

PRISONERS OF LOVE: AMATEURS & PROFESSIONALS

François Matarasso

The modern system of art is not an essence or a fate but something we have made.

Larry Shiner, 2001

Members of West Bromwich Operatic Society can be sensitive about being called amateurs, not because it is inaccurate, but because of the perception that amateur is a synonym for mediocre, self-regarding, even incompetent. And it is true that the word is sometimes used almost as an insult—and not least between artists themselves.

It was not always like that. There was a time when to be an amateur was prestigious. It signified someone who was seriously committed to the pursuit of knowledge in science, philosophy or art, someone motivated only by a love of learning. Since they were not paid, the amateurs were genuinely disinterested. In the past, that also meant that they were wealthy, probably aristocrats or landed gentry, because only those classes had surplus time and resources to dedicate to something that was not edible, usable or tradable.

Some amateurs dedicated their lives and fortunes to knowledge in science, philosophy, history and the arts. Others, lacking artistic talent themselves, surrounded themselves with artists in need of a living, or amassed great collections that have become the heart of public museums today. In all these roles, amateurs were deeply influential in the development of art forms and in shaping public taste and ideas of art. Crucially, there was a close interactive relationship between amateur (unpaid) and professional (paid) artists: gentlemen and players.

Professional artists, by contrast, usually had low social status. Throughout most of European history, there was no reason to distinguish a painter or a

potter from a builder: all useful trades, but anyone who worked with their hands could have no claim to high status. Performers were generally held in still lower esteem, perhaps because their art does not even produce anything useful or lasting. Their living was precarious and they often inhabited the disreputable margin between entertainer and beggar. The Border style of Morris dancing uses blackface as the traditional disguise of street performers, though this origin is not always understood and the gesture has acquired new and more troublesome associations.

There are always exceptions. It was possible to be a performer without forfeiting one's social position if there was no payment involved. The people who performed in Classical Greek theatre or medieval mystery plays were amateurs playing a role at a designated season with religious meaning. People with a talent for song, story or a tune have always been appreciated in community celebrations, but again because they perform for pleasure and honour.

The status of professional artists in Europe began to change in the 18th century, when the ideological, social and economic changes of the Enlightenment took hold. A distinction began to be claimed between the 'fine arts' and something that was assigned a lower value and called 'craft'. With the invention of fine art, with all its ideological force, the relative power of patrons and artists was slowly reversed. In 1717, the Duke of Saxeweiimar had Bach imprisoned for wanting to leave his service; by 1791, Haydn could choose to leave the Esterházy court to work in London, where he made much more money from concerts and teaching. By the 1830s, statues of Beethoven were appearing all over Germany, where once only those of noblemen had been seen. More importantly, he was being claimed as higher than anyone: for Bizet, 'He is not a human being, he is a god'.

Romanticism had elevated the artist to an unprecedented status. Freed from the ties of patronage by new consumer markets, artists began to describe their work as a vocation, a word that had previously meant being called by God to serve in the church. Art was establishing itself as an alternative religion with claims of transcendence and spiritual value, a position it retains today, partly because Christianity is now a weak force in European society.

The professional artist became someone who had answered that higher call, sacrificing worldly advantages for a nobler purpose. Of course, artists have to eat like everybody else. Unless they have a private income, like aristocratic amateurs, or a wealthy patron, they must sell their work in the market. The independence claimed by artists in the 19th and 20th centuries was partly illusory because it had been achieved by trading a relationship with one or two wealthy individuals for a relationship with thousands or even hundreds of thousands. And a mass market can be as demanding, as deceptive and as dismissive as any aristocrat. In 1893, frustrated by his best invention, Arthur

Conan Doyle killed Sherlock Holmes, by flinging him into the Reichenbach Falls. Ten years later he bowed to pressure from his readers and customers and resuscitated the great detective, who continues to have new adventures almost a century after his creator's own death.

Before the industrial revolution an artist who failed to find a patron could have few illusions about their importance. They became an assistant to somebody more successful or they found another trade. Today, with the example of Vincent van Gogh always before them, an artist who fails to sell can see that failure as proof of their own genius. That can be quite a consolation.

As the social status and economic power of artists has changed in the past two centuries, so has that of amateurs. The aristocracy has been pushed or retreated to the margins of more democratic societies, generally abandoning any claim to shape public discourse, while holding onto their property. The rich amateurs who make public taste now are more likely to be self-made men (and they still tend to be men) like Charles Saatchi.

At the same time, education and leisure extended to the growing populations of industrial cities. At school, in public libraries and working people's educational associations, people learned new tastes and skills. Church and chapel supported choral singing and, in more liberal quarters, concert parties and amateur drama. A growing consumer market gave ready access to books, music hall and theatre, and then film, pop music and television. Over the decades, the pleasures of the aristocracy became those of working people, albeit adapted to suit other lives and interests and mixed with other influences from folk and popular culture.

The number of amateurs grew and continues to grow as new creative tools become available to more people: cameras first and now computers and the Internet. Much of their work is informal, created by individuals or loose groups of friends and like-minded people. As a result, it is difficult to know how many people are seriously engaged in photography, music, dance or writing, but it is certainly many million.

Where things need to be more structured, as in theatre, it is easier to get a sense of the scale. The National Operatic and Dramatic Association, for example, has 2,549 member societies in the UK and Ireland. But this is only part of the amateur arts world. According to Department for Culture, Media and Sport research there are almost 50,000 amateur arts groups in England. Between them, they have about 6 million members and a further 3.5 million volunteers—so about 15% of the population is active in amateur arts organisations. In a typical year, they promote 700,000 performances or exhibitions and get about 160 million attendances. Amateur arts organisations have a collective income of over half a billion pounds, almost all of it from ticket sales and their own fundraising.

A further difficulty with assessing the extent of amateur arts practice is that it does not have neat boundaries. Contrary to what some people would wish, and perhaps also to some of what has just been said, the arts are not divided into two separate, watertight and antagonist worlds: the amateurs and the professionals. It is better understood as a complex ecosystem in which people may play different roles at different times or in different aspects of their career.

Citizens are increasingly spending significant amounts of their leisure time engaged in serious creative pursuits. These pro-ams are people who have acquired high level skills at particular crafts, hobbies, sports or art forms; they are not professionals but are often good enough to present their work publicly or to contribute seriously to a community of like-minded artists or creators.

Stephen J. Tepper, 2008

There are members of WBOS who have worked professionally: singing with big bands, as dancers, or in fringe theatre. Others have had to choose between seizing a chance or continuing in the existing course of their life and staying amateur: even 50 years later, there can be a hint of regret at the path not taken. Nowadays, there are also young members who hope to go on to drama college or conservatoire and so into the professional theatre. As one told me:

'In a dream world, I would love to be an actor. But I'm not unrealistic – I'm not one of those that's just got my head in the clouds about being a big Broadway star. I would carry on doing this for ever.'

On the other side, professionals are involved in WBOS productions, including the director, the musical director and the choreographer, who are all paid by the company. For the shows themselves, a stage manager and musicians are hired, along with the staff of the theatre itself. Finally, there is also the input of the professionals who created the original production, including set and costumes hired for what becomes, to some degree, a revival when it is staged by an amateur company.

The same intermingling exists in the professional world, many of whose stars discovered performance in amateur groups where they were growing up. Lionel Bart, in whose debt thousands of amateur groups will forever be for having given them *Oliver!*, wrote his first work as a member of amateur groups in London. Much choral music involves a professional orchestra working with an amateur choir. The Crouch End Festival Chorus, which sang in Mahler's 10th Symphony at the opening of the 2010 BBC Proms is just one example of the excellence achieved by amateur choirs. In America's different arts ecology, it is estimated that amateur musicians perform almost half of all live symphonic music.

New technology is further blurring the lines between amateurs and professionals as more people create, publish and distribute their work online. Wikipedia typifies a world where people with global expertise can work alongside people with local or specific knowledge to create something neither group could achieve alone. This is a long way from the world of amateur drama satirised by P. G. Wodehouse in 1909.

In a cozy corner of the electric flame department of the infernal regions there stands a little silver gridiron. It is the private property of his Satanic majesty, and is reserved exclusively for the man who invented amateur theatricals. It is hard to see why the amateur actor has been allowed to work his will unchecked for so long. These performances of his are diametrically opposed to the true spirit of civilization, which insists that the good of the many should be considered as being of more importance than that of the few. In the case of amateur theatricals, a large number of inoffensive people are annoyed simply in order that a mere handful of acquaintances may amuse themselves.

It is the humourist's prerogative not to believe what he writes and, given Wodehouse's love of musicals, it is tempting to think he would have loved West Bromwich Operatic Society's performances of *The Producers*, watching from whichever balcony in the afterlife is reserved to those who make us laugh. Amateur theatre is an easy target because its enthusiasts have been known to take themselves very seriously, something English humour delights in mocking. But if some amateur actors do take themselves very seriously, so do some accountants, some plumbers and some arts managers: self-importance is a non-exclusive character trait.

Seriousness is essential to art. The question is what you are serious about. Good things start to happen in art when people are serious about something that is bigger than technique, bigger than audiences, bigger than them. The Canadian sociologist Robert Stebbins, one of a rather small number of academics to have taken an interest in amateur art practice, coined the phrase 'serious leisure' to distinguish the work of committed amateurs from those for whom their engagement with art is a casual entertainment. He describes serious leisure as 'the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling'. In conversation with amateurs, Stebbins found that people used the word 'serious' frequently, associating it with such qualities as 'earnestness, sincerity, importance, and carefulness'.

Watching WBOS at work—or should that be at play?—one sees apparently contradictory things. There is happiness *and* seriousness but little sign of the self-importance Wodehouse mocks. These are no prima donnas elbowing their way centre stage (though they are hardly introverts either), but hard-working performers having fun. And that air of good humour is the lasting

impression you get from spending time with the company – laughter, affection and mutual support. As one member told me,

'That's what it's all about – it's giving; it's giving, not taking. That's why it's here. That's why it's successful.'

Some of that lightness is due to the advantages amateur performers have over their professional counterparts. The show is important, very important, but nobody's career is riding on it. Deeply as they care about it, the amateurs have not invested their whole identities in this performance: they may be critiqued, but not damned. There is too much else in the rest of their lives, including work, since this is not it.

The other big difference for the members of the operatic society is that they are enacting a production created by others—by professionals. They do not have to invent how to stage a scene, or how to make the show come together. They know it works, because others have done it before. Amateurs are not usually looking for originality—itsself a Romantic ideal—but for quality, which defined art before the Enlightenment. It's a critical difference.

Wayne Booth, a professor of literature who spent 40 years playing the cello with fellow amateurs, has written about the joys and pitfalls of what he called 'amateurism'. He knew that he would never be as good as the least of the professional players, but his effort and practising was the tribute he paid to music, because he valued it so much. He believed that 'If anything is worth doing at all, it is worth doing badly'. Booth hated low standards and mediocrity. His argument is that since playing music is such a valuable experience, doing it at whatever level you can reach is always better than not doing it at all.

Booth is perfectly right. It is *because* the practice of art offers such unique and enriching rewards that everyone should be able to take part, in the ways and to the extent that they find congenial.

Art does not need protecting from untalented practitioners: it can look after itself. But untalented performers might need protecting from their more skilled peers who have an interest in controlling who is and who is not able to take part.

There is a parallel with cooking. Preparing one's own food, however basic or unappetising to someone with a more refined palate, offers satisfactions that the most expensive ready meal cannot give. It is doing, not watching others do. And by doing we can improve our technique and our taste. But it is not always in the interests of processed food retailers or restaurateurs— or indeed the professional arts world—to encourage people in that idea.

Participation is the hallmark of a vibrant cultural scene, not just participation for the trained and well heeled but participation that's available to just about everybody.

Bill Ivey, 2008

The serious amateurism recognised from different angles by Booth and Stebbins exactly describes how the members of WBOS approach their theatre work. It is a hobby but one that is undertaken seriously, because of the love they have for the art of musical theatre, and because it is by investing themselves fully that people get most from taking part. Its value comes from doing, from understanding something from the inside, experientially, and its greatest prize is not the applause, joyous as that is, but nurturing skill, ability and understanding in community.

Members with demanding jobs and young families said that people asked them how they find time to do it. The consistent answer was that they could not imagine *not* doing it. They were prisoners of their love of theatre and of the families and friends with whom that love was shared.

'From the heart, I'd say love. It's a love for theatre but I also met my wife here so it encompasses everything.'



For references and further information, please download the full text:
Where We Dream: West Bromwich Operatic Society and the Fine Art of Musical Theatre