



Opera Hong Kong's Role in the Development of the West Kowloon Cultural District

Background

Opera Hong Kong ('OHK') was established in 2003 as Hong Kong's first professional Western Opera Company and is now recognised as the leading opera company in the HKSAR. OHK is a charitable arts organization which focuses on bringing high-quality opera performances to Hong Kong audiences and promoting the development of opera in Hong Kong. The latter is achieved through a very extensive education and outreach programme which places considerable emphasis on increasing awareness and appreciation of opera in schools. OHK is also firmly committed to nurturing local musical talent by providing leading local singers, many of whom are graduates of the Academy for the Performing Arts, with performance opportunities in its productions.

Hong Kong, like London and New York, is one of the world's leading international and financial centres. While, in many respects, Hong Kong is on a par with these two cities, by comparison, its cultural life is very undeveloped, particularly in the area of western opera. If Hong Kong is to make good its claim to be 'Asia's World City', it has to place a far greater emphasis on and devote more public resources to the development of the performing arts, in particular opera. If Hong Kong's cultural life is to start to match the breadth and quality of that in London and New York, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority ('WKCD') must prioritise the development and promotion of opera as a key element in its development programme for performing arts venues.

The Lyric Theatre

According to the WKCD's latest plans, the Lyric Theatre will be built in Phase II of the West Kowloon Cultural District ('WKCD'), with the design brief and design scheme being prepared from May to July 2014 and the detailed design from July 2014 to May 2015. The emphasis will be on promoting dance although it will 'showcase' other art forms including musicals, opera, theatre and events. Disappointingly, the auditorium's seating capacity will be only 1,200 seats. However, the traditional Lyric Theatre, as it has evolved in other parts of the world, is a genuine multi-purpose cultural venue designed for dance, operatic and theatrical performances. Good examples of multi-purpose lyric theatres on the Mainland are: the Lyric Theatre of the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing, the Shanghai Grand Theatre and the

Guangzhou Opera House which are able to stage major operatic productions as well as ballet and theatrical performances. In the USA, all major theatres are suitable for performances of opera while, in Europe, major opera houses like the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, stage both ballet and opera.

OHK is concerned that, if the Lyric Theatre is going to be designed primarily for dance performances, it will not be a genuine multi-purpose venue capable of staging opera and theatrical productions. In this respect, if this venue to be used for staging operas the acoustical design and stage size and design will be of critical importance. Furthermore, as the seating capacity is only 1,200, it will be significantly smaller than the existing Grand Theatre in the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, currently used for staging operas and ballets, which has a seating capacity of 1,734.

The Great Theatre

OHK's concern with the size and scope of the Lyric Theatre is underlined by the very uncertain status of the Great Theatre which is primarily intended for staging large scale stage performances such as opera and ballet. At the moment, this is in Phase III of the WKCD's programme which is post-2020. Furthermore, even the size of this venue, which was originally 2,200 seats, has been very significantly reduced to 1,600 which is less than the existing Grand Theatre. As one of the principal reasons for building the WKCD was to provide Hong Kong with cultural venues of a size and sophistication which the SAR currently lacks, the fact that both of the two major theatres in the WKCD will be smaller than existing similar cultural venues is both very surprising and most disappointing.

Review the Lyric Theatre's Function and Size

Given the uncertainty surrounding the development of the Great Theatre, it would appear that, in the immediate future, the Lyric Theatre will be the only venue in the WKCD capable of staging opera. In view of this, OHK urges the WKCD to review the size and scope of this facility, with particular reference to acoustics, stage design and seating capacity, to ensure that it is a genuine multi-purpose cultural venue, capable of staging high quality performances of operas, musicals and dramas as well as ballet and dance. Hong Kong deserves no less. OHK stands ready to assist the Government and the WKCD with the design process.