



Oiling the wheels of opera

by Denis Joe March 2013

During the interval at the premiere of David Pountney's [Lulu](#), for **Welsh National Opera**, much of the talk amongst the opera goers, was not about the opera they were seeing, but about Welsh National Opera's acceptance of a \$2m donation from the **Getty Foundation**

You would think that after the company suffered a cut in funding from **Arts Council England** in 2011, which led to job cuts and a cutback on new productions, that this generous donation would be welcomed. Alas, this was not the case. Some suspected that the offer had strings attached and that

Pountney

had compromised

WNO

's integrity by agreeing to produce Gordon Getty's one-act opera

Usher House

in return for a handsome hand-out.

In October of last year author, broadcaster and cultural commentator, [Norman Lebrecht](#) bemoaned that “In exchange for a seven-digit cheque, the company will perform an opera by a talentless musician who inherited and once managed an oil empire”.

From what I have heard of Getty’s music, it is hardly ground-breaking. It is unashamedly populist, but no less so than, say, Gian Carlo Menotti’s television opera ***Amahl and the Night Visitors***, a popular and critically acclaimed Christmas opera, or even many recent musicals, such as ***Les Misérables***

. Because a work is popular doesn’t necessarily mean it is bad. If that were the case then we would have to write off many operas, including those by

Puccini

. And being rich does not always equate with being talentless.

Francis Poulenc

, born into the wealth of the Rhône-Poulenc chemical company, is an outstanding example.

But there does seem to be something distasteful about a donation with strings attached. I would doubt that WNO would have put on a production of a Getty opera had it not been for the generosity of the Foundation. Yet WNO deny that there were strings attached. In an interview with [Radio 4](#) Pountney said the of Getty's ***Usher House*** that it was "beautiful, refined, sophisticated and atmospheric". He went on to say that was conductor

Larry Foster

who brought the opera to his attention.

However, even if there were strings attached, would it matter? If the Getty Foundation expected WNO to produce a Gordon Getty opera, it pales into insignificance in comparison to the demands made on the ***New York Metropolitan Opera Association Inc***, which led the **Sybil B. Harrington**

's estate to sue the opera company because, it was alleged, that a production of Tristan and Isolde was a

non-traditional

one, that contradicted the wishes of the oil heiress, who stipulated that the money should only be used for operas written by established composers (Puccini, Verdi, Wagner, etc.) and should be staged in traditional settings and costumes - virtually dictating the Met's policy on opera.

But it is understandable that donors to the arts expect some recognition in return for their sponsorship. BP is one of the most generous sponsors of the arts in Britain along with their rivals Shell, yet it would be ungracious of The Tate, The British Museum or The Royal Opera House not to acknowledge those corporations. There are always going to be those who believe that art should not be tainted by filthy lucre, especially when that money originates from oil production (see [Arts funding has never been a pretty picture](#) by Tiffany Jenkins).



If we look at the alternative of state funding, how do the arts benefit from **Arts Council** demands that works should somehow be beneficial to the community: that art should be used as a means of addressing social problems? The

NHS

has recently become a major source of income for local arts groups and individuals, particularly

to work with geriatric patients, patients in Mental Health Services and other with other [long-term conditions](#)

Every arts organisation in Britain these days provide some sort of 'community work' whether that is providing access for those sections of the community who might not otherwise been interested to pursuing art to decorating buildings, such as hospitals, with Monet prints.

There does seem to be a sense of entitlement when it comes to state funding of the arts. As **Ric hard Luce**

, as Arts Minister, opined in 1987: "There are still too many in the arts world who are yet to be weaned from the welfare state mentality". At least sponsors who might treat their funding activities as vanity projects do not see art other than for what it is: work that serves no other purpose other than to stimulate our curiosity or simply just to please us.

In the Welsh National Opera 2013/2014 Season brochure we get to see just what the \$2m contribution means for WNO and the opera going public: Three new productions of Donizetti's Tudor operas plus four other new productions, including a rare performance of Schoenberg's **Moses und Aron**

and Hans Werner Henze's

Boulevard Solitude

as well as three British premieres including the late Jonathan Harvey's opera

Wagner Dream

. It is an exciting and ground-breaking season, all the more so in these times of austerity when arts funding is being reined in and there is a general panic about the continuing existence of some art institutions and groups. So it is refreshing to read in Pountney's introduction to the season that ". . . but we do not apologise for the fact that this is a serious programme of work. Opera is a big, expensive medium, but it is also a forum for great ideas – ideas that lie at the

heart of our experience of European civilisation.”

Here’s one opera lover who is looking forward to the next WNO season, and pleased that the Getty Foundation has helped to provide an adventurous calendar of events.