

# **Ulster Hall - Programming Policy**

## **1. Introduction**

The Ulster Hall will reopen in March 2009 following a major refurbishment.

This is the second phase of the refurbishment work (Phase I 2005-06) and will see major changes to the venue including:

- Ulster Orchestra taking residency in the venue
- Addition of interpretive displays
- Launch of an education and community outreach programme
- Opportunity for the venue to actively programme and promote a range of events.

Since 2004 the venue has been managed alongside Belfast Waterfront and it is envisaged that existing expertise within the Waterfront staff structure will inform and direct the relaunch of the Ulster Hall.

This document addressed the programming policy for the 'new' Ulster Hall, identifying the changes in the venue's operation and management and taking into account the overall marketplace in which the venue operates.

## **2. Context**

This policy is based on the following assumptions about how the Ulster Hall will operate in the future:

- A receiving house and programming venue
- Programming will have a mix of commercial and developmental objectives
- Opportunity for business use of the venue will be exploited
- In-house PA and lighting facilities will be available
- Premises will be licensed – alcohol consumption permitted in the main space for standing concerts
- An improved environment – front of house facilities, seating, dressing rooms
- Hire charges will need to be set appropriately to reflect these changes in order to compete within the market, whilst acknowledging a previously loyal client base

### 3. Historical and Current Position

#### ***Historical Position***

Typically the Ulster Hall has hosted around 150 events each year. A further 50 days would have been used for rehearsals and 'get-in'.

The main event types were:

- Classical (30%)
- Popular / rock music (18%)
- Religious events (16%)

The remaining 34% of use covered a range of uses including variety, sporting and choral events.

There was limited business usage, with occasional meeting and exhibitions in the main space. The Group space also attracted occasional meetings, chiefly from within Belfast City Council.

#### ***Reopening – Changes***

When the Ulster Hall reopens in March 2009 significant changes to the Hall's management and day to day operation will impact upon how the venue is programmed.

- The Ulster Orchestra residency involves a regular booking (Wednesday, Thursday, Friday) during the orchestral season (September to May), and 10 week-long bookings during the year – primarily 4 weeks in August, but also single weeks at other times. Overall this reduces the days available for other use to 216 per year.
- The Group Space offers potential as a programming area. However this space may also be considered for use as a bar area on concert nights, thus restricting its availability.
- Hire fees are scheduled to increase on reopening subject to a full benchmarking exercise.
- Customer research in 2006 highlighted that ***moderate*** price increases would be acceptable on reopening, with improved technical facilities/equipment.
- Management aim to actively promote a programme of events in addition to the traditional externally promoted events. Assuming 70% usage of the building (after Ulster Orchestra days), a notional target of 10% as own promotions represents 15 days per year. This compares with the Waterfront target of 20-25 events per year.
- The venue's planned Education and Outreach programme provides new programming opportunities.

## 4. Market Analysis

The Ulster Hall competes chiefly in the local marketplace.

### Other Venues

An analysis of programming at other key local venues highlights the following:

Waterfront (Capacity: 2200 / 350)

- Wide-ranging programme – music, comedy, opera, family events, trans/UAA
- Music tends to be less 'edgy'

Grand Opera House (Capacity: 1000)

- chiefly theatre / musicals;
- some family;
- Dates in Sept 08 for Frances Black, Grand Old Opry (Hugo Duncan), Miami Showband, Our Jimmy – all promoted by David Hull. These events could equally well take place in the Ulster Hall.

Baby Grand (Capacity: 200)

- Smaller scale music events, some film

Odyssey (Capacity: 10,000)

- Big names
- some trends towards 'smaller' events – Lee Evans, Paul Weller

Lyric Theatre

- Closed until 2010
- Chiefly theatre productions
- Children's summer scheme in July 2008

Old Museum Arts Centre (Capacity: 90)

- Chiefly theatre
- Some summer youth programmes
- Move to new venue in 2011 (Capacity 350-400)

Millennium Forum (Capacity: 1000)

- Wide-ranging events programme – music, comedy, family events, musical theatre
- Similar in overall profile to Belfast Waterfront

Island Arts Centre (Capacity: 300)

- Smaller scale music events
- Community events
- Large workshop programme

Other Venues (Capacities up to 350)

- Regional towns across N Ireland
- Generally smaller scale music, theatre and community based events

None of these compete directly with the Ulster Hall.

In addition, the Ulster Hall has traditionally enjoyed a unique position as the only venue of its size with the flexibility to host a wide range of events from rock to classical music.

It provides an alternative for events too big for the Waterfront Studio (350 seats) yet too small to adequately fill the Main Auditorium space.

The two year closure has forced promoters to seek out other commercial venues such as Spring and Airbrake, Auntie Annie's, St George's Market, and Mandela Hall. Whilst generally smaller in capacity, these venues have certainly seen a growth in business and profile. These may continue to pose a competitive threat, particularly if Ulster Hall pricing is considered prohibitive by promoters.

## **General Trends – entertainment industry, social, economic etc.**

A number of factors outside the immediate control of the Ulster Hall management will also impact upon the programming opportunities for the venue.

- The ongoing 'credit crunch' – with retail price hikes set to continue through to end of 2008 and beyond.
- Huge competitive product offering (venues and acts) means customers are more selective.
- Despite technological advances, the 'live' music experience remains irreplaceable.
- The availability of entertainment 'product' is often dictated by artist touring schedules, which can limit control over when / if an artist visits Belfast.
- A growing number of emerging commercial promoters and the reduced dominance of key promoters such as Wonderland and Aiken is also changing the profile of the entertainment marketplace.

## **5. SWOT**

From the review above the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the Ulster Hall in a programming context emerge.

### **Strengths**

History / place in Belfast's heart  
Unique size  
Unique profile  
Potential of Group space  
Established customer base  
City centre location  
Improved facilities  
Ulster Orchestra residency  
Synergy with Waterfront  
New education and outreach programme  
Experienced Waterfront programming team

### **Weaknesses**

Price increase  
Wednesday – Friday, and week long Ulster Orchestra bookings  
Lack of extensive Technical provision  
Catering space  
Car parking  
Storage space  
Loss of traditional Group customer base

### **Opportunities**

Reopening eagerly anticipated  
Link programming with education/community programme  
Exploit 'live' music experience  
Emerging new promoters  
Belfast – city of festivals  
Emerging strands – all ages gigs  
City centre location allows for daytime / early evening events  
Increased education contacts  
Business hire – main space (exhibitions?) / Group (meetings)

## **Threats**

Competitive marketplace  
Shake-up amongst local music promoters  
Emerging new venues  
Credit crunch

## **6. Key Issues**

This overview identifies key aspects which will affect programming strategies.

- Ulster Hall history
- Education and outreach programme
- Improved facilities
- City centre location
- In house programming opportunities
- Business hire potential
- Availability of space (Wed – Sat)
- Technical provision (PA and Lighting)
- Price Increase
- New promoters / venues

The programming policy will address these key issues as well as identifying the key programming strands for the venue.

## **7. Programming Policy Objectives**

- to present the Ulster Hall as 'the people's place'
- to link to the heritage of the Ulster Hall
- to provide a wide-ranging and balanced programme of events
- to introduce an element of in-house programming to complement hired events
- to complement and expand on programming at Belfast Waterfront
- to allow a degree of developmental programming

## **8. Themes**

### **8.1 Education / Outreach**

The unique history of the Ulster Hall will be the subject of interpretive display panels and of the Education and Community Outreach programme for the Hall.

This document does not seek to address the work of this programme, but the development of programming linked to interpretative themes and the education programme will be addressed on an ongoing basis.

### **8.2 Pricing**

It is important to state that in terms of pricing, both for ticketing and the hire of the Hall, it is an essential element in any venue's programming strategy.

Any review of this element of the strategy must however to be balanced with income forecasts / operating costs. A separate review of pricing is currently being undertaken and will be presented to committee in a separate report.

Key issues to be taken into account are:

The need to consider the existing loyal customer base – chiefly the needs of community and voluntary groups

The need to create a differential between the Waterfront and Ulster Hall's pricing structures so as not to discourage use of the Ulster Hall, because the Waterfront offers greater potential return.

Recognition of the limitations of the technical package available in the Ulster Hall.

### **8.3 PA / Lighting Provision**

This document assumes that adequate PA and Lighting provision will be available in the Ulster Hall. However this will be achievable only at extra cost. Whether the provision is through purchase or hire, these costs must be realistic and consideration given as to how these are incorporated into hire fees.

### **8.4 Space Availability**

The demand on space presented by the Ulster Orchestra's regular rehearsal, recording and performance schedule will clearly impact on programming time available. To this end there will be a focus on Saturday night as the key weekend night, but also a need to channel events towards other days. The implications of this will only be apparent when programming becomes operational.

### **8.5 Promoters**

The fragmentation currently taking place amongst locally based promoters and the growing importance of key players must be carefully managed. Key programming staff have already developed relationships with key operators, but it is essential that these are maintained and developed. Similarly it is essential that the longer established promoters are developed further. This will be achieved through a regular contact programme with the promoters.

### **8.6 Location**

The Ulster Hall's location in the city centre presents an opportunity to extend programming outside of traditional hours to early evening and/or lunchtime. Both the improved foyer and the Group space provide ideal venues for less formal events which might encourage office workers, shoppers and tourists to stop off. These events might take a number of formats, including music and spoken word.

It is envisaged that programmers could work in partnership with Belfast City Council colleagues currently involved in the Evening Economy and other key tourism initiatives.

### **8.7 Programming Strands**

#### **Classical Music**

It is envisaged that orchestral programming will be covered by the Ulster Orchestra. Visiting orchestras have had limited success in the local marketplace and with the Ulster Hall playing home to the Ulster Orchestra there is limited need or scope to develop this aspect of programming.

Other classical music such as opera (concert format), recitals, or choral events are ideally suited to the Ulster Hall venue and opportunities for programming in this area will be explored.

### **Contemporary Music**

In general rock and popular music are the domain of external promoters but from time to time opportunities do exist for direct promotions. Programmers will continue to work closely with commercial promoters to secure key acts for the venue, whilst at the same time researching opportunities for our own programming.

The current changes in the profiles and scope of key local promoters will also be closely monitored, ensuring beneficial relationships are maintained – and established with emerging promoters as relevant.

It is in this field that the opportunity identified for the development of ‘all ages’ gigs can be best developed.

Other musical genres presenting opportunities for the Ulster Hall include:

- Country music
- Nostalgia type events

We will actively seek to include events of this type in the programme

It is not our intention to seek out ‘tribute’ type acts, the quality of this type of event not always being guaranteed. The more successful acts are generally handled by external promoters.

Musical variety events fall in the main within the remit of external promoters.

### **Dance**

Traditionally a difficult sell in the Northern Ireland market, dance programming has been limited in the Ulster Hall.

Currently most dance events fall within the scope of festivals. Opportunities to partner with festival organisers in this area will be progressed.

### **Theatre**

With the closure of the Group Theatre this has posed challenges for the large number of community and amateur theatre groups who used this venue. We will continue to work with these groups to investigate alternatives.

The opportunity to present traditional theatre in the main space at the Ulster Hall is limited by the design of this area but cannot be overlooked and as such will be considered on an ongoing basis.

### **Religious Events / Schools’ Concerts / Community Based Events**

Traditionally a staple in the Ulster Hall’s programme, events of this nature are the responsibility of the event producers and do not fall within the scope of Ulster Hall programmers.

### **Sport**

Sporting events will generally be run by external promoters. However there is scope for Ulster Hall staff to work with Belfast City Council Events team to secure appropriate bookings.

### **Spoken Word**

Historically the spoken word has not featured strongly in the Ulster Hall events schedule. However the venue is well suited to this type of activity and it is envisaged that programmers will seek to develop literature, comedy and mediums/hypnotist type events.

### **Festivals**

As a key city centre venue, with strong roots in community and music

events, the Ulster Hall is ideally positioned to spearhead Belfast City Council's initiative to further develop the city's festival programme.

Programmers will therefore work together with existing festival organisers including Belfast Festival at Queen's, Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival and Belfast Children's Festival, as well as emerging festivals to support this City Council initiative and to provide a focus for its development. To this end it is proposed that ten days usage of the Ulster Hall is set aside for festivals usage.

### **Business Use**

The Ulster Hall will present a clearly defined conferences and meetings product and sales efforts will target specific events – the Group for smaller meetings and the main space for exhibitions and larger meetings. This will be carried out on a hire basis only.

## **9. Closing**

This document seeks to highlight the key issues influencing programming at the Ulster Hall and how this will be addressed. It cannot be viewed as a static document and must respond to specific programming opportunities as they arise. However it forms the basis from which the programme will be developed.