

A hard act to follow

Clive Gillinson, director of the LSO, is off to New York. As Jessica Duchen discovers, his departure raises serious questions about the orchestra's future

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How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practise, practise, practise - or run the London Symphony Orchestra for 20 years. The announcement last week of the appointment of Clive Gillinson, managing director of the LSO, as executive and artistic director of Carnegie Hall, New York, has set the UK music scene buzzing with mingled pride and dismay.

The announcement has come at a less-than-ideal moment for the LSO. As the orchestra embarks on its centenary celebrations, financial difficulties resulting from the construction of St Luke's, the LSO's educational and rehearsal centre in a beautifully converted 18th-century church in the City of London, have yet to be fully resolved. Creating St Luke's last year plunged the orchestra into the red by £729,000.

The costly project, to create a base for up-to-the-minute education and community activities as yet unrivalled elsewhere in the country, was admirable. The orchestra and some 30,000 people drawn into this outreach work are now reaping the benefits. But, in the view of many in the business, the orchestra - Britain's finest and previously most moneyed - has virtually had to put its neck on the line for the sake of St Luke's. When asked about the timing of Gillinson's resignation, Patrick Harrild, the LSO's principal tuba and chairman of the self-governing orchestra's board, says simply: "There would never have been a good time for Clive to go."

Gillinson is adamant that the deficit is not a long-term problem: "St Luke's was very demanding, but I am determined that by the time I leave next summer, there won't be a deficit," he declares. "St Luke's is now fully funded; we've had the Lord Mayor's Appeal to underpin LSO Discovery, our education programme; our record label, LSO Live, is thriving; and foreign residencies are in place, including New York. If we can eliminate the deficit before I go, then I will be delighted."

The rumour among other orchestras is that Arts Council England, which provided lottery capital for St Luke's, was none too pleased by the deficit. Previously, the LSO was so well placed financially that it received less money than most orchestras from the "stabilisation programme", which was designed to firm up the wobbly basis on which many orchestras habitually lurch from crisis to crisis.

Harrild, however, is confident about the prospects: "The deficit wasn't an accident. You can't make a project such as St Luke's happen without a lot of input, and now it is an amazing place for amazing work. And Clive has already almost single-handedly halved the deficit in a matter of months." Gillinson, for whom raising the remaining half should be a piece of cake, will stay until the end of the orchestra's star-studded centenary season. Just a few of the luminaries appearing are the principal conductor Sir Colin Davis, the guest conductors Mstislav Rostropovich, Valery Gergiev and Pierre Boulez, the violinists Maxim Vengerov, Anne-Sophie Mutter and Joshua Bell, and the pianists Evgeny Kissin, Lang Lang and Leif Ove Andsnes.

Even with such a glittering roster at home, one can hardly blame Gillinson for wanting his new job. It is the kind of opportunity that appears once in a blue moon. Carnegie Hall is an iconic venue, rivalled by few others except the Musikverein in Vienna. Its history is impressive: Tchaikovsky conducted its first concert, in 1891; its architecture is elegant, its acoustic superb and its atmosphere, in the heart of New York, electric. Its site also encompasses the smaller Weill Recital Hall and the new, 650-seat Zankel Hall, the design and acoustic of which have been much praised. London's concrete-bunker halls, despite the acoustical refurbishment of the LSO's home at the Barbican, do not stand the comparison well.

Moreover, financial conditions for UK arts organisations tend to fall between two stools: we have neither the long-established US tradition of philanthropy, with associated tax benefits, nor the chunkier state subsidies available to comparable organisations in the rest of Europe. "It's an utterly different system in the States," Gillinson says. "Virtually all the money is raised privately, so it's not subject to the vagaries of political subsidy. There is no umbrella organisation determining arts policy, so it is up to each institution's chief executive to make sure its vision is clear." Gillinson's fundraising skills will no doubt be much appreciated in New York.

He acknowledges the additional frustrations felt by many arts practitioners in Britain over the way state funding for the arts is constantly at the mercy of successive governments' sacred cows. Nobody could be more devoted than Gillinson to the transformation of national attitudes to music through education and outreach work: that dedication is evident in the existence of St Luke's. But even he is aware of the dangers of regarding the arts primarily as a tool for social engineering, as many feel the Labour government has until recently; whether its latest Music Manifesto will make any difference remains to be seen.

It is perhaps amazing that Gillinson has not left sooner. He is 58 and has spent almost all his working life with the LSO: 14 years as a cellist and 20 as its managing director. In general, this country does not seem to be good at retaining its finest arts practitioners. Among British supremos who have gone west are Tony Woodcock, once managing director of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, now president of the Minnesota Orchestra; Anthony Whitworth-Jones, who used to run Glyndebourne but left it for the Dallas Opera in 1998 (he resigned four years later, citing homesickness); and the conductor Donald Runnicles, music director of the San Francisco Opera since 1992 and greatly respected by musicians worldwide, but under-recognised in the UK. In 2002, Britain's starriest conductor, Sir Simon Rattle, left the UK to head the

world-renowned Berlin Philharmonic, and did not mince his words about the state of the Government's attitude to the arts. Is Gillinson the latest to vote with his feet?

"It's not a question of leaving Britain," he insists. "It's a question of a particular job and an extraordinary opportunity. I genuinely can't think that there would be a better job in music anywhere. Carnegie is one of the greatest halls in the world, but not only that: its three excellent halls give tremendous scope for broad programming in numerous genres. It ties in with many things that have lain at the core of my vision at the LSO, including a strong commitment to educational activities. Carnegie Hall has the backing, resources and willpower to make dreams come true."

In the LSO, Gillinson will be sorely missed. "We've got 11 months to find his successor," Harrild says. "We'll need someone with total integrity, huge energy and a great dose of that overused word, 'vision', which Clive has in abundance. Persuasiveness and a degree of stubbornness are essential. Arts organisations are always tough to run if they are going to be great, not just ordinary; and we've got a great orchestra. In short, we need a saint!"

Saints have been in short supply in British arts management. For now, the LSO will have to hope there will be one waiting in the wings somewhere - practising hard.