

A passion for music

Roy McEwan explains why LSE was perfect for a young man with a love of music.

Ending up at LSE was a fortunate accident for me. I left school unclear what to do, but studying politics and economics seemed as good as anything. I couldn't really have landed more squarely on my feet at LSE. Not only was I studying at this prestigious institution, but its city centre buildings were incomparably placed to allow me to indulge my passion: music. Just a short walk across Waterloo Bridge was the Royal Festival Hall (RFH). What began with records and local amateur orchestras at home in Dumfries and Carlisle exploded as I stretched my student grant as far as humanly possible to hear as many great orchestras, conductors and instrumentalists as I could. Whether LSE or RFH was more influential on my eventual career is maybe a moot point.

On leaving LSE, many of my contemporaries donned suits and headed into some form of public service. I wanted this too but rather simplistically thought it would be good to go into an area that I loved – music. I applied for many jobs and wasn't really qualified for any of them, but this did lead to a postgraduate course in arts administration at Central London Polytechnic. The course lacked rigour and the standard of teaching and facilities were quite a shock after LSE, but it provided a grounding in the cultural sector, some contacts and a piece of paper that magically increased the frequency of interviews when the time came. This was crucial. "The Arts" is still a small business sector: even major cultural institutions have modest turnovers compared with commerce and industry. Career development was (and largely still is) a matter of learning on the job and moving around to gain advancement.

I did not get to work in music for many years, a blessing in disguise as I had a rich and varied career. First, I held a junior position in a London theatre; then, gallery manager at Whitechapel Art Gallery (working with Nick Serota in the days before the Tate). Eventually I returned to Scotland, and the MacRobert Arts Centre at Stirling University. I started as business manager and eventually became director. Programming work across the spectrum of performing arts, visual arts and film was fulfilling. I also had the annual pleasure of casting and producing the panto



PICTURE COURTESY OF SCO

– not always as much fun behind the scenes as it was in front, but it has left me with memories and bad gags that reduce me to tears (of laughter) even now.

Enjoyable as the MacRobert was, I knew when the time came to move on. Here luck really came into play. After a short spell in Manchester in the funding sector, I found that a dream job had come up and I got it: chief executive of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra (SCO). I have remained in it since because it so fully satisfies my passion for music and commitment to public service.

As one of Scotland's National Performing Companies, the SCO (pictured) works closely with government and holds a clear responsibility to serve the whole nation, as well as representing it internationally. This may sound worthy but, for me, cultural organisations need to keep a strong focus on their social responsibility, never forgetting who their stakeholders are and always remembering to articulate what they do as a benefit to the community that supports them. It grounds us in a sense of purpose while not in any way inhibiting our ability to make great music.

Art and making art happen are two very different things. Maybe it is here that the benefit of an LSE education seems clearest. I can't say, as another recent contributor did, that I would not have ended up where I have, had I not gone to LSE. But the intellectual framework I learned there has served me exceptionally well in the arts sector and enabled me to approach its challenges from a usefully different perspective to that of many colleagues who entered arts administration from being artists or performers or with arts degrees.

After all these years, my great motivation remains the music. If I can contribute to the enrichment of people's lives through the part I play in making it possible, I will, eventually, retire happy. ■



Roy McEwan (BSc Economics 1973) is chief executive of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. He was awarded an OBE for services to music in the Queen's Birthday Honours List 2011.