

ULSTER TOURING OPERA LTD
A COMPANY LIMITED BY GUARANTEE
TRUSTEES' REPORT (INCLUDING DIRECTORS' REPORT)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2024

The trustees present their annual report and financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2024.

The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the accounting policies set out in note 1 to the financial statements and comply with the charity's Memorandum and Articles of Association incorporated on 18 June 2021, the Companies Act 2006 and "Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) (effective 1 January 2019)".

Objectives and activities

UTO's objects are to advance the education of the general public through the presentation of opera, and to further the development of public appreciation and taste in the art form. Through cross-border touring, innovative outreach projects and immersive technology UTO enables greater access to opera. UTO is committed to ensuring audiences enjoy the physical and digital content it creates, whether they are attending one of UTO's cross-border touring productions, or engaging with an augmented reality opera experience using a smartphone.

The objectives can be split into two sections:

Artistic Objectives:

- to provide creative opportunities for opera practitioners on the north of the island of Ireland and beyond
- to run a flexible and lean organisation enabling artistic risk
- to develop talent and ideas through partnerships
- to develop excellent working relationships with UTO's existing and future touring venues in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

Research and Development Objectives

- to build partnerships within the immersive technology sector on the island of Ireland and beyond
- to explore a range of volumetric capture options
- to develop skills within UTO in preparation for an increase in immersive technology work

The strategies employed to achieve these objectives in the year covered by these accounts include releasing the augmented reality app for release on iOS through cloud storage solutions, and developing strategic partners for the funding and delivery of School workshops and Ulster Youth Opera. In UTO's fourth year, the company has built upon the projects delivered in the previous year in the live touring and immersive technology sectors.

In reviewing and developing UTO's activities and future plans, careful consideration is given to the public benefit arising from UTO's work. The Trustees take particular account of the Charity Commission NI's general guidance on public benefit when reviewing the aims and objectives of the charity. The Trustees consider that the work of the charity will provide considerable benefit to the public as illustrated by the activities described in this report

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Achievements and Performance

Opera and Orchards

Ulster Touring Opera delivered Opera & Orchards in partnership with Armagh City Choir, the Ulster String Quartet, and Armagh Cider at the Market Place Theatre, Armagh, on 10th February 2024. This innovative project fostered community engagement, artistic excellence, and sustainability, aligning with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's five-year strategy to inspire, connect, and lead.

UTO worked closely with Armagh City Choir, providing a series of workshops that culminated in the choir performing alongside professional soloists in a public concert. Audience responses were overwhelmingly positive, with attendees rating the performance 4.7 out of 5 stars. Notably, 78% of surveyed audience members expressed a desire for more opera events in their local area, reinforcing the project's success in cultivating new audiences.

The initiative also demonstrated significant wellbeing benefits for the choir members, with 76% feeling more connected to others and 96% appreciating the opportunity to perform alongside professional artists. The event successfully deepened engagement with classical music while also broadening UTO's reach and impact within the community.

Ulster Youth Opera and School Workshops

As part of Ulster Touring Opera's commitment to developing young artists and expanding access to opera across Northern Ireland, the *Ulster Youth Opera* programme continued its impactful work in 2024. With the support of the ACNI Rural Engagement Arts Programme, UTO delivered a series of monthly workshops in Enniskillen, aimed at 8-13-year-olds and 14-18-year-olds. These sessions introduced young participants to opera through a blend of singing, acting, and movement, facilitated by professional opera singers, directors, and pianists.

Impact and Outcomes

- **Skill Development:** 100% of surveyed parents reported that their child's singing and acting skills had improved.
- **Wellbeing Benefits:** 77% of parents observed an increase in their child's confidence, while 62% noted they were happier since joining.
- **Social Engagement:** Over half of the participants made new friends through the workshops.
- **Access to Opera in Rural Areas:** All surveyed parents expressed a strong desire for more opera opportunities in County Fermanagh, highlighting the programme's role in filling a cultural gap.

A key takeaway was the positive impact on mental health awareness, with participants reporting increased understanding of wellbeing. However, some found it difficult to identify where to seek support, suggesting a potential area for further development in future workshops.

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UTO Composer in Residence Programme

From November 2023 to March 2024, Ulster Touring Opera (UTO) successfully delivered the initial stages of its Composer in Residence Programme, a significant initiative aimed at fostering new opera composition talent in Northern Ireland. Supported by the National Lottery Minority Ethnic Artists Mentoring & Residency Programme (SIAP) through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), this programme represents a major step in UTO's commitment to developing diverse voices in opera.

The residency provided an early-career composer with a unique opportunity to develop their artistic practice under the guidance of leading figures in the opera and classical music industry. The selected composer, Anna Ramzy, has already brought a distinctive perspective to the field, blending her multicultural background (Egyptian, Irish, and English) with classical training and a passion for experimentation.

By March 2024, Anna had:

- Composed the first drafts of a 5-10 minute opera scene, exploring new compositional approaches.
- Received 31 hours of mentorship from industry professionals including Dafydd Hall Williams (director/producer), Greg Caffrey (composer), and Giselle Allen (opera singer).
- Refined her composition through iterative collaboration with mentors and professional performers.

Launch of the AR Opera App on the Apple Store

In September 2023, Ulster Touring Opera achieved a major milestone in digital innovation with the launch of its AR Opera app on the Apple Store. This pioneering application represents a bold step forward in the integration of opera and augmented reality (AR) technology, offering a new way for audiences to engage with the art form.

The AR Opera app was designed to enhance audience engagement, allowing users to experience opera in an interactive and immersive way directly from their mobile devices. By leveraging AR technology, the app brings high-quality, digitally enhanced opera performances into users' personal spaces, broadening access beyond traditional theatre settings.

Key features of the app include:

- Augmented Reality Staging, enabling users to view opera performances within their own environment through AR technology.
- Multi-angle Viewing Options, providing an intimate and customisable experience.
- Integrated Subtitles and Contextual Content, offering insights into the production, composers, and performers.
- Immersive Audio, delivering a high-fidelity listening experience.
- Strategic Significance and Industry Innovation

The launch of the AR Opera app aligns with UTO's vision of blending classical artistry with cutting-edge digital technology. It also serves as a proof of concept for the wider potential of immersive opera experiences, particularly for audiences in rural and international settings who may not have easy access to live performances.

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Financial review

Total income received of £77,732 for the year ended 31st March 2024 (£124,502 for 2023), with net expenditure of £73,223 (£124,168 for 2023). Funds carried forward at the end of the year totalled £14,086, being made up of £11,005 of restricted funds and £3,081 of unrestricted.

The trustees are currently working to establish a reserves policy.

Risk management

The trustees have assessed the major risks to which the charity is exposed, and are satisfied that systems are in place to mitigate exposure to the major risks.

UTO has previously completed a robust verification process conducted by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Vincent Crossey, establishing that the company's risk management, contracting and financial procedures are in line with the best practice expected of a professional arts organisation.

Dafydd Hall Williams completed the Risk Assessment Awareness Course run by Regenerate, and has completed a range of risk assessments, including those for events held during the pandemic. To ensure best practice, UTO has undertaken a peer review of the risk assessment documents for similar sized organisations, in order to compare UTO's assessment process against their rehearsal and performance processes.

In October 2022 Ulster Touring Opera signed a service agreement with the Fermanagh Rural Community Initiative, which enables the FRCI to submit Access NI documents on behalf of UTO as a registered umbrella organisation. This is in line with UTO's safeguarding policy, and all company members who deliver work in schools are processed via Access NI.

Plans for future periods

The next financial year will see the expansion of the Youth Opera programme to branches in Belfast and Derry. Ulster Touring Opera will collaborate on a Northern Ireland wide tour of Handel's Messiah in partnership with the Merry Opera Company in autumn 2024.

UTO will collaborate with National Eisteddfod Wales to bring the Irish story of Nia Ben Aur to thousands of in-person and broadcast audiences through partnerships with Culture Ireland and Six Dance Collective.

UTO will launch a new trading subsidiary company dedicated to commercialising its immersive technology intellectual property. This will coincide with the exploration of Virtual Reality devices with the view to building a platform for content distribution.

Structure, governance and management

UTO's first year of operations began with registration with Companies House on 23rd December 2019 by founder and Artistic Director Dafydd Hall Williams. As UTO was set up with the intention of achieving charity status, it was registered as a Company Limited by Guarantee.

The trustees, who are also the directors for the purpose of company law, and who served during the year and up to the date of signature of the financial statements were:

Ms Anne Doherty
Ms Karen McShane
Ms Marie-Louise Muir
Mr Robert Thicknesse
Mr James Donnelly
Ms Jane Monari
Mrs Nuala Trainor

The current Trustees of Ulster Touring Opera have been recruited to the board during the period covered by these accounts. Drawn from the arts, events, accounting, engineering, journalism and creative industries sectors, this group of professionals represents a diverse, experienced and passionate governing body, well suited to the task of overseeing the organisation's initial years of growth.

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The trustees' report was approved by the Board of Trustees.



Ms Anne Doherty
Trustee

13 February 2025