

## The Richard Morrison column



# Do we need huge opera companies when smaller ones can do it better?

History is full of once-powerful entities that crashed into oblivion because they had become too big, unwieldy, lethargic or slow-witted to cope with change. Just think of the dinosaurs. The Roman Empire. The British motor industry. Lehman Brothers. The Soviet Union. The Australian cricket team. Battersea Power Station.

I hesitate to raise such a heretical notion in a cultured journal such as this, but I wonder whether opera is heading the same way. Or at least opera as it is usually evoked in the popular imagination: pricey, posh, preposterous, and plonked in theatrical surroundings so grandiose and sprawling that you need millions of pounds a year just to keep the velvet vacuumed.

This apocalyptic thought was triggered by what may be a bizarre aberration – or a significant straw in the wind. This year the Opera Award at the Oliviers (the West End's equivalent of the Oscars) went not to some spectacular epic at the Royal Opera, English National Opera or any of the other big subsidised companies or conservatoires presenting opera in London. Instead it was bestowed on a shoestring staging of *La bohème* in a pub in Kilburn – an area of north-west London about as far removed from the orbit of La Scala, Covent Garden and the Met as it's possible to get without going to prison.

Admittedly, this was a *Bohème* glowingly reviewed in the national press. Robin Norton-Hale's

production for the aptly named OperaUpClose company (the pub could hold only 40 punters at a time) was acclaimed for both its modernity and audacity, with the Café Momus scene brilliantly played amid the hurly-burly and hubbub of the real saloon bar. It ran for six months, and sold out before it was transferred to a 'proper' fringe theatre. Clearly this was a thrillingly entertaining rethink of Puccini.

Even so, let's pause and consider what the Olivier Award judges

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seem to be saying. They decided that although taxpayers fork out close to £40m to subsidise opera performances in London, the best show in 2010 was supplied by a tiny company, accompanied by a tinkling joanna, in a little venue that receives not a ha'penny of public funding.

Thank goodness that Cabinet ministers don't live in places like Kilburn, otherwise they might start to wonder why the government needs to subsidise opera at all. One reason, of course, is that opera companies have become entrenched in those grandiose theatres with their vast fixed labour costs – salaried orchestras; choruses; backstage crews; armies of administrators. But should that

be the norm? Or should we be chivvying this most cumbersome of genres – the dinosaur of artforms – towards a style of presentation that is lighter on its feet, more quick-witted, more intimate and altogether better equipped to survive the 21st century? In other words, more like OperaUpClose.

I can think of at least five reasons why we should. First, much of the operatic repertoire – and nearly everything composed before about 1800 – was written for comparatively small spaces.

To bellow it in barns does it no favours. Secondly, smaller-scale performances accompanied by piano or chamber group make possible a more interesting variety of voices. And the singers can nurture a subtler range of dynamics and timbres.

Thirdly, by taking opera into pubs, community halls, restaurants and clubs you are taking the artform to the people, rather than asking them to step through the grand portals of an opera house. And the 'posh' image of opera is still daunting for millions who feel uncertain about how to dress and behave, and are anyway horrified by the cost of tickets. Which brings me to the fourth reason: price. There should be a range of operatic

experiences to cater for all wallets and all levels of enthusiasm.

And the fifth reason? It's about revitalising the operatic repertoire by encouraging young composers to experiment with the genre. That's almost impossible to do in big theatres, because the stakes and costs are so high. It's much easier in smaller places, which is why Bill Bankes-Jones's annual Tête à Tête festival at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith can mount 15 or 20 new works in three weeks.

Don't get me wrong. I'm arguing for variety, fresh thinking and practicality, not the abolition of traditional opera houses. But look around you. The big opera companies are already diversifying into smaller-scale work – ENO at the Young Vic; the Royal Opera at the Linbury Studio. Scottish Opera has even been forced by its dire finances to ditch its chorus, put its orchestra on a half-year contract and cut its big-theatre performances to such an extent that the vast majority of its shows are now piano-accompanied efforts in community halls. Of course, Scottish Opera's critics deride these moves as panic-driven responses necessitated by failure. I disagree. They are pragmatic and flexible moves to guarantee the company's survival and reach new audiences. And like Kilburn's unlikely dash for Olivier glory, they could be portents of how most of the opera world will look in future. ■

*Richard Morrison is chief music critic and columnist of The Times*