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Scarcely a month goes by without reading somewhere about the demise of classical music as we know it, and rightly so. Consumer demand for music has never been so great, yet concert halls and opera houses struggle for profitability. This article is not about to add to the debate but to consider the more human face involved in

the change of attitudes towards classical music: the performers themselves, and in particular my own area of expertise, the opera chorus.

Many singers are now finding that despite devoting a large percentage of their musical life to a particular company, this loyalty is increasingly in danger of being rewarded by redundancy payments. The whole business of classical music and its employees seems to be in a state of flux and in the future, performing musicians might well have to develop as much flexibility as their industrial counterparts to adapt to these changes.

Increasing needs for efficiency and productivity have for many years resulted in the business world constantly feeling the need to downsize its work force, while at the same time forming larger and larger conglomerates. This results in fewer workers being employed who then need to work longer hours. The irony of this seems to be that enforced idleness is the price to pay for improved efficiency. Unfortunately, governments and shareholders alike seem to take the view that cultural institutions should be treated in the same way.

Culture, it seems, needs to be marketable as opposed to being valued in its own right. Covent Garden and English National Opera have both downsized their chorus, which generally resulted in longer working hours for those who remained and problems for those who didn't. However, the *pièce de résistance* has to be Scottish Opera, which dismissed a whole chorus, leaving only a skeleton management and a number of loyal Scottish singers who stand very little chance of finding alternative singing work, at least on a permanent basis. This current trend does not seem to be abating, particular when considering recent hunger strikes by chorus members in Italy.

One of the problems is of course that opera can never be financially viable in an open market. A recent article in this

magazine (21 January) saw Susan Nickalls reporting on the growing awareness of cultural institutions to be ever more creative in what they do in order to attract sponsorship and give a good market return to their sponsors. The head of fund-raising for Scottish Opera was quoted as saying that private sponsorship can account for half an opera production, but what about the other half, or indeed other productions in the season? As Ms Nickalls rightly says, the days of a chairman entertaining 50 guests to a night at the opera are over. Unfortunately the high costs of modern technology opera production make it a difficult task to persuade the larger sponsors of its market value.

Ironically, it is perhaps these developments in technology and the ability to portray a greater depth of realism on an opera stage that has added to its current difficulties. But as long as opera audiences expect these visual, high technology thrills, more companies may be forced to consider cost cutting exercises in their personnel and the way they are employed. It could also re-define the whole meaning of the term opera company.

Charles Handy in his book *The Empty Raincoat* (1994) reminds us of the old meaning of company, 'a group of companions, members one of another'. He then remarks that this original meaning now only lingers on in the occasional theatrical company. That was over ten years ago. It seems that there is very little of the 'company' left in any theatrical group. An opera chorus used to be made up of a permanent group of singers, who might not all have been best friends, but who rehearsed together, socialised together and in that way built up a mutual trust and understanding of each other's abilities. It was this solidarity which generally formed the backbone of the company and musical stability. Change in personnel happened naturally and gradually allowing for successful integration of new members.

Nowadays, a full-time chorus seems to be an unwieldy, expensive commodity and the danger is, if the Scottish Opera experiment of using only freelance chorus members is a success, how long will it be before some of the other provincial companies think in a similar way? The opera company could then be in danger of becoming the 'empty raincoat', employing a transient, anonymous workforce, where a sense of loyalty and belonging are no longer necessary. This could then put into question the whole concept of a singer's musical identity.

A friend of mine recently remarked that when she went to see a Scottish Opera production as a child, she knew then that she wanted to sing for Scottish Opera. She didn't say it inspired her to become an opera singer; she wanted specifically to train for work with her country's national company. She did this for nearly 25 years. Her identity as a singer was interfaced with the identity of the company she worked for. This used to be true for many industrial workers who had been

Musicians are no strangers to the insecurities of freelance life, but current trends towards short-term contracts and downsizing have increased the need for flexibility. **Jane Oakland** considers the changing face of the musician

'Defining what we do as musicians may have to take on new meanings'



employed by the same company for many years.

Research acknowledges that we take a considerable amount of our identity from the work we do. Saying 'I am....' or indeed 'I work for....' is a way of announcing to the world who we feel we are and where we belong. Changing that conception is not always easy yet modern business expectations are such that in the future, workers may need to re-train as many as three or four times in their career, dependant on market requirements. That would require the ability to form and interact with three or four possibly life-changing identities. A report by McKinsey and Co (2005) acknowledges this and stresses the need to ease the transition for displaced workers. But how easy is it for a musician to do that?

Training as a musician is not just investing in a future job but investing in a way of life, an identity and that investment starts very early in life. In a study of professional violinists, Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romers (1993) claim that on average a professional musician will put in around 10,000 hours of practice before reaching 20 years old. Other studies have found similar results. Obviously this level would be significantly lower for singers, but apart from perhaps dancers and athletes, where else in business life can this level of youthful investment be seen?

The difference with dancers and athletes is that they enter their profession knowing that physically there will come a time when their career will stop. They are aware that they will at some time need to view themselves as ex-dancers or ex-athletes and help is usually available for this transition. But this is a new concept for musicians. Unless they leave the profession from choice, they expect to be musicians for life, yet the age of a 'job for life' is seemingly well on its way to being dead and cremated.

Even in Europe, short-term contracts are increasingly becoming the current trend. As permanent jobs become 'free' in the larger opera companies there is a reluctance to fill them, preferring instead to use the more flexible freelance market. Musicians are of course no strangers to the insecurities of freelance life and the exciting challenges it can give. But there are also the singers and orchestral players who are happier with less stress in their working lives and who value the balance between work and home-life that full-time employment can give. If this option is taken away from them,



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many will find it very difficult to imagine themselves in other roles. Indeed it could discourage potential talent from even considering a musical career.

The reality may be that musicians of the future could have to learn to accept these terms and be prepared for a more flexible concept of what it means to be a singer or an instrumentalist. Defining what we do as musicians and how we do it may have to take on new meanings and stretch across previously unconsidered borders.

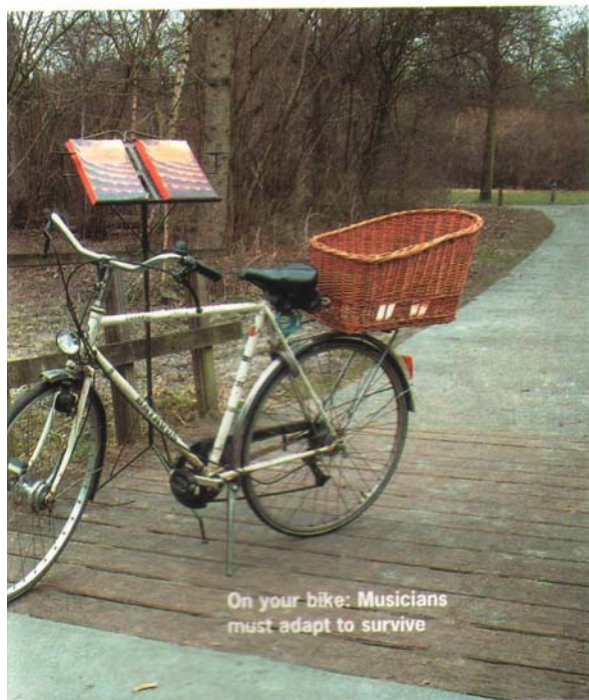
Four years ago the Higher Education Funding Council commissioned a research project, *Creating a Land with Music*, to address this dilemma by considering what is meant by the terms 'musician' and 'performance' in the 21st century. Its aim was to 'inform bodies responsible for training and professional development about the changing patterns of employment for the professional performer'. Included in its many recommendations was the need for better collaboration between work providers and training institutions to ensure that students are better equipped for the needs of the modern music industry. It also found that many of the musicians interviewed felt they were not adequately trained in skills that might enhance their career, such as education work or leading workshops.

The paradox of this 'jack of all trades' mentality is that more and more 'centres of excellence' are being established in our music colleges, encouraging a deeper understanding of the processes of music and musicians. The question is, can this quest for more specialised knowledge be balanced with the need for flexibility in the work place? It is possibly too early to fully evaluate the effect that these institutions may have on the industry in general.

It seems that music cannot separate itself from the current industrial landscape, where society is demanding ever more flexibility in our work patterns. Culture also has a price in today's market economy and we as members of society have contributed to these changes. The positive side of these developments is the new creative challenges it can give musicians of the future. The McKinsey report ends by stating that protecting jobs may stifle future innovation and instead focuses on the goal of facilitating the inevitable changes.

As musicians as well as creators of society, our sense of musical identity may have to change to accommodate market demands. Perhaps it is time to embrace the challenges on offer instead of reflecting on a past life. But whatever changes may have to be made in our individual lives, we should never compromise the values, and standards that we aspire to as performers of classical music.

Jane Oakland has been a professional singer for 25 years, working in opera houses throughout Britain and Europe. She is currently undertaking PhD research in music psychology with Glasgow Caledonian University



On your bike: Musicians must adapt to survive