

## Written evidence submitted by Sound Space Vision

### **The Parliamentary Committee for Culture, Media and Sport Evidence offered on the effects of Covid-19.**

Dear DCMS

#### **Introduction**

The Institute of Theatre Consultants has submitted evidence to the Parliamentary Committee in a separate letter. Sound Space Vision is a performance planning and acoustics consultancy, designing the buildings and auditoria within which people gather, whether for the performing arts, worship, education or parliament. Our purpose is to make communication in auditoria the best that we can, by shaping the form, detailing the finishes, setting out the seats and specifying the technical equipment.

We work alongside architects who are commissioned for the whole building. Our work considers all matters within the performing arts (including the creative freelance crafts), liaises with all disciplines within the design team, and once complete, affects the public experience of the building and the performance. In a theatre, concert hall or opera house, you will have sat in our ergonomic seat designs and layouts, confirmed our sightlines or heard the sound reflected from the surfaces we have shaped. Performers will have safely stood on stage under rigging specified by us and been lit at the right angle from lights on accessible lighting bridges located by us. We also contribute to the backstage planning from an operational perspective. To support the business of our clients, we have been responsible for achieving additional seating on refurbishment projects such as the Royal Opera House main house, the Roundhouse, Wigmore Hall, Theatre Royal Bath and Hull Truck Theatre.

Our founding directors Anne Minors and Bob Essert have been practicing a combination of art and science for 35 years in most continents of the world, where we have been asked to help create aspirational spaces for different societies and cultures to realise their own form of self-expression. Prior to 2008, 95% of our turnover was overseas. Being able to export our skills for positive uses is something for which we have been thankful. In recent years we have focussed on reducing our carbon footprint, servicing projects electronically and undertaking a broader range of building types. Buildings we have contributed to have won the Public Vote for the RIBA Stirling Prize for 2 years running – Storey's Field Community Centre, Cambridge for key workers and Nevill Holt Opera House, Leicestershire.

#### **What has been the immediate effect of Covid-19 on the sector?**

Between mid-March and mid-April, much of our project income evaporated, from education as well as arts projects, over twice the reduction in UK GDP in the same period. Projects we had just won through a year-long competition process are not being started; interviews for projects were cancelled and then the project itself cancelled. Meanwhile performing organisations have shut their doors, have no ticket income and therefore will only be seeking immediate design work that they need, until the guidelines are established for the long term. The Arts Council has rightly diverted its capital fund towards supporting artists who have lost all their income.

We halved our office outgoings early, with a combination of furloughed staff and 4 day working week to service the few on-going projects, on site or abroad, when the bridging period seemed to be necessary until September 2020. Now that the bridging period seems indefinable, and by August 2020 our contracted income falls further to a quarter of that in March. Others in our profession are in the same boat. Covid-19 has struck at the heart of what we do, which is to gather people in space to communicate well, and has decimated what we have built up together with our colleagues over the last 25 years.

#### **How effectively has the support from the DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?**

Our office reflects the specialisms within theatre and music and is multi-disciplinary. Each project requires each discipline, so there were a limited number of people who could be put on furlough. The variable furlough will be better in enabling part time work across each discipline, but in our case will come too late for the ongoing work that we have. We are very grateful for the furlough especially for enabling staff with families be together in the early months of lockdown while working from home.

#### **How might the sector live with Covid-19 and then evolve after Covid-19 and how might DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?**

We can apply the fluency of our skills and regulatory knowledge to increase the experience of communication for live and broadcast performances while we all live with Covid-19 and its limits. Normally we provide a framework of safety, equality and accessibility to enable other creatives to inhabit and change the space artistically. Now we must extend our

remit to explore creating safe environments to minimize the spread of infectious diseases. We want to create and apply guidelines for what is possible now, however limited in numbers, and to outdoor performances. Our situation is urgent, as is that of many others who will be lost to the industry if no action is taken.

In the last few weeks we have participated in meetings held by the International Society of Performing Arts; Opera Europa; Classical Next & the Association of British Orchestras International Orchestra; OISTAT Scenographers' Commission; Association of British Theatre Technicians; Association of Sound Designers. Where the dialogue is international, there are procedures and habits in behaviour to exchange, which helps to identify the common issues and local responses. This gives hope that ways can be found to reopen venues, however modestly.

We therefore offer the DCMS our 14 thoughts of practical possibilities of what can be done now for loosening the chains of lockdown for the next stages of the pandemic.

- 1 **STRONGER TOGETHER** All the arts must work together with the science. The performing arts sometimes appear more segregated in the UK compared to other countries that we have worked in. The theatre lobby is fluent in campaigning, but good representation is also needed for dance, opera, classical music and popular music including jazz and folk. Grass roots venues are particularly under threat on many fronts, irrespective of Covid-19. More open forums (which are possible on Zoom) can be held to ensure all voices are heard.
- 2 **SMALL AND AGILE** The green shoots of live performance are most likely to come from organisations that are not burdened with buildings, or who have extensive grounds. They can offer limited numbers, socially distanced performances within an economic structure that can work with Covid restrictions.
- 3 **TEMPORARY STRUCTURES** Outdoor spaces and pop-up theatres can play a part in the short term, with socially distanced entrances and the audience broken down into smaller groups in the design.
- 4 **SHORTEN & SPACE OUT** The duration of a performance can be shortened and works commissioned especially to comply with reducing the risk of spread. If brass and wind are going to require more space, (after scientific tests have concluded the extent of droplet spread per instrument type) then either programme works for them separately, or be inventive about where the musicians are located. Hearing brass instruments is not a problem either inside an auditorium, offstage or outside. The military parade at Windsor Castle for the Queen's Birthday was a clear demonstration with its 'feathering' choreography of brass players socially distancing outdoors. The military orchestra in Buckingham Palace courtyard on VE day also demonstrated string sections playing together at a distance using in ear monitors to stay together.
- 5 **RICH LEGACY OF COMMISSIONS** The most exciting opportunity is that rather than having 'sleeping beauty' buildings, mothballed for 2 years we could have a rich legacy of Covid-19 in new commissions for more integrated art forms which deal with the constraints of the virus head-on.
- 6 **RESCALE REPROGRAMME CITYWIDE** While some operators are convinced that their venue is uneconomic to run with a lower capacity socially distanced audience, the venue might be better suited to a different art form from its usual programming. For example, if social distancing at 2m means a one third capacity audience, then the space between the seats, if they are removed as in Komische Oper Berlin, affects the acoustics. In a theatre designed for musicals with seats removed, suddenly the acoustics of the space is better suited to opera than musicals. So there might be the opportunity for creating a different ladder of events across each city by venues coming together and sharing. Eg. the 2000 seat musical plays in the 6000 seat arena, the 800 seat opera plays in the 2500 seat lyric theatre etc. The City of Culture movement has promoted the coming together of the arts in one city and this is something that could be built on while living with Covid-19 over the next few years.
- 7 **OPTIMISE CAPACITY IN NUMBER OF ROWS, NOT FINITE DIMENSIONS** Using social distancing recommendations, the percentage reduction in capacity is different depending on the specific seating layout. Victorian theatres often have narrow seat rows (minimum 750mm apart) such that 2m equates to using every third row. Seating layouts for the last 30 years have been 900mm back to back, so 2m means every third row also, but 1.8m (or 6 foot as discussed for the House of Commons) would mean the audience could sit in every second row. In continental seating with long rows of seats (as found in the Barbican Centre), 2m might mean every other row. In the case of National Concert Hall, Taipei, where social distancing of 1m is allowed, an orchestral concert was held with 55% capacity because the row spacing in the concert hall are generous and family groups attended.
- 8 **NUANCED SOCIAL DISTANCING** This can be developed according to the art form and the risk profile of the audience. Classical audiences wearing facemasks sitting still could be considered low risk compared

to a ‘dancing in the aisles’ rock audience. Family bubbles increases the proportion of seats that can be sold because they can sit together. Offering ticket discounts to family groups may help venues increase attendance.

- 9 **LIVE AND HOME AUDIENCE** To balance the loss of ticket revenue, the venues and presenters may have to embrace a future economy of a mix of live performance to a limited live audience and a greater digital audience that contributes to a paywall. The Wigmore Hall lunchtime recitals with no live audience during June have already demonstrated how to make donations easily and a natural exchange for a quality performance. The economics in the future will be different, going back to basics and the essence of performance.
- 10 **FRESHEN AIR** Ventilation rates and purging of the air between performances will be important. Often as acousticians, we work with design teams to have different rates of air flow for different events depending on the audience numbers and activity. Also since the early 1990’s many new venues have air inlets in the floor or seats pedestal near to the audience. The laminar flow is hygienic and passes past the audience faces and is extracted at the top of the room. This is preferable over a top-down mechanical air system which mixes the air before the audience breaths it. Optimising air flow to audience density may help to maximise occupancy, but a robust study is necessary first.
- 11 **SEPARATE REFRESHMENTS** Venue operators with Victorian theatres have further managerial constraints because the foyers and toilet provision were never generous to start with. Some theatres with balconies still have segregated stairs to each balcony which can be used to good effect for audience arrival after temperature testing at street level. Where issues with toilets and public spaces still exist, either temporarily change audience habits to the 1970s, where the theatre/concert hall is only used for the performance and the local bars and cafes service the refreshments. Or, alternatively, food and drink can be pre-ordered in sealed containers for collection.
- 12 **CENTRALISE TOILETS** For the West End, where there are many theatres and tightly spaced public foyers, consider a shared temporary front of house in the street including toilets which can be serviced all evening. Investigate with planners whether one lane of Shaftesbury Avenue can be closed off to accommodate this and align with other ideas for pedestrianisation.
- 13 **INVEST IN THE CALLING CARD** Successive generations have built up our arts community with deep-seated skills and creativity. If culture is Britain’s calling card, then it has value that must not be thrown away lightly. The danger right now is that in order to make a living, many people will find other occupations in the short-term and may not be found again in the future. At the very least create a database of all freelance workers and their skill sets so that they can be called up when venues reopen, in the way that the retired NHS staff were brought back into service in the early months of the pandemic.
- 14 **WITHOUT CULTURE** London will lose its place as a World City. Overseas, cultural buildings are seen as essential building blocks of civilised society. London with its manifold public foyers filled with audiences for matinees, exhibitions and music has been a shining aspirational goal for some. We have heard from our own staff, who have left London for the lockdown, that many are less keen to return if all the cultural institutions are closed. It is critical that performances, however small and distanced, happen soon.

The lockdown has proved that many people turn to the arts for escape from the everyday, and for solace in times of strife. Broadcasting into the living room has been a good way of remaining in touch for many, yet it also highlights the difference between a recorded performance and live experience. There is no doubt that audiences will return in future, but surviving until then can only be helped by proactive creative action, of which we are very willing to be a part.

Anne Minors  
*Founding Director*  
Sound Space Vision