

Beat: Arts

Edinburgh International Festival

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USPA NEWS - The Edinburgh International Festival was the inspired idea of Rudolf Bing, then the General Manager of Glyndebourne Opera, Henry Harvey Wood, the Head of the British Council in Scotland, and leaders from the City of Edinburgh. It was established in 1947 as a world class cultural event to bring together audiences and artists from around the world, and over 70 years has gone from strength to strength.

For three weeks in August, Scotland's capital becomes an unparalleled celebration of the performing arts and an annual meeting point for people of all nations. The International Festival presents a programme featuring the finest performers and ensembles from the worlds of dance, opera, music and theatre.

Creation of the festival

The idea of a Festival with a remit to "provide a platform for the flowering of the human spirit" and enrich the cultural life of Scotland, Britain and Europe took form in the wake of the Second World War. The idea of creating an international festival within the UK was first conceived by Rudolf Bing, the General Manager of Glyndebourne Opera Festival, the arts patron Lady Rosebery, theatre director Sir Tyrone Guthrie, and Audrey Mildmay (wife of John Christie) during a wartime tour of a small-scale Glyndebourne production of The Beggar's Opera.

Rudolf Bing conceived of the festival to heal the wounds of war through the languages of the arts.

This is its principal raison d'être. It was first financed by Lord Rosebery with the £10,000 winnings of his horse Ocean Swell that won the only two major horse-races run in wartime including the Jockey Club Cup in 1944. This sum was matched by Edinburgh Town Council and then some money in turn was matched by the Arts Council of Great Britain under the chairmanship of John Maynard Keynes. Bing also co-founded the Festival with Henry Harvey Wood, Head of the British Council in Scotland, Sidney Newman, Reid Professor of Music at Edinburgh University, and a group of civic leaders from the City of Edinburgh, in particular Sir John Falconer.

Bing had looked at several English cities before shifting his focus to Scotland and settling on Edinburgh, a city he had visited and admired in 1939. In particular, Edinburgh's castle reminded him of Salzburg where he had been the festival director before the war. Harvey Wood described the meeting at which the idea was hatched:

The Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama was first discussed over a lunch table in a restaurant in Hanover Square, London, towards the end of 1944. Rudolf Bing, convinced that musical and operatic festivals on anything like the pre-war scale were unlikely to be held in any of the shattered and impoverished centres for many years to come, was anxious to consider and investigate the possibility of staging such a Festival somewhere in the United Kingdom in the summer of 1946. He was convinced and he convinced my colleagues and myself that such an enterprise, successfully conducted, might at this moment of European time, be of more than temporary significance and might establish in Britain a centre of world resort for lovers of music, drama, opera, ballet and the graphic arts.

Certain preconditions were obviously required of such a centre. It should be a town of reasonable size, capable of absorbing and entertaining anything between 50,000 and 150,000 visitors over a period of three weeks to a month. It should, like Salzburg, have considerable scenic and picturesque appeal and it should be set in a country likely to be attractive to tourists and foreign visitors. It should have sufficient number of theatres, concert halls and open spaces for the adequate staging of a programme of an ambitious and varied character. Above all it should be a city likely to embrace the opportunity and willing to make the festival a major preoccupation not only in the City Chambers but in the heart and home of every citizen, however modest. Greatly daring but not without confidence I recommended Edinburgh as the centre and promised to make preliminary investigations.

Wood approached Falconer, who enthusiastically welcomed the initiative on behalf of the city. As it was too late to finalise arrangements for 1946, plans were made for the following year.

The first International Festival took place between 22 August and 11 September 1947, and it remained an event straddling August and September until 2015, when the dates of the Edinburgh International Festival was brought forward, to begin and end in August, to coincide with the Fringe.

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