

THE FUTURE IS SILENT. ACT NOW.

When it comes to music, theatre and art, one thing is clear: taste is personal. What I like, my neighbour finds dull. I'll never share my partner's preferences. But the cultural life of this country is an entire ecosystem, and it is collapsing around us.

Shakespeare not for you? That theatre also hosts the panto, the community gala, the comedy night. Don't fancy the ballet? Their tutus are crafted by the costume designers who make a Netflix drama look so striking. Choral music isn't your thing? The singers make Christmas sound like Christmas, and run your toddler music group. Can't stand Beyoncé? The admin, security and finance team work on jazz, on tribute bands, on the Last Night of the Proms. Not a symphony person? Your next blockbuster hit will sound pretty weak without its orchestral soundtrack.

The infrastructure of the cultural industries means that everything is interconnected. Venues host a wide range of styles, individuals in the gig economy work for a host of different people, and consumers absorb an eclectic mix of creative output as they go about their daily life.

Whether or not you think of yourself as someone who Believes In The Arts – your world will feel very quiet when they disappear.

The creative is one of the only sectors to have received no Covid-19 bail-out from the government – and this despite the government's own figures showing that the creative industries contributed £111.7 billion to the UK economy in 2018, before allowing for the related impact on the hospitality industry (every £1 spent at the theatre sees £3 spent in restaurants, hotels and bars). Every day now brings news of another venue closing, another swathe of redundancies. Even the Royal Albert Hall predicts bankruptcy in months, but the most at risk are those venues in the regions: it would be a criminally London-centric move to allow the demise of the main points of cultural access outside of our major cities.

Think that culture isn't for you? Imagine a wedding with no music – live or recorded – a film with no lighting design, a children's book with no illustrations, a nursery with no-one to lead the Christmas play, a mental health patient with no music therapist.

Of course the first priority in handling a national crisis must be to ensure citizens can eat, can move around safely, can buy things and sell them. But once all of this is up and running again, life will look barren without any culture.

Creativity is central to our shared human experience. It is how we emote, express, respond, understand, how we celebrate or grieve. In education, it is vital: it teaches children to imagine, to empathise, to solve problems, to collaborate. As so many traditional jobs become automated, the one thing human beings have over machines is imagination, and the skill of creativity is more highly prized by future employers than ever.

Britain has long been the envy of the world for its cultural legacy. People travel from across the globe to train in the arts here, and our export of film and music is truly international. We are the land of Shakespeare. This is a heritage of which we as a nation should be proud. It is

the work of centuries to build up this excellence, and the work of only a few months at the current rate to destroy it.

Most venues are utterly dependent on ticket sales to cover their overheads, and yet have not been allowed to reopen alongside cinemas (comparably risky) or pubs (surely more dangerous – who judges their distancing carefully after four pints?). Both of these can now begin to earn an income again. Meanwhile, arts venues are folding one by one.

These venues and organisations need support from the government. They need to be allowed to reopen soon, and they need assistance to make the economics work, when only a small proportion of tickets can be sold for distancing reasons. The fear that singing causes particular spread of the virus, through air movement and projection, has caused blanket cancellations far into the future of everything from school singing to opera. Further research needs to be commissioned, and fast, to ascertain clearly what the risks are, and how they equate with the risks of permitted activities like raising voices in the pub. Imagination needs to be used to allow some things to restart. 200 people in a packed room? Clearly a bad idea. Community choirs singing spread apart outdoors, or professional choirs distanced in vast spaces like cathedrals? Surely possible sooner.

There are tens of thousands of individuals across the country whose livelihood has vanished overnight, and in many cases it seems unlikely to start up again until well into 2021. This is a significantly longer period of zero earnings than in most other industries. It is true for the local ballet teacher, the organiser of the open mic night, the jobbing actor, the orchestral violinist, the opera star normally touring the world. An eye-watering number, however successful, have received neither furlough payment nor self-employment aid: so much work is based on zero-hours employment contracts, with no payment for cancelled projects, but no self-employment bailout either. These individuals pay taxes, contribute to the economy, and should be treated fairly by their government.

But wider than the painful situation for individuals who work in this field, is the bleak prospect of how life in this country will look without due support for the arts. We are in very real danger of waking up when it's too late and finding this centuries-old, living, breathing tradition extinguished. The arts give us tools for living – for making sense of life, for processing the emotions that are part of being human. We will be a poorer race indeed without them.

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