

## BOOK REVIEW

Aebhric Mc Gibney.

"The Performing Arts and the Public Purse-an Economic Analysis"  
Professor John O'Hagan  
Christopher Duffy.

This timely Report, commissioned by The Arts Council, provides an objective economic framework for discussing the much neglected policy area of whether the government should intervene in the financing the performing arts via public funding.

It may be asked why economics should concern itself with a topic that would seem to have little relation with the allocation of real tangible goods. Indeed the book begins with a warning from Galbraith that "art has nothing to do with the sterner preoccupations of the economist". This attitude could be a legacy of the classical economic viewpoint as expressed by Adam Smith that the arts were the ultimate in unproductive luxury expenditure, disappearing at the moment of performance. Economics has finally come around to the view that just because a good is intangible doesn't mean it is not worth while and with this has come a change in the attitude to the arts as epitomised by the subsequent conversion of Galbraith. Even the economics guru Keynes himself was first chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain which may add further legitimacy to the study.

A possible limitation of the analysis that is clearly stated at the outset is that only the live, labour intensive, classical performing arts are considered such as ballet, orchestral concerts and theatre. The reason given is that to include the arts as a whole would have raised too many questions and issues to be adequately discussed in the short space provided. Clearly it is better to deal with one area well than to provide a scanty treatment of the whole spectrum.

The Report is divided into three parts.

Part One considers the general issue of public funding for the performing arts, arguing that because the collective social benefits far outweigh the private benefits to individual consumers the amount of this public good that is provided may be way below the optimum level. Among such collective benefits listed are a distinctive national culture and a rise in tourism; there are others require deeper breaths to swallow. Other reasons given for public funding are possible distortions in the market and the question of equal access, which is developed

later. Also considered in Part One is what form the public funding might take either directly, indirectly or through other government budgets such as an employment scheme. Such a plan was implemented in the U.S. in the 1930s to get the dole queues down and it might be well for Ireland to consider such a scheme in the present economic climate. An interesting side issue is the question of funding through the National Lottery and the danger that such income might be included as part of the total funding of the Arts as opposed to additional revenue.

Part Two looks at the main direct source of public funding, the Arts Council itself. It critically examines the aims of the Council and looks at the issues of what level and what distribution of funding is best. This part concludes by looking at the main item of expenditure by the Arts Council, the theatre.

Part Three continues the specific application of the general issues raised in Part One looking at the policy areas of Equal Access, Arts Festivals and Community Arts. Of most interest is the question of equal access in terms of socio-economic and geographical equality. Also there may be a need to change present individual preferences by educating people as to what they are missing. Using what data is available the authors show that the one link the Irish have across all barriers of integration is traditional Irish music which is enjoyed as much by the urban working class and the farmer.

The Report is written in a clear progressive format following the traditional essay style of "say what you are going to do, do it, and say what you have said". However despite the intention to appeal to a wider audience than economists alone it is inevitable that certain economic jargon and concepts arise which may make some chapters more accessible than others. Nonetheless each point discussed is explained in as clear and as logical a manner, with examples, as I believe could be possible. This is a commendable achievement on the part of the authors as the most difficult test of understanding is in the teaching or explaining of knowledge to others. Although no definite conclusions on these "matters that are ultimately issues of values and political judgement" the aim of the Report is clearly achieved in that a framework is provided for considering the funding of the Performing Arts from a public funding viewpoint. Now that this framework is in place the way is open for further research in this important area.