

CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

ARTS FUNDING INQUIRY

SUBMISSION FROM KEN MATHIESON

Introduction

While my submission reflects how funding impacts the jazz scene and its musicians, who are almost without exception free-lance players, free-lancers across all the Arts must have similar experiences.

My CV

I've been active on the Scottish jazz scene and internationally for 60 years and in that time have had the good fortune to work with many of the greatest names in jazz in the 20th century. In 2004 I formed The Classic Jazz Orchestra for a single gig in the Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival and that proved so successful (at least in artistic terms) that the band continues to this day, counting the cream of Scottish jazz talent among its pool of players. In its 15 years of existence CJO has appeared all over the UK and has won awards and accolades world-wide for the quality of both its bespoke arrangements and its performances and recordings, as well as the versatility of its musicians.

Jazz in Scotland

For a century Scotland has produced many world-class jazz musicians, but in the last 40-50 years the Scottish jazz scene, like jazz everywhere, has contracted as it became marginalised from mainstream entertainment, due in part an ageing demographic, but mainly to the massive commercialisation of pop music. Jazz will always attract creative musicians with improvisation skills (perhaps more so than ever as classical music starts to embrace improvisation for the first time in some 200 years and colleges and conservatories are once again teaching it – if it can be taught), but the contraction of the scene means fewer playing opportunities in smaller bands in fewer, smaller venues for fees reduced to levels common in the 1980s. The outcome is that it is harder for professional musicians to earn a living playing jazz and, with fewer performance opportunities, it is harder for players to maintain high standards. Obviously this also makes it harder for Scotland to retain its brightest talent, which should be a priority of any self-respecting nation. The situation is no less difficult for promoters or indeed Arts specialists in the media as activity tails off.

My Experience of Funding of Jazz in Scotland

Given these issues and others explored at greater length below, it's existentially important that funding for jazz should be more specifically targeted than the current "all-Arts free-for-all" operated by Creative Scotland. Its structures and processes currently inhibit funding reaching the jazz sector. Since CJO was formed I've received funding awards from Creative Scotland and other sources, some for recording sessions and composition commissions and some for development of work opportunities in the jazz sector. For the latter, it seemed

clear to me that without gigs there is no jazz scene, so musicians and promoters have to work together for mutual benefit or we suffer further contraction.

The key aims were therefore to create work opportunities for musicians and to encourage venues like theatres and arts centres which had dropped jazz from their programming to reinstate it at reduced financial risk to the promoter. Subject to a successful funding award, the deal involved CJO giving the promoter a 33% discount on its usual performance fee, with the award covering the shortfall and all overheads e.g. travel, subsistence, accommodation, PR etc costs. This also meant that small grass roots venues, which are so important to national culture, were able to afford CJO and benefit from the increased resulting revenue. With 2 Open Funding awards this model was successful and resulted in a substantial increase in public performances, most of them to very full/capacity audiences, so the model clearly works and the additional gigs tightened the band's performances markedly. Key to this success was that most of the financial risk was borne by the promoter, with Creative Scotland only funding the fee discount and touring oncosts.

However, the following year a third application was rejected as "just more of the same", which overlooks the fact that many of the gigs lined up were in venues where we had never played before and that part of the project was to cover the costs of extra rehearsals to familiarise new players with the repertoire so that the three oldest players (all in their 70s) could bow out and ensure the band's continuation with new blood. The rejection resulted in a diary with 25 gigs being reduced to a mere 6 for the year, with significant loss of income for all the band's players. At a subsequent meeting with Creative Scotland staff, I was encouraged to re-apply and ensure that I covered all the points they raised at the meeting. When I pointed out that all these points had indeed been covered in the original application, it was met with embarrassed looks.

Issues Specific to Creative Scotland's Processes

Funding Cycles

I fully understand that funding of large national companies and projects is by its nature different from the funding of smaller projects and organisations. The completion of funding applications is onerous and time- and resource- consuming for all applicants, but the 3-year cycle of Regular Funding means that the admin burden of applying is relatively lighter for its applicants.

For smaller projects and organisations there is a disproportionate admin burden in applying for Open Project funding as it may require more than one application in a year to assist with ongoing activities plus any special project opportunities which might arise. This can have a massive adverse impact on smaller grass-roots ventures which collectively are the bedrock of our culture.

Application Completion and Appraisal Processes

As mentioned above, the form-filling alone is a very time-consuming process given a 35-page application form for Open Funding projects of under £15k and 37 pages if over £15k. On top of this is a requirement for numerous supporting documents (CVs, reviews, proof of bookings etc). The size of all the documentation required for my application in 2016-17 amounted to just under 6MB of (mainly) Word and Excel documents.

Once submitted, an Open Funding application goes through an initial screening process typically taking about a week. If it fails this test for any reason, there are further delays while information is re-worked and double-checked before re-submission. It then goes round the initial screening once more before going for appraisal. Depending on the amount of re-work, it is possible that 3 weeks can elapse from submission to the start of appraisal.

Appraisals for under £15k take 8 weeks and for over £15k 12 weeks. In addition it is recommended that a further 4 weeks are allowed between notification of success and the start of the project, so these projects can require 3 or 4 months respectively to pass successfully through appraisal (i.e. not counting the pre-submission compilation and initial screening cycles). If these cycles are included, the total elapsed time could easily come to 6 months or more, so it's hardly surprising that hardly anyone tries again after a rejection.

Where a project includes bookings for performances agreed in principle with a promoter, it is commonplace to find that the promoter has filled the slot by the time a decision emerges and can't accommodate a replacement date due to other bookings. This applies particularly where theatres are involved as they tend to work 6 to 9 months ahead in programming. Finding alternative promoters in a shortened timescale is never easy and my experience in such cases is that I have to fall back on promoters for whom CJO has worked in the past and who know they won't lose money on it, thus exposing me to the "just more of the same" criticism by Creative Scotland. Contrast this with my experience of applying to Renfrewshire Council for funding for a large composition and performance commission. The form was 8 pages long, took a couple of hours (including budget calculations) to complete, and the whole cycle from start to confirmation of its success took 2 months.

Creative Scotland Budgets

There are no separate budgets for different Arts forms let alone sub-genres within these forms (accountants call this "midden accounting as money gets shovelled in at one end and out at the other without any sense of direction), so effectively funding decisions are made on a "first come first served" basis. This tends to put minority interest genres (which sadly now include jazz) at a disadvantage. Surely it is not beyond the wit of Creative Scotland staff to evolve more detailed budget methods that ring-fence funds to enable threatened genres to recover?

Other

After meetings and other communications, I question whether Creative Scotland has any staff with a deep knowledge of jazz in general and Scottish jazz in particular.

Conclusions

My principal concern is that Creative Scotland should reconsider its processes to better support the non-corporate individuals in Scotland's Arts who plough a lonely furrow in pursuing precarious careers and furthering their skills. This applies to the artists and to the facilitators (promoters, galleries, theatres, clubs etc) who bring the Arts to the public. In the course of doing that, Creative Scotland should make it simpler to apply for funding (my experience is that artists are wonderfully creative people in their genres, but few are adept at admin and PR), and look at ways to shorten appraisal cycles so that artists don't have to put their careers on hold until they hear whether applications have succeeded or not. It would also support even-handed distribution of funding if CS could develop a more sophisticated approach to budgeting.

My fear for Scottish jazz is the continuing contraction of activity. No gigs = departure of the best players = no jazz scene. With young musicians emerging every year from jazz courses in music colleges, there are more and more people competing for fewer gigs and so the money goes down and quality counts for less. If we can find a way to reverse this trend I have confidence that there will always be creative musicians who want to exercise their talent in the most spontaneous musical idiom yet invented. The issue goes beyond direct funding and has to include encouraging audiences, which in turn in turn means involving promoters.

Ken Mathieson

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