

Theatre, orchestras and the cultural budget

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Music and theatre depend on public money far more than museums. The Theater Basel, which combines opera, drama and ballet in one house, is the largest cultural institution of the region by budget and staff. Its present building on the Theaterplatz dates from 1975. Over the years the house has received international awards, including recognition as opera house of the year from a German critics' survey.¹ The Sinfonieorchester Basel and a number of independent ensembles, festivals and theatres add to the offer. The Stadtcasino Basel, the main concert hall, reopened in 2020 after a renovation and extension by Herzog & de Meuron, which was financed largely through private donations.²

The canton of Basel-Stadt finances culture on a scale that reflects both its wealth and its role as the centre of a larger region. Its cultural spending per inhabitant is among the highest in Switzerland, according to the statistics of the Federal Statistical Office on public cultural expenditure.³ The cantonal cultural law and the guiding principles of the canton's cultural policy, the *Kulturleitbild*, define the priorities of this spending. The largest share goes to the state museums and to the Theater Basel, while smaller amounts support independent culture, music, film, literature and youth culture.⁴

Direct democracy shapes this budget. In 2020 the voters of Basel-Stadt approved a popular initiative, known as the *Trinkgeld-Initiative*, which requires the canton to devote a minimum share of its cultural budget to youth culture.⁵ The vote showed that the citizens who approved the Picasso credit in 1967 still regard culture as a public matter, while their priorities have broadened from the established institutions to younger and more informal forms of cultural life. Debates about the balance between the large houses and the independent scene recur at every budget cycle.

1 Notes

1. On the Theater Basel, its building on the Theaterplatz (opened 1975, architects Felix Schwarz, Rolf Gutmann and Frank Gloor), and its distinctions, including "Opernhaus des Jahres" in the critics' survey of the magazine Opernwelt (in several years), see the publications of the Theater Basel. Architects and years to be verified. ↩
2. On the renovation and extension of the Stadtcasino Basel by Herzog & de Meuron, reopened in August 2020, and its financing by the Stadtcasino-Gesellschaft with private donations and public contributions, see the publications of the Casino-Gesellschaft Basel. To be verified. ↩
3. On public cultural expenditure per inhabitant by canton and municipality, in which Basel-Stadt usually ranks at or near the top, see the statistics of the Federal Statistical Office (BFS) on the financing of culture by the public sector. Figures to be verified. ↩
4. On the Kulturfördergesetz of the canton of Basel-Stadt and the Kulturleitbild Basel-Stadt, and on the distribution of the cantonal cultural budget among institutions and independent culture, see the publications of the Abteilung Kultur, Präsidialdepartement Basel-Stadt. Status to be verified. ↩
5. On the Trinkgeld-Initiative for the promotion of youth culture, approved by the voters of Basel-Stadt in 2020, and its implementation, see the official results and publications of the canton of Basel-Stadt. Date and content to be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-theatre-orchestras-and-the-cultural-budget