

IFRCS23 Gareth Williams, Chair, Mid Wales Opera

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

[Pwyllgor Diwylliant, Cyfathrebu, y Gymraeg, Chwaraeon, a Chysylltiadau Rhyngwladol | Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee](#)

[Effaith Gostyngiadau Cyllid ar Ddiwylliant a Chwaraeon | Impact of Funding Reductions for Culture and Sport](#)

Ymateb gan: Gareth Williams, Cadeirydd, Opera Canolbarth Cymru | Evidence from: Gareth Williams, Chair, Mid Wales Opera

1. What impacts has reduced funding had on your organisation and sector so far?

Our initial view, following ACW's decision to remove 100% of our funding was that we would need to close and the Board took an in principle decision to wind down the company after a final SmallStages tour in autumn 2024, funded from our reserves.

In line with most other opera companies in the UK and Europe, public funding is essential to underpin MWO's existence. In 2023/4, funding from ACW represented 58% of our income: comparative figures for the proportion of income derived from Arts Councils' support are:

Scottish Opera – 81%

Opera North – 73%

English Touring Opera – 64%

Welsh National Opera – 61%

Without this public funding, it would be impossible to perform live opera to anyone except the wealthiest people in our society. A MainStages production costs roughly £20,000 for one performance which means without subsidy we would need to be able to sell tickets for £100 - £150 per seat to at least 150 - 200 people which would be impossible in communities like Milford Haven or Llanelli. This is however the model used by elitist summer festival operas in places like Garsington or Glyndebourne.

The potential damage to the opera and classical music sector in Wales of a decision to shut down MWO entirely would be enormous as we account for at least 25% of live opera performances in Wales and have always played a crucial role in developing the careers of young artists from or based in Wales. We were overwhelmed by the response to news of the cuts by those who had worked with us, for example:

"Mid Wales Opera has been crucial to my career progression and success. To have paid work fresh out of college and now the luxury carving my teeth on mainstream repertoire around Wales to intimate audiences whilst being nurtured and supported in a highly creative and musical environment " [REDACTED]

"Mid Wales Opera has been the only ACW funded organisation that reached out to Ensemble Cymru in 23-year history. Its officers, with the support of its Board, have been consistent in actively supporting a deepening and mutually beneficial relationship with Ensemble Cymru and through this relationship increasing the impact of both charities for schools, musicians, communities and audiences across Wales." [REDACTED]

However, in Spring of this year we were invited to apply for funding from Powys County Council's Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) allocation for cultural renewal from the UK Government and we were successful in receiving grant of £75,906. Powys have prioritised this because the sector in the county was disproportionately hard hit by ACW's Investment Review, with three of the seven core-funded organisations in the county (MWO, Hafren and Impelo Dance) being axed and with the county losing more than 25% of its portfolio funding. Although we are delighted to have been thrown this lifeline, it is ironic that a funding initiative by the (former) UK Government which is fundamentally unstrategic and temporary has had to be used to stave off at least some of the damage caused by a supposedly strategic funding body such as ACW.

Although the SPF grant itself must be spent within this calendar year, it gave us the momentum to launch an appeal to our friends and supporters which has so far raised the unprecedented sum (for a small, rurally based arts organisation) of nearly £50,000. Together with reserves which we have patiently accumulated over recent years, these two new funding streams have given the Board the confidence to agree to a more limited programme of work for the next three years.

2. What measures have you taken in light of it, such as changing what you do and how you do it.

Our three year plan will necessarily be based on a far smaller body of work than we have undertaken in recent years.

In particular:

- We will not be able to produce any of our MainStages productions. This will mean that audiences across Wales will have no opportunity to see medium-scale fully-staged live professional opera for the next three years, unless they are able to travel some considerable distance: WNO, as Wales' main opera company intends only to put on orchestral concerts in our partner venues, while giving a small number of performances in Llandudno and Swansea, alongside its programme in Cardiff. Our audience is likely to be only around a third of what it has been in recent years, in line with the sharp fall in our budget.
 - "It was our first opera and we absolutely loved it. And it was brilliant being able to go and see one in our local theatre. I'm not sure we would ever have travelled and paid for expensive tickets at a major centre. We will definitely go again. Please come again!" [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
 - The loss of MainStages touring means a drastic reduction in the opportunities for young professional singers. Casts for our SmallStages work usually offer work for 4 - 6 singers for about two months, whereas MainStages have additionally provided work for between 12 and 17 singers for a similar period.
 - MainStages tours have also been an important part of the work of the instrumentalists employed by Ensemble Cymru and our inability to put on similar scale work further undermines the opportunities for professional Welsh and Wales based musicians outside Cardiff.
 - Without work on this scale we will be unable to sustain the work to integrate adult and children's choruses into our staged work, depriving them of unique experiences:
 - 'I just lived my dream' [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
-

- In terms of our own staff, we have reduced the hours of the three core staff by one-third which means they will have to find more freelance work in order to sustain their families while as yet we are unable to replace our Chief Executive who has left to take another job: this means we lack the professional staff to develop the company and seek alternative sources of funding, thus threatening the viability of the company in the medium term.

3. To what extent will these impacts be irreversible (e.g. venues closing, or specialist skills being lost rather than a temporary restriction in activities)?

If we are able in the longer-term to ramp up our activities to again be able to mount larger-scale productions (which for the reasons explained above, will necessitate renewed funding from ACW or any successor body), then we would anticipate being able to rebuild audiences, although inevitably this will be more difficult than sustaining and building on our current audience. However, for those in our audience who cannot travel through circumstance eg age, disability, lack of discretionary spend, the opportunities which would have been available over the next three years will not come again.

Perhaps more seriously, the fact we will no longer be able to stage our MainStages productions will drastically reduce the opportunities for Wales-based singers to find professional work near to home. Many, however talented, already struggle to generate a full-time income from their chosen career and have to supplement their earnings by taking minimum wage work in retail or distribution despite having often studied for six or more years in the Royal Welsh College or other conservatoires. The reduction in opportunities for young singers will almost certainly lead to some leaving the profession or moving overseas and this will do permanent damage to the vitality of the sector.

‘Without Mid Wales Opera I would have no opportunity to work in my own country, despite the fact that I can find work with Opera North, Scottish Opera and other companies around the UK. If MWO goes, that’s me finished for working in Wales’ [REDACTED]

4. What interventions would you like to see from the Welsh Government, beyond increased funding?

We believe that the Welsh Government needs to conduct a thorough review of the governance and operations of ACW. In our view, their priorities completely ignore the perspective of actual and potential audiences, in favour of an emphasis on experimental work which appeals only to a narrow elite of metropolitan arts professionals. Making the full range of performing arts truly accessible to all requires a rigorous analysis of the extent of market failure, based on the costs of developing and presenting work versus the potential box office revenue from an audience of no more than average incomes.

5. To what extent do the impacts you describe fall differently on people with protected characteristics and people of a lower socioeconomic status?

MWO provides access to live and local opera across Wales at an affordable price. The cut to our funding will result in a disproportionate narrowing of opportunities to experience this fantastic art form for those on lower than average incomes, for whom travelling to Cardiff, Llandudno or Birmingham, possibly having to stay overnight, in addition to paying for tickets will be wholly unaffordable. Of course, we recognise that just making the art form available is not sufficient: that is why we perform in English, work extensively with schools and make every effort to minimise any impression that opera is only for a narrow stratum of society: one of the most frequently asked questions from those considering coming is 'What do you wear?' to which our answer is 'Anything you feel comfortable in! Opera isn't about dressing up, it's about the music, the people, the performance and the experience....it doesn't matter to us or anyone else what you wear'.

It is also important to emphasise that the arts establishment seems to dismiss older people (on the basis that older people are more likely to attend arts-related events), despite the fact that age is also a protected characteristic. Older people, particularly in rural areas, often find their lives constrained not just by low incomes, but by limited mobility, and greater fear and reluctance to travel long distances, particularly at night. We know that our audience is often older, but we know too that we provide unique access to live performance for many of this group of people. It is they who will particularly lose out from the fact we will no longer be able to tour our MainStages productions.

Similarly, young people are unlikely to undertake expensive long-distance travel just to try out an artform which they believe might not be for them. The combination of suitable repertoire and highly subsidised tickets in local venues makes it more likely they will take the opportunity and indeed, with this year's Macbeth we noted a real increase in our younger audience.

While in line with the demography of the places we visit, our audience is overwhelmingly white, our casts have always offered opportunities to BAME singers (our Trustee, the South African tenor, Njabulo Madlala has been playing a crucial role in advising us on this) and also to neuro-divergent musicians. Our work also helps sustain the ability of Welsh-speaking singers and instrumentalists to remain in Wales by offering employment here. The loss of opportunities to perform in Wales are likely to hit all of these groups disproportionately hard.

6. Do you have any other points you wish to raise within the scope of this inquiry?

Background

Mid Wales Opera (MWO) was founded in 1989. Our mission is to create and tour fully-staged opera performances for audiences in Wales and the Marches (particularly rural Wales) who would otherwise not be able to experience live opera and also to provide opportunities for young professional singers to build their careers.

For more than 20 years we have received core funding from Arts Council Wales, as well as regular Lottery Funding to enable us to tour productions which we have created. In 2023/4, our core grant was £107,056 and our additional Grants for the Arts funding for our touring work was £97,882.

Despite the huge costs of mounting any opera production, our performances are priced in such a way as to enable as many people as possible to come (SmallStages performances are normally around £10 - £15 per ticket with MainStages priced at £15 - £20 a ticket with much cheaper tickets for young people). We perform in English, not the original language, to make the work as accessible as possible, but all our materials, including the programmes are produced bilingually.

What we offer to audiences in Wales is to a considerable extent unique: other mid-scale touring companies across the UK have closed down in the last 20 years as costs have become unaffordable.

As well as offering audiences access to live opera, MWO has also played an essential role in providing opportunities for young professional singers who have finished their training but who often struggle to find work which will allow them to establish themselves in their sector. MWO has a policy of casting half of its roles with singers who are under 32 and/or have finished their training within the last

five years and as such has played a vital role in the ecology of the opera sector in Wales and throughout the UK.

We have always had excellent relations with Arts Council Wales and had been encouraged in the context of the Investment Review undertaken in 2023 to apply for an increase in funding to consolidate our two ACW funding streams.

We were therefore shocked to be told in September 2023 that ACW had decided to withdraw all our funding, which was justified on the basis that our work 'did not excite' those who had appraised our application and on a number of fundamental misconceptions about the standard operating procedures of opera companies.

We recognise that the current inquiry concerns the impact of the decisions made, not the process by which they were made, but it is important to state that we believe the processes undertaken by ACW were fundamentally flawed and should also be subjected to closer scrutiny. We would willingly submit additional evidence to support our view.
