

Case study: Know your value, public funding requires advocacy for the arts of music.

God bless Iceland

on a crisp and clear October day in 2008, from radios and computers across the country, these words from Geir Haarde then prime minister ring out with ominous overtones, even though nobody at the time, can quite understand why.

In the following week, as the whole financial infrastructure of the country crumples away, the enormity of the situation slowly dawns on the nation. A period of doubt, blames and anger follows. This period is now called "the kitchen revolution" where people stormed the streets, banging on pots and pans, week after week, demanding explanations and revenge.

Finally, as the first rays of the spring sun cut through the darkness, it was possible to begin to think about the events leading to this catastrophe with calm and analytical minds.

What happened in Iceland in 2008?

It wasn't only that the financial institutions and banking system of the country collapsed which according to "The Economist" was the largest collapse suffered by any country in economic history, it was also that the whole self image of a nation suffered bankruptcy. This proud and independent nation which according to various polls taken in the last decades, had been the happiest and most optimistic in the world, along with having the highest literacy rate and most books per capita published, had somewhere gone astray, forgotten the values upon which it was founded and fallen prey to greed and ruthless self promotion.

In the aftermath it became apparent that the country, besides having lost its financial reserve, is straddled with tremendous debt and has nowhere to turn to to be able to pay this debt, which the national pride demands be done. How can 300,000 people, including children and elderly, finance such a debt? To make matters worse, unemployment tripled in the first months after the collapse.

The following period saw a tremendous upswing of creative energy, as people fought to redefine what Iceland is, what it means to be an Icelander.

Questions were asked

in answer, one can say that no stone has been left unturned.

Here I come to the issue of today's topic.

Sustainability is one thing, survival is another. In the redefining of a national identity, one of the questions has to be where the responsibility to shape or reform, lies? Inevitably the education system must be somewhere in the foreground, with the Universities and schools of higher education leading the way. A university is a strong tool, that is where the foundations of a nation are laid by educating future generations and by the creation of new knowledge through research. As an example, one of the biggest weapons in the Icelandic independence battle with Denmark at the beginning of the last century, was the founding of the University of Iceland.

However, where do the arts come into this picture, more specifically, why is music education important in the rebuilding of a society and even still more specifically, is it necessary to spend taxpayers money to educate musicians?

Let me be clear, these questions have little or nothing to do with the cultural identity of the country, the issue is not whether music is in itself an important element of our culture. The questions are, who will pay for the education and why?

The dark shadow of these questions has loomed like falcons waiting for their prey, possibilities ranging from closing one or all of the departments of the Academy of the Arts to admitting students only every other year to various types of mergers. Of the three, only the first, that is closing some of the departments would save any substantial amount of money, though that is debateable as the government would be forced to pay for the study of those subjects abroad. To be sure, we are a small nation and the number of students studying the arts is small so this is not at all financially speaking an absurd idea. The second suggestion, that of admitting every other year, would not save very much as the structure still needs to be in place and it is probably impossible to hire professors to teach every other year. The third suggestion which has been the most vocal suggestions is that of merging the Academy with one or more of the other universities in Iceland. There are 7 universities, of which the Academy of the Arts is the only institution where the arts is taught and all the other 6 institutions have made their wishes to acquire the Academy, very clear. However, with such a specialized focus, it is really arguable where the savings would be, certainly not within the actual teaching without greatly reducing the quality of the education.

The situation for the Academy of the Arts was indeed life threatening at this point.

Throughout all these discussions, elections and meetings were taking place all over the country, and with increasing frequency the term "New Iceland" kept coming up.

According to the unwritten, but publicly acknowledged manifesto for the New Iceland, creativity is the leading force, the litemotiv throughout. That, along with critical thinking, equal opportunity and ethics are what must be fostered in order to rebuild a truly free nation. In spite of our perilous state, it became quite obvious where the importance of our institution lay, what strength we might expand and build upon. The core role of the Academy of the Arts is to advance the country culturally, economically and socially through artistic research and performance. It is the only institution creativity is not only fostered, but specifically taught, where our students are encouraged to listen to intuition, experiment and search into the unknown, push boundaries and enhance their creative spirit.

This of course, all of us here know, but how to convince the authorities?

In such a grave situation as being faced with the possibility of being closed down, the only path to take is that of action. We were faced with the challenge of convincing the authorities that our institution was, though only 10 years old, absolutely necessary in the process of rebuilding our society. First, two new programs were instigated. They are unique in the way that they are specifically designed for people who lost their jobs because of the financial crash, in other words, for people, who are highly educated, mostly in the fields of economics, engineering, architecture or law. The first program, is an intensive interdisciplinary course we run for 10 weeks, where the main objective is to get people to think outside the box. Students have the chance to scrutinize the changes around them from various points of view under the leadership of artists from all the arts, many of whom belong to our permanent staff as well as philosophers, writers, anthropologists and other specialists, about 40 in all. The idea is that when placed in this kind of a stimulating environment the problems at hand turn into opportunities, the capsizing of ideals and collapsing of society evolves into the beginning of new and exciting times. This program, Prisma, immediately became immensely successful. It gained quite a bit of media attention as many known

and prominent figures were amongst the first people to take the course and generated immense political goodwill.

The second program is a physical space we call the "Idea house", where people who have a good idea can come and have access to free work space, other people, facilities etc. Several people actually have graduated from the 10 week Prisma course to the Idea house. In the first year, over 50 companies were founded with the assistance of our Idea house, employing close to 600 people.

These two programs were launched and have been run without extra funding, by cutting the budget still further throughout the Academy and several people donating their time and energy. The result is rewarding, the Academy has demonstrated clearly that it is an institution that is capable of making a tangible difference in society in a way no other institution can, thereby proving it's worth on another level.

The situation also called for re-evaluation and examining possibilities for development within the Academy. In music, the obvious was to look into the composition program, where most of the creative energy is located. The program was fine-tuned and expanded with the aim to enhance the versatility and open-mindedness of the students besides increasing their possibilities in working within the multifaceted musical life. Emphasis is placed on their ability to work on projects involving the other arts and in diverse cultural situations.

The applications for the composition program, have soared. We admit from 10 - 12 new students each year, which is one out of 10 applicants. There is no intention or expectation that these young people will all be earning their living in the future as composers in the traditional sense of the word. These are, however, highly creative and innovative individuals, that are finding work in various fields as well as branching out on their own. Currently, according to studies, the musicmarket - I'm not using the word industries, is generating 1.2% of Iceland's gross national product. This is the language politicians understand.

The Iceland Academy of the Arts is a small university. It's power not only lies in the fact that it is the only higher education institution in Iceland teaching the subjectfield "arts", but also in the fact that it is the workspace for about thousand artists, teachers and students. In the city of 100.000 inhabitants, the impact and creative force of one thousand artist of all genres meeting, discussing, communicating at

every level, creates a kind of energy, that radiates into the surrounding environment. True, we are getting along on a vastly reduced budget which will soon have to be addressed, but through finding a way to survive, we have been forced to look inwards, find and develop our strengths, find what we alone can bring to the table both for nursing our nation back to health and hopefully in the future be able to bring something of importance to the outside world as well.

What happened in my country springs from very deep ethical gaps on the part of those who mismanaged and compromised the future of this ancient nation. A lack of money handling skills was not the reason for this tragedy, ethical behavior was. I claim, that a person who is taught about the subtleties of meaning found in the "Gospel of Bach" is less likely to cheat. The same applies to all the arts. It is that simple. Sustainability has a material side and an intangible and equally important component as well. We are in the business of teaching the latter. In doing so, we are advocates of life.