

When people say, as more and more people are saying, that the Government should do something, the tendency is to interpret this expression as meaning that the Government should run the arts in the country. Comparisons are made with France, Great Britain, Canada, and many European and Latin American nations, which do have cultural institutions owned and supported entirely by the state. This is their way of doing it. It works, for them. It would not work here, because the philosophy of the system is not the American philosophy of private initiative.

What should be done in America, and what these two bills would start happening in America, is to provide a system of national encouragement of the arts, through a council or commission in Washington, and to make provision for financial grants upon local request through the State governments with no strings attached and on a basis of matching funds—we build hospitals this way under the Hill-Burton Act. As it happens, now is a sensitive time for consideration of these bills, and there is need for a clear understanding about the proposed relationship of the Government and the arts.

No one disputes that there is need for greater cultural development in the Nation. Presently established organizations need more money, and local resources are reaching the point of no return. The arts cannot stand still, any more than a progressive people or a nation can stand still. If a symphony orchestra is to stay in being, and extend its season by many weeks a year, it needs money to do so. The same applies to opera companies and ballet and dance companies.

The business of the proposed Federal Advisory Council on the Arts would be to research the fundamental questions involved, spot the problems in consultation with people from all parts of the country, and set standards and bases of qualification for grants to be made.

What these bills do and the course they chart will set the tone and indicate the direction of our cultural development for a generation to come. They should err on the side of caution for a long time—and make progress slowly. Fortunately the pace of cultural progress is up to the States and their cities and towns, and a rapid pace is predictable because of the known restlessness at the local level to get more done. This restlessness here in Washington expresses itself in impatience at the delay in getting the National Cultural Center underway; in the need for a longer home season for the National Symphony Orchestra; a longer season for the Washington Opera Society, and for the Washington Ballet; the need or desirability of a conservatory of national prestige such as the Congress authorized in 1891—which is still a part of the basic law of the land—being located here. Other cities have similar or identical needs, and are restless to get going.

There is no one distressed area in the field of the arts. The problem is entirely national and widespread. The only variables are those of degree—New York City, giant that it is, has its problems—it almost lost Carnegie Hall; it may lose the Metropolitan Opera House; Lincoln Center is still a long distance from its total financial goal.

Cheyenne, Wyo., has no opera house or opera company, and in Kansas City the beautiful Music Hall in the municipal center is vacant more nights than it is occupied by performances of music, dance, and drama. There is need of places to play, and a critical need of more organized companies to perform.