RPS Music Awards

in association with BBC RADIO 3

THE UK's LIVE CLASSICAL MUSIC AWARDS

Not to be reprinted without the permission of the Royal Philharmonic Society

Mark Ravenhill Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards Keynote Speech
Tuesday10th May 2011

Theatres, concert halls and opera houses have modelled themselves on various institutions over the years: sometimes a form of parliament, a democratic forum where the community gathers together to witness an enactment of the key questions for a society; sometimes a secular church, a retreat from the material world where higher questions can be contemplated; sometimes a people's palace where the shop keeper or businessman can enjoy gilded cherubs and paste jewellery and live like a king or queen for a few hours; sometimes a journey to the end of the pier where fun can be had. All of these still have a part to play in our cultural institutions.

But our age seems to be increasingly using as it's model for theatres, concert halls and opera houses a very contemporary space: the airport business lounge. An airport business lounge allows you to step out of time and place – a floating, international environment where – because you are so damn busy – you feel that you've earned the right to be pampered for a couple of hours. A glass of champagne, pick at the open sandwiches, read the complimentary International Herald Tribune, watch some information flicker by on CNN, maybe a massage. Meanwhile some top end brands gently lobby you – after all, you are part of the new elite. It all makes you feel a bit special, a bit civilised and a bit more ready to face the grind of long haul flights and meetings.

On the right day, I love a business lounge. But it's an uncomfortable model for theatres and concert halls. And it's one I believe we should resist. Great art is made from a great paradox: it is grounded in the local, the specific, the ephemeral and yet it achieves the metaphysical and cheats time and place. But the floating world of international co-productions and festival art doesn't allow for that specific, local starting place – work is being made in the first place (sometimes quite literally, often metaphorically) in the business lounge. And the audience who come increasingly come to expect that floating, international world of luxury, a place where they can be lobbied by high end brand sponsors and donors.

Last year, I bumped into the German theatre director Thomas Ostermeier at the opening of the Sydney festival. (Thomas has directed the German premieres of three of my plays at his Berlin Theatre, the Schaubeuhne). Now that his work was constantly appearing in international festivals I

© **2011** Mark Ravenhill – *Not for publication without prior permission*

asked him who was he making the work for and where? 'Not for the world, not for Germany, not even for Berlin but for our street' he said. 'I walk up and down the Kurfurstendamm and look at the people looking in the shop windows and coming in and out of their flats – the faded wealth of former West Berliners – and I make theatre only for them'. I've just spent the last fortnight working at Snape Maltings – and was reminded how much Britten's work came from the specific, the local, from working with friends and neighbours. Too often in today's arts market we present two parallel events in a programme: the high profile, international, 'excellent' event and then alongside it the parallel local community or education event, the latter almost a form of penance for the High Art of the former. We too often forget that the greatest art – like Britten's – is created when there is no division between 'excellence' and 'community' and that the local and specific is often the best way to produce work that will, ultimately, find an international audience.

Many of our UK institutions operate under a strange schizophrenia: most of the signals that we give out suggest that we offer the international glamour, the pampering loveliness, the partnerships with banks and brands, the 'because I'm worth it' ambience of the business lounge. But at the same time we agonise about access: we want everyone (or we feel our funding depends on us wanting everyone) let into the business lounge. It's an irreconcilable contradiction: a business lounge which lets in everyone isn't a business lounge. It's a public space where anyone can congregate: the brands and banks and the international set are going to get lost in the crowd and will soon lose interest.

Making art and running cultural institutions is a joyously complex messy business. It's always going to be a balancing act between money and art, high aspirations and low cunning. We're always going to find it difficult to explain to government and the electorate at large exactly what art is for. In a modern world that buys and sells information and luxury, the arts deal in something very different : wisdom, a complex, challenging, life long search which can make you happy and furious, discontented and questioning, elated or bored. It doesn't educate or inform or make you a better citizen. We belittle art when we make it into information or into luxury. Art is a form of wisdom. Wisdom hurts as much as it harms. But human beings will always seek it out.

My first sustained contact with classical music came twenty years ago. I got a front of house job – tearing tickets, selling programmes – at the Coliseum. I was already starting to work in theatre but at the 'powerhouse' I found the most exciting theatre in town. David Pountney and Mark Elder and their incredible stable of performers replaced the pop pin ups of my teenage years. Night after night I watched from the back of the theatre as I saw the vast thrilling landscape of the opera repertoire roll out before me for the first time. At home, I hoarded the programmes that would be left under the seats after performances. I've worked in many big arts institutions since. In none of them have I had such a complete sense of an entire building united in purpose to produce important, audacious work. I did feel a little resentment from time to time that I'd spent the first twenty five years of my life and no one had introduced me to this world or that I'd never discovered it for myself. (Why had there been no teaching of classical music at my 'bog-standard' comprehensive school?) But that was overwhelmed by the thrill – which I still have today – of discovering such great art.

© 2011 Mark Ravenhill – *Not for publication without prior permission*

Yes, art is complex, mysterious but we do need now, more than ever, a clear message about what we do and why we do it. The government has opted for swift deficit reduction and a good hack at the arts: it's up to us now to set the long-term agenda for the role of the arts in public life over the next decade and beyond. Boom and bust are here to stay – capitalism will always be in a permanent state of crisis. We need a sustained, sustainable long-term plan for the arts in the UK and we need to start communicating that now if we're not going to be cut, cut and cut again.

Which is why I think the contradictory message of 'we're a business class lounge with an access policy' is such a self-defeating one. The public can smell a rat. We need to be able to look them clearly in the eye and tell them about the great work that is going on in our theatres, concert halls and opera houses. I don't know what the model for our cultural institutions should be over the next decades – and it certainly won't be a one size fits all model - but I would suggest a starting place: put down the complimentary croissant, turn off CNN and get out of the business lounge. Let's fly.

Original copyright – Mark Ravenhill

Not for publication without prior permission

Please contact:

Sophie Cohen, Royal Philharmonic Society PR,
00 44 (0)20 7428 9850
sophiecohen@blueyonder.co.uk

© 2011 Mark Ravenhill – *Not for publication without prior permission*