

Split decision: when it comes to the independence referendum's significance for the arts in Scotland, speculation abounds

David Kettle

To quote a movie cliché, in the Scottish classical music world, the first rule about the independence referendum is you never talk about it. Few in the classical music world in Scotland are prepared to discuss the issue publicly, and why that might be is a bit of a story in itself.

There are rules to be observed, of course. The charitable status of many music organisations forbids them from commenting on political matters. But there's more to it than that. Nobody wants to be seen to have backed the losing side – especially if there's a victory for the yes camp and a music organisation has been outspoken in its concerns about independence. Even in the event of a victory for

the no camp, though, there are worries that a continuing SNP government might look unfavourably on organisations that opposed independence.

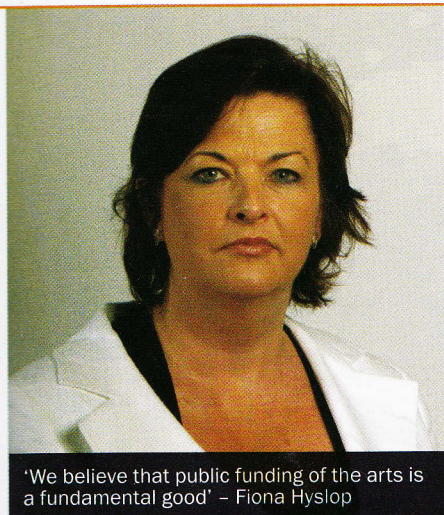
But that's almost certainly overstating things. As the *Scotsman's* recently departed arts editor Andrew Eaton-Lewis says, 'It's just supposition if companies feel like they're in danger of losing funding with an SNP government in an independent Scotland, if they've been vocally supporting the union. The only companies directly funded by the government are the five national companies, and the SNP is hardly going to cut their funding.'

Ah yes, that direct government fund-

ing arrangement. We'll come back to that. But there's more to musicians' reluctance to discuss the independence issue. As the *Herald's* arts editor Keith Bruce succinctly puts it: 'The truth is that if you say anything online that's not pro-independence, you'll get gunned down in social media.' It's hard to deny: Scottish mezzo-soprano Karen Cargill came in for criticism after saying she may consider moving to Canada in the event of a yes vote, and pro-union composer Eddie McGuire had to endure a certain amount of online ridicule following a debate with pro-independence novelist Alan Bissett on *Newsnight Scotland*. 'I hope my interventions have made it easier for others to speak up,' says McGuire. 'There are a lot of musicians out there who are pro-union.' And for him, the question is fundamentally an economic one: 'For musicians within the British isles, we're a unified profession and always have been. What we need is a national, UK-wide campaign to stick together to resist cuts to our arts budgets. It's just not the right era to be talking about splitting up.'

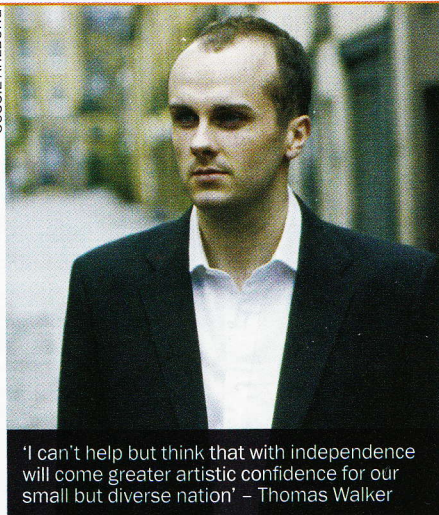
There's no denying that the yes camp has been remarkably mobilised in its publicity and activities – noticeably more so than the pro-unionists. National Collective is a vocal gathering of 'artists and creatives for Scottish independence' making a strong case for the benefits of independence to the arts community, with more than 100 artists signed up to its cause and meetings organised throughout Scotland. There's no similar grouping for pro-union artists – or not yet, at least. It seems to be received wisdom that most people involved in the arts are pro-independence: the *Scotsman's* theatre critic Joyce McMillan observed in June 2013, 'Among practising artists, it's





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SUSSIE AHLBURG



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a long time since I heard anyone express a definite intention to vote no'.

If that's true, for Eaton-Lewis, it's an understandable position: 'I think devolution has given Scotland a kind of cultural confidence – we've seen an incredible flowering of theatre, music and art, much of it since devolution – and there's a strong argument that independence would take that even further.' Tenor Thomas Walker, one of the National Collective signees, agrees: 'I can't help but think that with independence will come greater artistic confidence for our small but diverse nation. Scots will up their game just as other smaller European countries have done – in fact, Finland is a great example of how the arts played a huge role in the fight for independence, and in a country with a similar population to Scotland.'

The reality, though, might be a bit messier. Although independent artists may sway more naturally towards independence, those within established organisations may veer in the opposite direction – perhaps because they're more aware of the possibilities of what a break-up could mean, and perhaps simply because they've got more to lose.

And what are the classical music community's concerns about independence? To quote one (unnamed) figure: 'There's no sense of panic, just lots of questions.' Questions about lottery funding, about continuing membership of UK-wide organisations, about a potential reduction in support from sponsors. There are well-rehearsed questions about an independent Scotland's membership of the EU: what impact might that have on employing overseas players or soloists, touring, passports, even copyright? And there's a big question over the national broadcaster: with the possible replacement of the BBC by a Scottish Broadcasting Service (SBS), would the BBC Scottish Symphony

Orchestra survive? To be fair, the Scottish government has been straightforward in its response to this issue: a spokesperson said, 'The BBCSSO will become part of the SBS and continue operation after independence'.

Nevertheless, there's undeniably an entirely different ethos towards the arts north of the border. 'Westminster culture secretary Maria Miller talks about arts organisations having to prove their economic value, and that there needs to be a return on investment,' explains Eaton-Lewis. 'Her counterpart in Holyrood, Fiona Hyslop, is saying that the economic case has already been made – but more radically, that she doesn't believe it's that important, really. She describes the arts as our hearts, our souls, our essence, and part of our identity as a nation – it's the kind of language artists really want to hear.'

Hyslop herself confirms this perspective: 'Culture is already largely devolved, and this Scottish government is the most culturally ambitious government that Scotland has ever had. We believe that public funding of the arts is a fundamental good, and as such in the latest spending review we prioritised the culture and historic environment portfolio budget to minimise the impact of cuts on the sector.'

The SNP's independence white paper, *Scotland's Future*, lines up culture and national identity side by side, which might start to ring alarm bells when taken alongside Scotland's unusual arts funding arrangements, with the five national companies – Scottish Opera, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Scottish Ballet and the National Theatre of Scotland – getting their money directly from Hyslop's department. 'The thing with the national companies being directly funded is that it makes them suscep-

tible to manipulation,' says Bruce. Nobody in the classical world is accusing the Scottish government of political interference in their activities – far from it. But influence can take place in subtler, less direct ways: several Scottish music ensembles have toured China, for example, taking advantage of the funding that the government's 'priority international relationship' with the country has offered them. That's hardly a bad thing, but should we expect closer ties between political priorities and artistic activities in an independent Scotland? With an increased need to promote the country overseas following a yes vote, culture is likely to play an ever stronger role in trade and raising the nation's profile.

And then there are questions for England. Ironically, Scottish musicians are all too aware that south of the border, there's currently little general awareness of (or interest in) the independence vote. How much of the classical music world's established UK-wide links are built on goodwill, some wonder, and how much of that goodwill would be lost if Scotland was suddenly independent? Furthermore, what would be the impact on the global cultural reputation of England itself if it were suddenly to find itself a smaller nation? And despite the absence of a 'devomax' option from the referendum question, there's an argument that a strong minority yes vote may lead to greater powers being devolved from Westminster to Holyrood, again shifting the balance of power between the two nations – with knock-on effects for music in both Scotland and England. Six months before the referendum, there are far more questions than answers, and it's hard to do little more than speculate. But one thing's certain: this is an issue with implications not just for the Scottish music world, but for the whole of the UK.

