

Response to Ofcom Public Service Review

From Dr Reiner Moritz

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I am writing in response to Ofcom's request for submissions to Phase One of the Public Service Broadcast Review. I have already contacted the DCMS with a letter containing elements of the following submission and have been advised by the Secretary of State's office that the most appropriate medium for such a communication is via the current PSBR Review. I am an international producer and distributor of cultural programmes, currently operating both in the UK and the wider world through my independent company Poorhouse International, which is based in London and RM Creative in Munich. I have been a partner with British television for almost forty years and I have had the good fortune to collaborate with every British channel and every senior British television executive from Huw Weldon and Jeremy Isaacs to Mark Thomson and Michael Grade.

This submission is particularly concerned with cultural programming and its future on all platforms, including analogue broadcast television, digital distribution, online media and a variety of home entertainment systems. Earlier this year, I read with great interest and approval the recent report which the DCMS commissioned from Sir Brian McMaster. I applaud his conclusions and recommendations and fully endorse the following comments on public service television:

"It was highlighted in consultation that the problems arising from these three issues have been exacerbated by the decline in the provision of cultural programming through the public service broadcasters. This is an issue that few can fail to have noticed, and I believe that it has been to the detriment of public understanding of the arts and the depth of engagement in cultural activity. The timing of this review coincides with the forthcoming Public Service Broadcasting review. I recommend that the Public Service Broadcasting review examines the extent of the cultural provision provided by public service broadcasters."

The evidence contained in the sections of the current report available online at the Ofcom site broadly bears out Sir Brian's comments. In the past five years, the small amount of cultural programming in the UK across all available PSB channels has flat-lined in peak time and declined in daytime (see Page 39). In fact, when the increase in BBC Proms broadcasting on BBC4 is taken into account, all other cultural programming has actually declined in peak time as well. This is disturbing, particularly in the context of another statistic in the survey – namely that 69% of respondents ranked the provision of interesting programmes about history, science and the arts as of major importance in their motivation to watch public service television (page 28). An explanation for this contradiction is to be found on Page 60, where the current provision of arts, culture and heritage is described as "limited" and their discoverability as "difficult".

These conclusions are certainly borne out by my own experience. Over the years, I have collaborated with the BBC, ITV and Channel Four in producing a host of major cultural and factual series, performing arts programmes and drama, securing partners from every continent. Like many of my colleagues I have been very concerned that in the past few years the quantity of serious cultural programming on UK television has significantly diminished. Although BBC4 and More Four have added to the broadcast spectrum, the actual number of commissioned hours has fallen from the peak it achieved in the 1990s to its lowest level in two decades. The majority of independent producers and distributors of my acquaintance attest that it is becoming increasingly difficult to persuade commissioning executives to commit to serious projects – not only adventurous and experimental work but also substantial mainstream culture. This is true of all the major broadcasters but it is of particular concern at the BBC, which is the major recipient of public funds

It would appear that there are two factors responsible for this decline – editorial policy and commissioning practice, both of which have changed substantially in the period under review. To take these aspects one by one:

1. Editorial Policy

The BBC has stringently reduced its regular cultural documentary and magazine strands. *Arena*, which once broadcast throughout the year on BBC2, now has only six or seven slots, largely confined to BBC4. *Imagine* has replaced *Omnibus* on BBC1 but with only a little over half the former strand's airtime. There is no regular presence on any BBC channel for literary or musical documentary. This decline is even more severe on the commercial quasi-public service networks. *The South Bank Show* has lost a quarter of its slots and Channel Four has almost entirely abandoned arts and music documentary. What still exists is largely confined to the digital channels and in the case of ITV broadcast very late at night. The arrival of the BBC's i-Player and Channel Four's 4OD has alleviated this to some extent, but cultural programmes are fitfully promoted and often difficult to track down.

Of equal concern is the increasingly parochial quality of the output. Last year, the BBC commissioned a rare example of a classical musical documentary series – *Classic Britannia* – dealing with British music in the past fifty years. It was made with tiny budgets and relied almost entirely on archival content supported by a rather random scattering of not very representative interviews. Next year the BBC plans to follow this with another group of four programmes, also devoted to British musical history. It is not as if alternative content is unavailable. Here are a few examples. The BBC has been offered the first ever series on the history of opera in society, something which has already won support in several European countries, Australia and the USA. It was abruptly rejected without any inquiry as to content or cost. This indifference to international content is not confined to factual programming. The recent triumphant *Tristan and Isolde* from Glyndebourne has already been screened in many European countries. It too was rejected, as was Glyndebourne's equally popular and successful *Giulio Cesare*. The same happened to Mabou

Mines Dollhouse, a brilliant English language adaptation of Ibsen's play which was the hottest ticket at last year's Edinburgh Festival. Arte commissioned a recording which took place at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh and in a studio in Glasgow. Partners from Scandinavia were found, but again no British broadcaster showed any interest. The BBC said 'this is not part of our present remit.'

It would appear that this remit is constrained by the BBC's undertaking to make the work of the Royal Opera and Ballet available on a regular basis. This is an admirable arrangement but one which banishes from the screen superb work from the performing arts venues of continental Europe and the wider world. Even the work of great British companies outside London or on the fringe is all but invisible. One searches in vain for the Edinburgh, Brighton and Bath Festivals, the internationally acclaimed work of Complicité, Cheek by Jowl and dozens of others. It is many years since the British public had the opportunity to see the range of performance programmes available in France, Germany, Holland and Scandinavia. Thrilling new work is being made in the tiger economies of the Far East. As far as British television is concerned, it might as well not exist. It is not a question of cost. I know from daily experience that the BBC might co-produce or acquire such work at a fraction of its own in-house production costs.

2. Commissioning Practice

When I was collaborating with the BBC thirty years ago as both a producer and a distributor, there was an open dialogue between programme makers and commissioners. There was reasonably free access to Channel Controllers and departmental heads. The BBC commissioning system has now become remote and bureaucratic, with authority vested in a new tier of management who appear to operate independently of those other BBC executives who were appointed for their knowledge and experience of the arts. All music, arts and religious programming has to pass through a single gateway, guarded by two executives, neither of whom has an extensive track record in the fields for which they are responsible. As a result, both the amount of airtime and the quality of the programming which occupies it have declined. There is anecdotal evidence that this is a policy decision emanating from the very top of the television service. It is a matter of public comment that the Director of BBC Vision is extremely averse to the performing arts appearing on mainstream channels in prime time at all, with the bulk of such output confined to the digital channels. There is an occasional honourable exception – such as Birtwistle's *Minotaur* recently screened on BBC2 – although by scheduling it opposite a Euro 2008 football international, the custom seems to have been more honoured in the breach.

This is compounded by a very obscure relationship with the independent sector. The two arts, music and religion commissioners are meant to split their responsibilities between in-house and independent submissions. Yet they share an office and their responsibilities have been re-organised to work together. As a result, the BBC's own policy of a level playing field between in-house and out-house production – the so-called "Window of Creative

Competition” – seems not to function at all in cultural programming. The commissioning process is neither fair nor transparent. It is scarcely surprising therefore that current practice adds to the general sense that culture on BBC Television exists in a bubble, isolated from the world at large. In his report, Sir Brian MacMaster remarks that British cultural activity “needs support in opening itself to the wider world.” Once again, television music, arts and performance can play a valuable role in broadening the understanding of audiences of every age and social background, but this will only happen if the public service broadcasters restore the level of output which the UK once enjoyed and BBC management provides commissioning structures and policies to achieve these ends. This is not simply a question of funding. In my experience, there are always willing partners for artistic excellence, particularly in growing markets like Asia and the Far East. But the door must first be opened.

I have concentrated on the BBC, because the Corporation is the largest national provider of arts and music programming. However, the same is true to an even greater degree of ITV and Channels Four and Five. To some extent, they have the excuse of commercial pressure, and as phase one of Ofcom’s report indicates, this will be exacerbated after digital switch-over is completed. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that if cultural television is to survive intact outside the BBC’s digital channels, some reconfiguration of current license fee arrangements will be inevitable, always provided that there are adequate statutory safeguards and rigorous monitoring. However, the main challenge is to restore the visibility and availability of serious arts television in an increasingly crowded field. There has been too little discussion of an international response to this challenge. Yet there is a huge community of broadcasters outside the UK anxiously seeking partnerships. Their resources and experience can only enhance the quality of what the BBC provides. I would recommend that Ofcom casts its net far wider in the next phase of its investigations and would be more than happy to provide supporting evidence and potential solutions.