

**The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Public Petitions
Wednesday 10th October 2018**

Petition on the future of RTÉ Orchestras

Opening Statement

**Aodán Ó'Dubhghaill
Head of RTÉ Lyric FM and RTÉ Orchestras**

Chairman, Committee Members, thank you for inviting us here today to the Petitions Committee to discuss the public petition concerning the future of RTÉ's Orchestras.

I am joined here today by my RTÉ colleagues Rory Coveney and by Mathew Horsman, from Mediatique, who completed the Review, *'RTÉ Orchestras, Ensuring a sustainable future'* along with Helen Boaden.

The petition to Minister for Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht Josepha Madigan, came on foot an announcement by RTÉ that it would conduct an independent review of its orchestral provision.

The fact that the petition gathered such support, and that it has been presented for the formal consideration of the Oireachtas, is testimony to the importance of this issue. RTÉ would concur with that position, and we welcome the opportunity to discuss the findings of that review with the members here today.

As members will be aware, this review was conducted against very challenging financial circumstances facing the organisation. These circumstances persist.

Members may have seen that just last week the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, RTÉ's regulator, having completed its statutory 5-Year review of both RTÉ and TG4, recommended that; *'... at a minimum, that RTÉ should receive an increase in its annual public funding of €30m per annum. Given the urgency of RTÉ's current funding position, the increased level of public funding recommended should be available to the broadcaster immediately.'*

In presenting its recommendations, the BAI has taken account of the fact that, notwithstanding its frequent funding recommendations to Government in the case of RTÉ, there has been no television licence fee increase in over ten years.

RTÉ has seen its total income decrease by c. €100m per annum (24%) between 2008 and 2016. Since 2016 commercial growth has been very modest and the TV Licence fee system remains unreformed.

As Mathew from Mediatique will explain shortly, orchestral music in other countries is typically supported by a variety of public funding mechanisms and grants at national, regional and local Government level. In Ireland, by contrast, orchestral music is dependent on just one public funding source: the TV licence fee.

While RTÉ orchestras have been relatively protected, their budget has declined by 11% in that period, much less than other areas of RTÉ output, we now have significant vacancies in our orchestras and have had to sharply reduce commitments to touring and educational activity. Morale within the Orchestras has suffered, as indeed has the overall public value of our orchestral provision.

As the review was triggered we were looking at more cuts to budgets and were finding it difficult to see how we could accommodate even the current level of provision. There was no possibility of an increase to budgets that would be required for the orchestras to return to full strength and undertake touring and education programmes.

Put simply, RTÉ commissioned the Boaden review because it was clear to us as far as the RTÉ Orchestras were concerned, the status quo could not continue.

Albeit that perhaps there were some erroneous assumptions made that this review was intended to reduce orchestral provision, there was a wholly correct observation in the statement: *“The implications of these cuts are shocking, especially given that Arts and Music Education in Ireland is already severely underfunded, and one of the worst systems in the whole of Europe. Something needs to be done to preserve and develop these orchestral institutions”*.

It was within the spirit of exploring viable solutions to address this situation, that RTÉ commissioned the Review.

RTÉ is very aware of the importance our orchestras within the wider cultural life of the Nation and the role we have played in this for the past 70 years. The issues raised, as is evidenced in the on-line Petition and the Mediatique/ Boaden Review, affect not just RTÉ but Ireland as a whole. The Review carried out in-depth analysis of the options facing us, ranging from outright closure to a merger to retention with full funding restored.

Critically, the review concluded that neither of the two orchestras should be closed.

In fact, they suggested both orchestras should be brought back to full strength.

It became clear to the Review authors, as they consulted widely, that there is widespread support for the retention of both orchestras, across the orchestra sector, among all political parties and within Government. But, because of the Review, there is also now a wider understanding and recognition of the challenges facing RTÉ with much more constrained financial resources.

The Review outcome and key recommendations are consistent with the analysis of previous reviews (The Piano Report, etc.). It recommended that the National Symphony Orchestra be either established as a cultural institution in its own right or move to become part of the National Concert Hall.

A key provision of the Review is that it promotes RTÉ's role as a key orchestral media partner, through ongoing stewardship of Concert Orchestra and close affiliation with the NSO in the future. It recognises the balance between RTÉ's financial constraints and its public service role in promoting music, arts and culture.

Flexibility will be required from orchestra members, but the recommended approach provides a sustainable means of restoring the orchestras to former strength and the basis for a new creative vision.

RTÉ was acutely conscious that any decisions that followed the Review were not be for it alone to make. The overall funding and governance arrangements for orchestral provision in Ireland are as much a matter of public policy as they are considerations for RTÉ.

The support of Government therefore will be essential if orchestral music in Ireland is to flourish and if the recommendations of the Review are to be implemented.

In July the Cabinet considered the Review and its recommendations - we included the statement issued by both Ministers Madigan and Naughten in the materials we sent to you.

You will see that the Government have decided that the National Symphony Orchestra is to come within the remit of the National Concert Hall. In addition the Government authorised the initiation of discussions on the implementation of the recommendations of the Review. Those discussions are to be led by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, through both an Oversight and Working Group with the relevant stakeholders, RTÉ and the NCH and with the appropriate wider consultation.

There has been initial contact between the various stakeholders, and the terms of reference for the groups is now being finalised. We hope to begin the formal discussions shortly. That is where things stand today.

We thought it would be useful for the Committee in considering the petition and the related issues it has raised, to hear from the authors of the Boaden/Mediatique Review about their findings and their analysis. Unfortunately Helen Boaden couldn't be here but Mathew Horsman of Mediatique, will now give you a brief overview of the Review.

After that we are happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank You.