

## **Regarding Culture and its institutions (part one)**

By Mats Johansson

Europe is a magnificently long-winded continent in many ways. When culture is to be supported, the economic means very rarely go straight to the project that is to benefit from it. Instead, a huge colossal cultural department is created, which in turn hands the money out to what is regarded as interesting at that very moment in time, based on the current cultural agenda.

And there are many institutions. In Sweden we have Statens Kulturråd (The Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs), Konstnärsnämnden (The Arts Grants Committee), Svenska Institutet (The Swedish Institute) and assorted EU-funds just to mention a few. I have nothing against departments, organizations or institutions – IB and myself have been very fortunate to get funding from most of the organizations mentioned above – but it is getting to the point where it is getting difficult to work, to compose.

### **Some problems**

The applications are often so complicated that artists have to seek assistance from competent administrators who in turn have to consult experts to even fill in the application forms. Meanwhile, the artist is on the dole and gets dole money. In addition to that, he or she should apparently feel ashamed! In Sweden, this is solved by creating a new institution: a job centre for people working with culture. To qualify for this grand world you have to be an established artist or formally trained. Preferably have a job really.

The cultural job centre cannot find work for you, so they remain a slow resuscitation machine that can easily cause a sane person to break down in no time. I have never met an administrator at the job centre who has any real work experience

within culture or the labour market. Why? I have no idea. But I do know that voices were raised at the employment agency when a former artist was a possible candidate for a position as administrator!

Sure, many administrators are nice and understanding, but where is the double competence that should be required? Now threats are made and the artist who is on the dole is living in constant fear of being taken out of the labour market and put into a new institution – the “dole guarantee” – which is an just a sister organization to the employment agency. Simply a premonition.

There is still no work to be found, if there would, you wouldn't go to the agency, would you? At the same time, research tells us that culture is a resource in our society. A successful concert or theatre performance will affect restaurants, hotels, taxis and grocery stores, that will in turn pay taxes to the government.

### **WHAT!!!**

Here's the next shock: Swedish research shows that dole money is an important part of the Swedish music export, a venture that has become one of Sweden's greatest assets on the international market. Oh my God, bloodrush! I suppose that was the worst scenario. Everything is turned upside down all of a sudden. Can you hear the sound of administrators running right, left and centre?

Composers are actually writing music while getting dole money and by doing that, they are helping Sweden to move forward more than the wood and steel industries are at the moment. And here comes another organization: the union. They say: hold your horses! You can not work while you get unemployment benefits, which in practice means: go back to bed.

The more you fish in these muddy waters, the more you realize that you need a completely new way of looking at culture in Sweden and Europe. I honestly don't think that Sweden is any worse than any other European country, but this can hardly be a yardstick for the way culture politics should work in future.

### **A response**

By Thomas Olsson, musicologist

First of all, I would like to underline what Mats wrote just to clarify IB's position: IB have benefited more from grants and funds than most electric groups (for lack of a better description) in Sweden. We definitely appreciate that, no doubt about it. We are speaking from an insider's point of view.

### **Catch 22 once more**

But the problem remains. Where to find funding if you want to compose and play music that lies outside of the mainstream? It's a catch 22 situation when it comes to touring: to get booked, you generally need to be well-recognized and sell loads of CDs or have the support of a major record company that is taking good care of you. And how do you get to be a well-recognized name? You tour and sell CDs. If you are an independent record company – and Ataraxia productions certainly is – there simply is no money at all to spend on fancy promotion.

This is where grants and funds come in. Most of the Swedish classical and jazz musicians are supported by grants and funds in one way or the other. Luckily, IB are regarded to be on this cultural level. But the funds and grants are limited, and there are many good acts in Sweden who deserve support apart from IB, good riddance to them. If you get enough funding, what are you supposed to do?

You have to go on the dole of course, like anybody else would.

### **No great divide**

And here's an important aspect of the problem. For most people working with music, music is not only work, it is your life. If you work with accounting for instance, you wouldn't normally have accounting as a hobby, would you? But you may go to a concert in the evening, or listen to a record when you come home with your head full of figures.

If you work with music, it is not unlikely that there is no clear distinction between what you get paid to do and what you do for free, a blurred distinction between work and time off. This complicates things when you have to go on the dole and are not allowed to work. Currently there are no solutions, but we have to keep on struggling through the systems nonetheless.