoted entirely to tribute bands and appropriately named Glastonbudget.

This growth hasn't just been in the independent or commercially viable sector. Parts of the public sector – and predominantly local authorities – have created and funded a considerable number of new events in the past twenty five years, motivated in general by the widespread understanding that such cultural activity brings tourism, raises profile for the town or city and is part of a mix of activity that can build and sustain economic regeneration.

Venues such as arts centres and concert halls have tended towards highlighting some parts of their year-round programming by turning it into a festival for a short period of time. The SouthBank Centre in London, for example, created and hosts the Meltdown Festival of contemporary music, with a different musical celebrity as curator each year. Glasgow Royal Concert Hall engendered the Celtic Connections festival of traditional music. – and the Sage in Gateshead is about to hold its seventh annual jazz festival. These festivals are created for a variety of reasons. It may be to simply make money through an area of programming. More usually, however, it may be to strengthen areas of programming that need extra effort and focus in marketing and profile and audience development. Or the focus could be a particular interest and passion of the venue's or locality's audience or of the venue's management. Or it may be a way to give shape and light and shade to a venue's annual programme that would otherwise be simply a series of concerts.

And what of the festivals that have been building and evolving for several decades but may appear far less prominent as other festivals have mushroomed all around them? Edinburgh, of course, has long been established as head-and-shoulders above most events in the world and the accretion of five other festivals around the Edinburgh International Festival is a phenomenon that it would be impossible to replicate. But Edinburgh International Festival still provides a very rare platform for an extraordinary international array of orchestral and chamber music and opera – for its local audience and a large percentage of visitors from across the UK and further afield.

Bath, Cheltenham, Aldeburgh, Harrogate, Buxton, St Magnus in Orkney, Salisbury - and a slew of others, in (relatively small) towns around the UK - continue to provide a bedrock for classical music programming in Britain outside of London and a very few other major cities. They have all changed or evolved in artistic complexion as a succession of Artistic Directors have put their own stamp on the programmes. Bath, as just one example, developed a strong strand of contemporary jazz programming from the mid 1980s to add to the predominantly chamber-scale classical music concerts that had become its forte. Most of these festivals continue to commission and programme new work by contemporary composers and feature up and coming international artists. Specialist festivals with a slightly shorter history but otherwise similar pedigree - such as Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival or Brecon Jazz Festival – complement these long-established festivals with a focus on their specialist area of music.

There are few festivals of this kind – supported to some (often a large) degree by arts council and local authority funds – that haven't had to face significant political and financial challenges. Their core artistic remits were set in motion a long while ago and, with some changes of shade and emphasis, continue to be understood and followed by their staff and governing bodies. But the funders – and more particularly local politicians and residents – are often blind to the specific remit and echo sentiments which suggest the festival is either 'not for us' or 'elitist' or 'should put on things that are more popular'. Where there is a permanent infrastructure in place to manage and

produce the festival – and there is in the majority of cases – the tension is more pronounced with the local funders. When the popular perception that funds should be spent more on ‘front-line services’ and less on ‘back office’ is applied to a music festival which may only last a fortnight or so each year but which takes all year to fundraise, plan, market and administer, it is difficult to explain the need for a permanent festival office to a councillor with a truncated view of what constitutes value-for-money.

In an effort to justify the constant public pressure on value-for-money (although for a number of other equally, perhaps more, important, reasons as well) several of the more robust festivals have extended their reach and activity far outside the festival programme period. Cheltenham, for example, expanded its annual festivals portfolio and now runs three others to add to the Music Festival – of Literature, Jazz and Science. Bath now promotes a festival of Literature and another of Childrens’ Literature and runs a permanent box office service to serve its own festivals and other cultural promoters in the surrounding area. Brighton Festival’s administration is merged with the Brighton Dome venue; Aldeburgh is attached not only to Snape Maltings concert hall but to the Britten-Pears music school.

Diversification and expansion of this kind which make festival organisations less vulnerable in the face of local grumbling is also a result of the aspirations of the organisations and the people who run them. Music and festival promoters are (happily) notorious for wanting to present more performances and attract more audiences – and that can be achieved year-round and in various artforms as well as just in the music festival period. And being present in different ways throughout the year also helps any organisation maintain its profile, its marketing effort and keep in touch with its otherwise once-a-year audience.

These trends in festival organisation accord with prevailing social and political trends – on value for money, diversification and market/audience development. And so does the now-endemic practise of running educational and community or outreach projects as part of a festival’s wider remit. Whatever form these take – from artists in schools to producing community operas – they are motivated by a belief that this style of activity is worthwhile in giving access and opportunities to a wider section of the community – and at the same time by a pressing need to engage the goodwill and interest of the community in the festival. Either way, being linked into the people of the local area is another way to ensure that political opinions (and thus funding decisions) are more favourable, or at least less harsh than they might otherwise be.

In the immediate present, the economic situation that will affect funded and non-funded festivals alike – through a mixture of restrictions in public funds, the absence of enough commercial sponsorship and audiences’ diminishing ability to find the money to buy tickets – seems unsettling and threatening. But in the long-term view, the exponential growth of festivals and festival-going since the war is a success story for live music in Britain. And it’s some comfort to us at the moment that it’s a success story that happened over a period that saw several other periods of economic crisis and uncertainty - none of which seemed to stop us packing up our tents or picnic baskets and heading off to hear our favourite sounds.