

## ARTS

# The great Town Hall fracas

Christopher Moore

## STATE OF ARTS



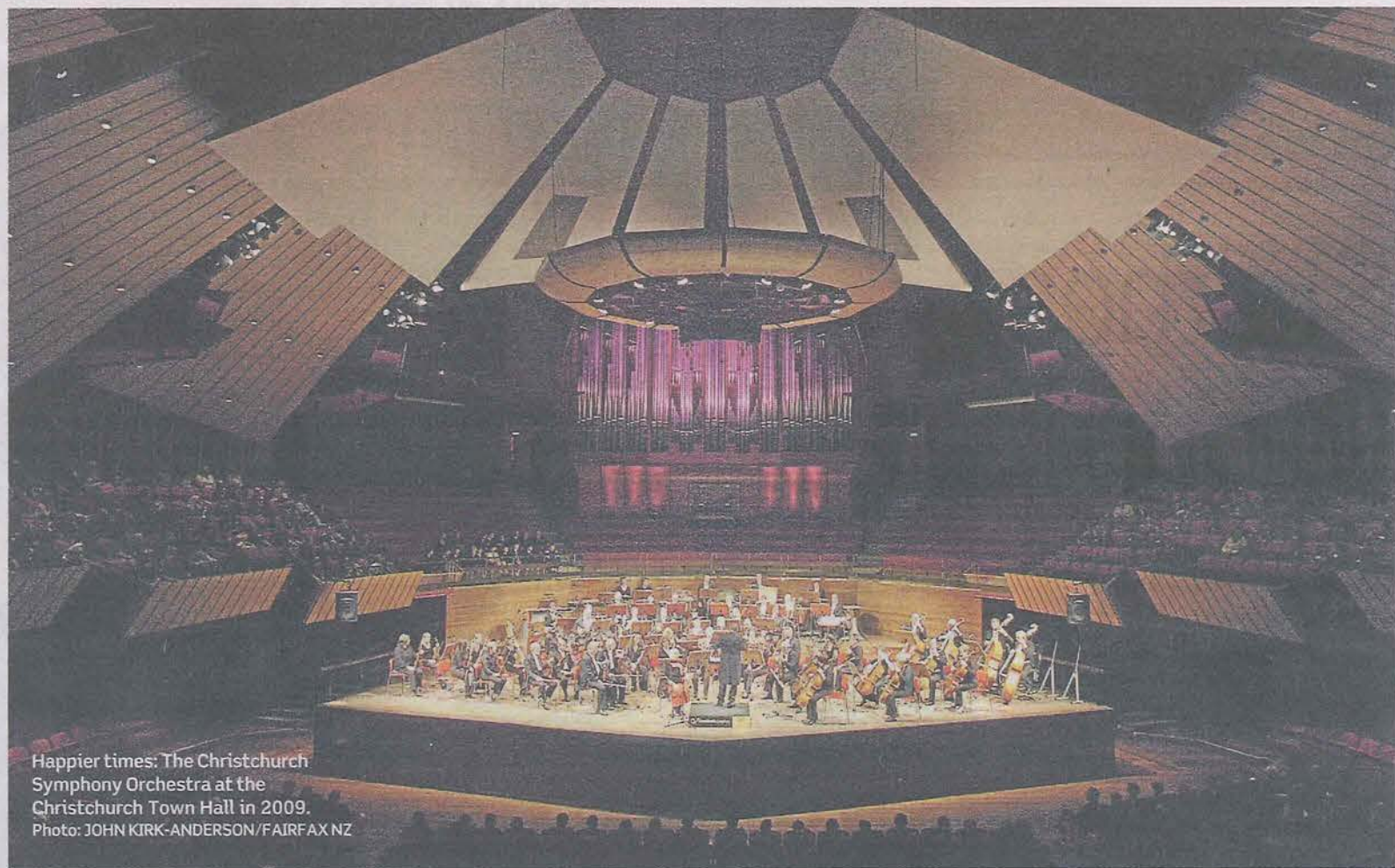
The debate over the future of the Christchurch Town Hall and the proposed performing arts precinct has raised horse trading to a true Canterbury art form.

Hedged in by claim and counterclaim, this confusing affair has emerged as a tangled web of cultural politics, ambition and the rebuilding of a city. One day a play will be written about "The Great Town Hall Fracas", but future generations will probably be bewildered about the underlying causes of all this angst.

Even at the final moment, the complex plot of this particular melodrama became a cliff hanger with moves to dump a decision about saving the entire town hall complex into the hands of a largely inexperienced incoming city council. Hardly cricket, I'd suggest, but that's another matter.

In a strangely one-sided debate largely conducted through the media, the perception was planted in the public's collective mind that restoring the entire Town Hall complex would stymie the grand designs for an arts precinct. Calm reason and reality were replaced by the perfect storm of rumour and speculation.

At the eye of the storm is Warren and Mahoney's 1966 town hall complex, an acknowledged jewel of contemporary New Zealand architecture, perfectly designed as a unified series of rooms linked by public areas and



Happier times: The Christchurch Symphony Orchestra at the Christchurch Town Hall in 2009.  
Photo: JOHN KIRK-ANDERSON/FAIRFAX NZ

meeting spaces. But the magisterial building – like any good piece of architecture – has always polarised opinion... and there's the rub.

Mauled by the 2011 earthquakes, the complex stands at the apex of the proposed cultural precinct. On one side is the proposed Ngai Tahu cultural hub in Victoria Square. On the other is the arts precinct. Central

Government offered two simple choices – demolish the Town Hall complex, or sections of it, and increase the size of the arts precinct. Retain it and restrict the area to a smaller area bounded by Colombo and Gloucester streets.

I would have assumed that the answer would have been self-evident. Retain a world-class auditorium and facilities as the beating heart of the arts precinct.

Renovate and improve the James Hay Theatre's seating and acoustics. Use rapidly evolving construction technology to strengthen the building and the land beneath. Do it. Now.

Here was a hugely significant 20th century New Zealand building, one with a national and international significance which must be saved for future generations. But then came the signs of a serious outbreak of Dungeritis Brownlitis or a dangerous exposure to the throwaway society. Some of the comments which preceded the decision to save the Town Hall complex were at best shallow, as some of us appeared hypnotised by the allure of discarding the Town Hall for new, glittery trendy bibelots.

Last week's council decision probably won't stop the misinformation. As the plans stand, apart from a new Court Theatre and a restored Isaac Theatre Royal, the area will be largely inhabited by administration, rehearsal and teaching spaces occupied by the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra and the Christchurch School of Music. Somehow the word "precinct" has fixated many Cantabrians with visions of glittering arts palaces and cultural venues for a good evening out. Fact: under the plans, it won't. Even the portentous word precinct is a misnomer.

No-one should limit their thinking to one area of inner-city land when it comes to sustaining the arts community's vital role in the city's rebuild. This is an evolving multi-faceted picture involving a range of facilities. The future of the arts should not focus entirely on a single relatively limited inner city site. There is a much wider picture to consider.

There's the restored Town Hall auditorium and James Hay Theatre with its improved acoustics and seating which can be adjusted to house a 600-seat theatre. Nearby there's a possibility of a performing arts facility in the Ngai Tahu cultural hub in Victoria Square. The Isaac Theatre Royal and the Christchurch Art Gallery are due to reopen in 2015. Once the Court Theatre moves back into the city, its Addington base would be a valuable asset for both professional and amateur theatre. The Christchurch Arts Centre has called for input into plans to provide performing arts spaces in the restored centre. Thoughts must also be given to Repertory Theatre's return and where that might be. Discussions are also continuing on the possibility of a dance centre in the sports precinct. The situation remains fluid.

Many of the smaller cultural players will benefit from the expanding facilities and closer relationships with their larger partners. There has to be a sustained conversation between not only local and central government and the arts community but between every one of the local arts organisations, whatever their size and scope.

If Christchurch truly believes that it is one of the country's major artistic and cultural players, it must abandon the bickering and work together to cement the future. If we don't grasp the mettle now, it will, simply, and sadly be too late to stop this city becoming a third rate cultural backwater.

I'd hate to see that dumped on later generations of Cantabrians.

■ This is a regular weekly column by Press arts commentator Chris Moore.

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