

Delyth Jewell MS
Plaid Cymru
Chair, Senedd Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International
Relations Committee
By email: Delyth.Jewell@senedd.wales

15 May 2024

Dear Ms Jewell,

Welsh National Opera

I hope this finds you well.

I'm writing in advance on the Senedd Culture Committee's meeting today to raise my severe concerns about the situation at Welsh National Opera, and request that you explore these issues further as a matter of urgency.

As the Regional Organiser for Wales and South West England at the Musicians' Union, I represent over 1,000 musicians in Wales, including the WNO Orchestra, and our members across the region are extremely worried about these proposals. Elizabeth Atheron's correspondence to you sets out the broad situation at WNO: as a result of cuts to their funding from the Arts Council Wales and Arts Council England the company is proposing dramatic and devastating changes.

I am concerned about the company as a whole, but particularly want to highlight the issues with the proposal to make the orchestra and chorus, who our colleagues at Equity support, part time with an associated pay cut of around 15%. It is unsustainable for our members to endure this reduction in income, and these proposals will also be hugely damaging for professional music in Wales due to the removal of stable, secure jobs. These cuts will effectively force musicians, who are already not well paid in comparison to other orchestral musicians, out of the company but without a redundancy payment.

I'm sure you understand, but not all decision makers do, that a musician can work in an orchestra for decades, invest tens of thousands of pounds in their training and instrument, but remain on a base salary of £30-35,000. We are working to try and achieve a base salary of £40,000 for orchestral players, but under the current proposals the lowest paid players at WNO will be on under £30,000.

Wales currently has two full-time professional orchestras (the same as Scotland), which provide work for many other freelance musicians, while the players also work in a range of other settings (like the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama). The WNO chorus is the only full-time professional chorus in Wales. Reducing that provision, which will inevitably affect WNO's artistic standards, would be a major reduction in our nation's cultural provision and status and hugely negative for Cardiff's position as a hub for professional music. The cuts will also affect provision to audiences across Wales through changes to WNO's touring schedule, such as a reduction of performances in Llandudno in their 2024/25 season.

I also want to highlight that, although these proposals are the result of cuts that have happened over the past 14 years and the last two years in particular, these specific proposals have only come to light in the last few months. Now they have, I think it's important to raise awareness of them given the long term effect they will have on a major national company - the largest arts organisation in Wales - and the broader arts ecosystem in Wales, including provision for audiences.

While I understand the difficult financial situation that Welsh Government and the Arts Council of Wales are in, now that we are seeing the consequences of the most recent cuts it is clear they, and the potential for further support, must be reconsidered. I understand the committee might be reluctant to interfere in specific decisions made by ACW, but this situation is ultimately the result of an overall lack of arts funding with a result that is now clearly hugely damaging for Wales and which can and must be addressed.


I am also concerned about the structural issues relating to how arts organisations in Wales and England are funded that are affecting competition for that funding, as well as awareness and discussion of significant proposals. The different statuses and relationships with government that arts organisations have are leading to significant differences in their ability to share the challenges they face and advocate for themselves, which now appears to be having a practical effect. It's important to note that these proposals at WNO will have clear and definite effects, such as reductions in performances, jobs, salaries, and work opportunities, with long-term consequences for the arts in Wales, even if they aren't as clear visually as buckets on the floor or paintings being taken down from displays.

We are asking the Welsh and UK Governments to work with both arts councils to find a way to resolve this situation for the sake of culture and music in Wales and much of England. This situation, and the proposed cuts at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, come while our sector is already facing major challenges such as the closure of St David's Hall, the cost of living crisis, and reduced job opportunities due to other cuts. Reducing the artistic foundation of Wales' largest arts organisation would be a further huge blow to musicians, audiences across Wales and England, and our national status.

WNO was founded by and for the people of Wales, and thousands of people have already signed our petition calling on the Welsh and UK governments and arts councils to protect WNO: <https://www.megaphone.org.uk/petitions/protect-welsh-national-opera>.

I hope you can help raise the problems at WNO and the need for a resolution with Welsh Government, and I would be happy to discuss these issues further with you and the committee.

Yours sincerely,



Andy Warnock

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