

Lend us a tenor: What can be done about the ENO's lack of cash?

Despite a consistently rewarding programme, the ENO ran up a £2.2m deficit in the last financial year. But there is a way forward, its artistic director, John Berry, tells Jessica Duchen: international collaboration

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John Berry, artistic director of English National Opera, is at his desk, soul-searching. Beside him are a number of strange-shaped objects made of glass or stainless steel: trophies scooped by the most go-ahead opera company in the UK, which in 2012 won every award in town.

Prizes, yes; money, no. Now the headlines are all about filthy lucre, or the lack of it.

The accounts for the 2011-12 financial year revealed that ENO had run up a £2.2m deficit. Of that, £1.3m is the amount by which Arts Council England reduced its grant. But audience figures for the period amounted to only 71 per cent. Has ENO perhaps been flying too close to the sun?

The amazing thing is that the company has been able to mount its trademark adventurous productions at all. ENO, which performs all its operas in English (except for Philip Glass's Sanskrit Satyagraha), functions on what is, by European standards, a threadbare public subsidy; its fundraising is increasing, but falls well short of the levels of comparable organisations in the US. Berry, though, has latched on to another way forward: international collaboration.

Since taking office in 2006, Berry – a tall, bearded northerner who radiates intensity and nervous energy – has built relationships with more than 20 leading opera houses around the world with which ENO can function as co-producers. In partnership, two or more companies share the costs of staging or commissioning an opera; each presents the result in turn. Thus they can deliver work that perhaps none of them could afford alone. The extra financial capability this has provided, Berry says, amounts to some £20m over the past five years.

So many of the individuals involved in these co-productions are British – they often collaborate with theatrical, design and dance organisations, such as Improbable, Punchdrunk and Fabulous Beast – that ENO has effectively become a crucial international showcase for British creative talent. Slashing funding to all this brings to mind an unfortunate combination of knives, faces and noses.

"Our international profile and brand now means that we're flying the flag for the British arts internationally," says Berry. "We're one of the biggest exporters of creative work in the UK. That £20m over five years is money we would have had to find elsewhere if we hadn't had partners, which would have been impossible. True, not everybody likes our work – but we've had something to say and we've really delivered."

ENO's joint efforts have meant that the work of top British directors like Richard Jones and Deborah Warner are being disseminated across the world. And it's not only directors. The video projection company 59 Productions started at ENO, providing work for a staging of Handel's *Messiah*, co-produced with Lyon Opera; they went on to work not only for the ENO co-commission with the Metropolitan Opera, New York, of Nico Muhly's opera *Two Boys*, but also for the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Improbable, the experimental theatre company, collaborated on Glass's *Satyagraha*, which sent its work to the Met, where it was rapturously received. Now the British novelist David Mitchell is writing the libretto for *Sunken Garden*, a new commission from Michel van der Aa, the Grawemeyer Award-winning composer; it will be given in April in a new collaboration at the Barbican and is co-commissioned by the Holland Festival, Toronto Luminato Festival and Lyon Opera. That's just for starters.

In return, ENO can bring the finest international efforts to London.

Next on the cards is Verdi's *La Traviata*, a co-production with Opera Graz in Austria directed by Peter Konwitschny: a figure of extraordinary standing in the opera world who has never created a production for London before. And in June, the company will present a newly commissioned opera by Philip Glass, *The Perfect American*, based on Peter Stephan Jungk's novel about the life of Walt Disney, in partnership with the Teatro Real, Madrid.

ENO's mission, under Berry's rule, involves surprise and experimentation, challenging audiences and attracting newcomers to a vital and thriving art form. It draws top-name directors from theatre and film to reinvigorate works familiar and unfamiliar. Above all, it takes risks. This doesn't always work, but it can be spectacular: nobody who saw it, for example, will forget Terry Gilliam's production of Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* in a hurry. Meanwhile, under music director Edward Gardner, the orchestra and chorus have reached new levels of excellence. That makes the financial situation all the more infuriating.

"Having ambition and delivering it can be very different things," Berry admits, "but it's nice to reflect that our work is absolutely everywhere: Munich, Berlin, New York, Brussels, Madrid. If I'd said five years ago that we were going to do that, no one would have believed me."

There's one problem with co-productions. Audience expectations vary enormously from country to country. So do types and levels of resources and the public's attitude towards them. The Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich receives lavish state funding and its audience expects to be challenged, believing that subsidy exists to support boundary-pushing work. But in most of the US, taste remains pretty traditional – even more so than in Britain. One size won't fit all. Some conservatively minded opera-goers tend to dismiss adventurous, director-led opera as "produceritis" or, sometimes, "Eurotrash".

Berry acknowledges that it is a tricky balancing act: "The relationship with Munich has been about choosing directors that we think can go over equally well in both cities. Dmitri Tcherniakov, for instance, is one of the great iconic directors in Europe." Tcherniakov directed a subtle, sharp-edged and updated production of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* which was bound to be more controversial here than in Germany. "I had to make a decision about whether we could handle that," says Berry. It opened at ENO in June 2011; some critics hailed it as "extraordinary", others as "pallid". At the opposite end of the spectrum was Glass's *Satyagraha*, with the Met: "That was never going to shock anyone. Improbable designed it in the most eloquent, beautiful way and we felt it was always going to work."

Rameau's *Castor and Pollux* in autumn 2011 was another matter: "That was one of the most defining productions in London for 20 years," declares Berry. It was directed by Barrie Kosky in a

co-production with the Komische Oper Berlin and its core concept was to transform the Greek myth's literal descent into hell into a terrifying psychological equivalent. "I knew it would be perceived as a strong concept that not everybody would like," says Berry. "That was tough for London, because that sort of work just isn't seen here, not even in straight theatre.

"In Germany, it's what they expect. Again, I took a risk. It won an Olivier Award [for Best New Opera Production] and the last three performances were totally sold out."

Times have changed at a previously unimaginable rate. "In 2009 we sold out Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*. That wouldn't happen now. And with hindsight, I ask myself whether it was right to do *The Passenger* and *Caligula*." An unknown work by a relatively obscure composer, Mieczyslaw Weinberg, set partly in Auschwitz, *The Passenger* was a thorny prospect and required four international partners, spearheaded by David Pountney at the Bregenz Festival. Berry had faith in it and it opened the 2011-12 season – "but I couldn't sell it," he says, crestfallen. *Caligula*, a 2006 opera by Detlev Glanert about the rise and fall of the murderous dictator, likewise didn't pull the crowds.

The challenge may lie in persuading the public to spend money on seeing something it might not like.

ENO has been using its reserves of £2.6m to stay afloat – and Berry insists that the company is financially stable, since it accumulated those reserves during the boom years. "What we'd like to do, of course, is build those reserves up again."

Still, he says, he has no choice but to rebalance the programme: "Any productions for which we don't have partners now look vulnerable."

Ticket prices may be tweaked, some falling while others rise. And selling more seats is vital. ENO's home, the London Coliseum, is the biggest theatre in London, seating 2,358 people – so a 71 per cent house is equivalent to a capacity crowd somewhere smaller. Berry has already staged selected productions at the Young Vic and Sunken Garden will be a first collaboration with the Barbican. We can expect more such ventures.

Meanwhile, a long, hard examination of ENO's marketing and digital output is essential. It has had a propensity for clangers, such as an invitation to young opera-goers to dress down for the evening – in case they think it is "too posh" – though many already do. And a poster earlier this season showing a condom packet and captioned "Don Giovanni: Coming Soon" fell foul of public prudery. The company may be doing fabulous work, but it needs to consider how it puts its message across. As for digital developments, Berry says he has big ideas up his sleeve – but we will have to wait for them.

'La Traviata', London Coliseum, London WC2 (020 7845 9300) 2 February to 3 March