



COMMENT: Hall of Mirrors?

When is a concert hall not a concert hall? When it's a political football. Jessica Duchen ponders the principles at stake in the mooted new London venue

by Jessica Duchen, 23 February 2015

It looks as if London may finally get a world-class concert hall. The other day it was announced that George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer, has given blessing and cash to a feasibility study for the project; and the City of London Corporation was said to be scouting for a site close to the existing Barbican: various theories suggest taking in the tunnel beneath it, or ousting the Museum of London to pastures new.

I can't help being amused by an article jointly by Osborne and Mayor of London Boris Johnson, outlining their vision for the future of London and including the sentences "...That includes proposals for a new concert hall for London. This week we got Sir Simon Rattle's support in helping develop it."

Many of us had had the impression that, conversely, the idea came from Rattle and the London arts world, which needed the support from politicians that had hitherto been lacking. Maybe this time we can just be kind and blame human nature: after all, whenever there's a good idea around, everyone wants to claim it as their own.

The latest outcry, though, is a predictable backlash against it. Apparently London has two reasonably "serviceable" (Sir Simon's word) halls; isn't that good enough for the likes of us? I can promise you that to many international musicians, who play at the state-of-the-art venues in places like Tokyo, Lucerne, Berlin and, er, Birmingham think London's "serviceable" halls are a complete joke in terms of acoustics. Some refuse to play there. And the backstage facilities at both are atrocious. One has the feeling that in old-fashioned British style, musicians rank with servants, don't deserve natural light, should bring a packed lunch, and have to use the tradesman's entrance.

London's music scene has been crying out for a world-class concert hall for decades. It is wonderful that there is political support at last for it.

Still, let's not get carried away. If, two and half months away from a general election, this government wants to be seen as a serious friend to the arts, its track record won't help it. The same goes for the current mayor.

Most of the country's best arts companies have suffered gouges to their grants under the coalition; ENO is currently in danger of being slain outright. As for Johnson, it is not so long since he allegedly delivered the coup de grâce to the inclusiveness-oriented Southbank Centre's ambitious redevelopment plans by siding against it with a group of skateboarders who refused to leave their "home" in the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft, despite the centre's offer to build them a special new skatepark. Enormous amounts of taxpayers' money were therefore wasted on those plans, which were shot down for some very questionable reasons indeed.

Having seemingly courted the populist anti-elitist vote by supporting skateboarders, the Mayor now appears to be a feather for a different wind that blows, especially when the money involved – around £200m, say estimates – is supposed to be "mostly" private. Meanwhile, another part of the Southbank's planning problem had arisen when Sir Nicholas Hytner, director of the centre's neighbour, the National Theatre, grumbled that the intended buildings would spoil the NT's view. Intriguingly, we hear that working on the new hall feasibility study together with the Barbican will be...Sir Nicholas Hytner.

How ironic that some of the people behind this ambitious, "mostly" privately-funded new project should be the very same that effectively killed plans to transform the Southbank Centre into an more attractive, state-of-the-art location.

Is this hall not a hall? Is it a political football, intended to prove the worth of private finance over public and therefore of right-wing attitudes over left?

Conspiracy theories aside, what's certain is that, far beyond the Square Mile, budget cuts to local authorities – necessitated by Osborne's austerity policies – are threatening music tuition for thousands of children around the country who cannot afford to pay for private lessons.

To claim a world-class cultural city, and nation, you need at the top end fabulous spaces to inspire people. But there's no point building a great new hall if your education policies deny children from disadvantaged backgrounds the chance to grow up into musicians who can play there. Some commentators say we don't need a hall; we just need better education. Actually we need both.

Most of all, we need joined-up thinking from those holding power and purse-strings about where culture really comes from: the people that create it, and those who will create it in the future.