

HONG KONG PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

SUMBISSION TO PANEL ON HOME AFFAIRS AND PANEL ON DEVELOPMENT

Joint Subcommittee to Monitor the Implementation of the West Kowloon Cultural District Project

Introduction

The Hong Kong Philharmonic warmly welcomes the development of the West Kowloon Cultural District, in particular the inclusion in the plans of a first class concert hall for symphonic music.

The Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra is the largest and most active of all of Hong Kong's performing arts companies. Our Orchestra comprises 90 full-time musicians and our season runs for 44 weeks from September until the beginning of July. Across its busy and varies season of concerts, the Orchestra achieves 80% paid attendance and in addition presents a huge education and outreach program which includes schools concerts (with over 13,000 students participating this week alone), a free, annual open-air concert attracting more than 20,000 music-lovers, regular touring to Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou and a series of concerts devoted to the promotion of the next generation of Chinese artists.

The Hong Kong Philharmonic's annual budget is in excess of HK\$100 million, of which approximately 60% is funding from the Hong Kong Government via the Home Affairs Bureau. The remaining 40% is earned through ticket sales, sponsorship and fundraising which, in the current financial year will represent more than HK\$45 million.

A new home in West Kowloon

The Hong Kong Philharmonic has long been held back in its artistic and audience development by not having a home. Although the recent Venue Partnership Scheme has made some improvement in the Hong Kong Philharmonic's relationship with our prime venue, the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, we are still a long way from having the necessary residency status which enables all of the most successful orchestras in the world to flourish.

We see a symbiotic relationship between a performing company such as the Hong Kong Philharmonic and its home venue. The Orchestra needs the venue in order to work, rehearse, perform, attract audiences, supporters and sponsors and connect with the community. An orchestra is almost unique among the performing arts as, for the vast majority of its programs and activities, it cannot function unless it is housed in a suitable venue, with appropriate acoustic properties and it cannot flourish and develop unless it has first call on the use of its home concert hall for rehearsals and performances.

Meanwhile, the venues need the resident companies to provide the lifeblood of programming, attracting the public with a wide range of programs, from the most artistically challenging to those educational programs designed to introduce children, students and adults to the life-enhancing qualities of music.

The relationship between the venue and its resident company is vital to the eventual success of the venue. Therefore the mode of operation of each of the venues in the West Kowloon Cultural District needs to be considered very carefully in relation to the needs, aspirations and competencies of the resident companies for whom the venues are being constructed.

Involvement of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra

All of the most successful new performing arts venues built in the last 20 years have been the result of an intense and close relationship between the project management and those companies which will eventually become the resident performing companies of the completed venues.

This involvement is crucial to the success of the project and the Hong Kong Philharmonic pledges to contribute our knowledge, experience and expertise to the project in order to ensure that the completed venues will meet the needs of those companies which will provide the programming life to the West Kowloon Cultural District.

Design

The Hong Kong Philharmonic's greatest concern relates to the acoustics of the new concert hall in West Kowloon. Recent history reveals a number of notable failures which have had a devastating effect on the artistic development of the performing arts in the cities concerned. The Sydney Opera House is one of the most notorious which, through a change of policy during the construction process, has resulted in a concert hall with grossly inadequate acoustics and an opera theatre whose severe limitations have straight-jacketed the growth of the national opera company.

Concert hall acoustics are profoundly determined by the shape of the room. It is for this fundamental reason that the acoustic needs of the hall must be understood before any external design concept can be commenced. This inside-out approach is crucial to the success of concert hall design and requires a very close relationship between the acoustician and the architect before the first pencil is lifted. Some shining examples in recent years include the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles (architect Frank Gehry; acoustic designer Yasuhisa Toyota of Nagata Acoustics) and Lucerne Culture and Congress Centre in Switzerland (architect Jean Nouvel; acoustic designer Russell Johnson of Artec).

Walt Disney Concert Hall also stands as a textbook example of the results which can be produced when the resident orchestra plays a major role in the project from conception through to operation. A similar success occurred with Symphony Hall Birmingham with

the role played by Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra throughout the entire process.

In order to ensure that the finished venue will be of the highest calibre, the guiding principles of the West Kowloon Cultural District must enshrine a fundamental commitment to excellence in design and construction. Compromise will result in failure as is demonstrated by the inadequacies of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre.

Development of the performing arts

The commitment to build an entire precinct of arts and culture venues in West Kowloon requires a matching commitment to develop the resident performing arts companies in Hong Kong which will provide the lifeblood of West Kowloon's programming. The resident performing arts companies have a very finite timeframe in which to build their qualities, expand their audiences and increase their budgets. By the time the Phase I venues of West Kowloon are in operation, Hong Kong's resident companies need to be ready to meet the challenge artistically, financially and in the breadth of their community support.

This is a vital stage in Hong Kong's cultural development and requires a profound partnership between the resident companies and the funding body to commit to a development plan which will underpin the necessary growth to ensure West Kowloon's success. Currently, Government funding is granted on an annual basis, but future development will require longer-term commitments, aligned to agreed long-term outcomes which are the realization of a vision for Hong Kong's cultural future.

Articulating that vision requires leadership.

Prepared by Edo de Waart
Artistic Director and Chief Conductor

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