



Berlin deserves better

Open letter from General Music Director James Gaffigan

»Nothing's going to harm you, not while I'm around...«

This is a beautiful song by American luminary Stephen Sondheim. The piece is a moment of calm amid the gore and black comedy of Sweeney Todd, which we are currently performing at the Komische Oper. The text and the music provide a sense of peace, a veil of naïveté, and most importantly, a sense of safety.

I have long considered culture in Berlin to be safe and protected. In fact, from my point of view, culture defined the city. What other city is steeped in so much rich culture and history? What other city preserves its past so well, even the difficult parts, while also looking ahead to the future? When one looks at the Kaiser Wilhelm Kirche, one sees the darkness of history, but one can also see where the light comes in. This juxtaposition of darkness and light, past and future, tradition and innovation are hallmarks of Berlin. It is a city that has been reborn, and reborn again, and continues to be a beacon of hope for humanity.

As an American conductor from New York City, I thought Berlin was the example of how arts and culture should be centered in a major urban center, with unfettered access and with great reverence. This is the reason I accepted the post of GMD at the Komische Oper. It is the reason many serious artists and lovers of the arts make Berlin their home.

Private funding and government funding both have their challenges and advantages. But, what government funding does is validate the role of arts and culture in a society. Artists educate, perform, create, and bring meaning to so many lives. Cultural institutions create jobs for artisans, musicians, dancers, actors, carpenters, and designers of all kinds. Culture is not only art, culture is an industry.

The great American performer and activist Paul Robeson said, »Artists are the gatekeepers of truth. We are civilization's radical voice.« In this fraught time of AI, the mass spreading of misinformation, and an epidemic of loneliness, live theatre is a healing antidote. There is no substitute for gathering together as a collective to experience the transformative power of art. It changes us and changes us for the better.

Growing up in a middle-class family in New York City, I did not have easy access to the cultural hub of the city. I went to public school and lived some two hours on public transportation from Lincoln Center - the home of the Metropolitan Opera and NY Phil. Thanks to outreach programs and scholarship opportunities, I was exposed to music and culture, and it redirected the course of my life. Without access to the arts, I would not even be abroad today, let alone GMD of a prestigious opera company.

My own daughter says that her choir rehearsals are her safe space, her harbor from the challenges of being thirteen. What a gift. Arts education and access to the arts encourage empathy, collaboration, and a broad worldview. Who does not want those things for its citizens?

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While budgets do need balancing, citizens also need quality of life. Do not let culture be the victim of austerity. And do not let the essence of Berlin fall prey to short-sighted fiscal measures. Berlin deserves better. Berliners deserve better. The world deserves better.