

Conductor says art's at risk when funders call tune

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MUSICIANS fear Welsh creativity is being stifled because composers are practically denied any grants unless they write music for new dance productions.

The Arts Council of Wales now offers no specific funding for composers, and one American musician based in Cardiff warns that this could undermine major investment in musical institutions.

Kenneth Woods, conductor of the Contemporary Music Ensemble of Wales (CMEW), also says arts funding benefits everyone because the creative economy is a huge driver of economic and civic development.

"All too often it is easy for people outside the arts industry to look at government arts funding as something of a luxury – a way of subsidising a form of entertainment that is only of interest to a minority of the population," said Mr Woods, a former assistant conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and a long-time associate of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington.

"As Wales builds its international business profile, we need to remember that companies that are looking for markets in which to create jobs are looking for low costs, good healthcare, a vibrant educational system and a rich cultural environment.

"Investing in the arts brings jobs and wealth to Wales. When we talk about money to support the creation of new music, we're talking about support for the central aspect of musical life.

"It's not just a question of providing resources for composers, but for ensembles and performers to bring their music to life.

"Wales is primed to emerge as a European cultural powerhouse, but if you look at the investment in the arts of other small European countries you can see that we have to fight even harder to compete with other countries and capitals around the continent.

"Imagine a Cardiff with as vibrant and diverse an arts culture as Budapest, Amsterdam, Prague or Copenhagen."

He said Cardiff had the necessary musical institutions – the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Welsh National Opera and the CMEW.

"We have the facilities – St David's Hall, the Millennium Centre, the new Hoddinott Hall.

"We have the talent. We're poised, but we're not letting the arts do everything they can for Wales because, frankly, we just don't have enough funding to support what people are ready to do here."

Peter Reynolds, artistic director of the Lower Machen Festival, near Caerphilly, said commissioning new music with ACW funding had become harder over the past few years.

"Money has become scarcer and it's got hedged in with a lot of other requirements.

"Recently they introduced a scheme where we could only introduce a composer if dance was involved in some shape or form.

"That made it very difficult to commission a composer."

His festival is based on performances in a small village church.

"Putting on a dance would be very difficult. It's effectively stopped us commissioning composers for the festival.

"To have that as the only commissioning scheme seems madness to me."

Keith Griffin, of music umbrella body Ty Cerdd, said: "I don't think we treat our composers as well as they deserve.

"There's nothing like the same lauding of individual artists as there is in, say, literature or the graphic arts."

He said the ACW was covering more artistic activities than in decades past, but its funding had not increased to reflect the greater diversity. That left funding for new music at its lowest since the Second World War.

An ACW spokeswoman said: "The ACW's scheme for commissioning new music is currently conditional on the music accompanying dance."

She said the ACW supported numerous new music composition schemes such as Bangor Music Festival, Welsh National Opera, Opera Max, Ensemble Cymru and Presteigne Festival.

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