

New music and its audiences

An opinion into the perception & promotion of modern classical music today.

Yet more ramblings from me! I stress again these are my own personal views so feel free to agree or disagree!

First of all I use the word 'new' music very tentatively as this could mean a whole variety of different music. For the purposes of this article I will use it to mean music being written today.

When looking at concert seasons programmes it seems to me that the promotion of new modern music from living composers is decreasing. The trend today seems to bunch pieces from modern or living composers into one concert per season, thus allowing those who wish to give these concerts a wide berth. This seems utter madness to me, surely we should use these concert seasons as an opportunities to promote and expose new music (including saxophone repertoire), and to build up, and enthuse new audiences with these exciting sound worlds.

Proms Saturday Matinee 2: Maxwell Davies, Aperghis & Sir Harrison Birtwistle



Saturday 20 August
3.00pm – c. 4.30pm
Cadogan Hall
Choral music and singing events. Piano music

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies
Il rozzo martello (12 mins)

Georges Aperghis
Champ-Contrechamp (c.15 mins)
BBC Commission, World Premiere

Harrison Birtwistle
Angel Fighter (35 mins)
UK Premiere

closely it was not even a full prom, merely a matinee. On top of this, if you promote it like that you're possibly only going to get a smaller, quite selective, audience.

Why not programme in a traditional piece of repertoire to end with, for example, in this prom, a piece of Rutter or Howells? It would bring in a much larger audience, and even if only one person who wouldn't usually listen to those composers takes something away from the Birtwistle or Maxwell Davies then surely it is worth it?

This has been done before in previous prom years. For example, The Berlin Philharmonic often pair Schoenberg with Beethoven to great effect. Why not implement this style of programming across most, if not all proms. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra also do this to great effect with living composers such as Mark-Anthony Turnage, Louis Andriessen and Pierre Boulez building a reputation as one of

There are many factors as to perhaps why this seems to be happening. First of all if you label a concert as 'contemporary' you run the risk of turning a number people off or away from a concert, even if they do not know the music being performed. Darn these preconceived perceptions and labels within music!

This is often demonstrated to me in the BBC Proms. I often go through the glossy brochure to find only a handful of pieces being played by living or modern composers. Instead the bulk of the music is what I would call 'library' music.

Take for example this brilliant prom from 2011. It was a great one; however if you look

the world's leading orchestras. This should be done on a far more regular basis in this country.

I am not saying it is not already happening, and in fact the UK is perhaps one of the more forward-looking countries when it comes to pushing the boundaries within classical music. We have a growing number of smaller ensembles taken from the larger more established orchestras already doing this such as the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and Ensemble 10/10, both carrying out great work, as well as the amazing London Sinfonietta and Britten Sinfonia. However there is always more that can and should be done, and with the proms as the primary window into the classical music realm for the more general music listener and concertgoer, then perhaps opportunities should be given to these cutting edge and creative ensembles to bring their fantastic work to a larger audience, performing great new works from composers such as Howard Skempton, Ed Bennett, Luke Bedford, Joe Cutler and Peter Wiegold - the list could go on and on. Organisations such as the RVW Trust, Royal Philharmonic Society and the Britten-Pears Foundation must also be supported to allow in their excellent work in the continued performance and promotion of these new works.

I once got though to the final interview stage of a young artists platform competition. I played one modern/contemporary piece paired with what I thought was a more traditional piece. However the constant line of questioning was programming for their more 'traditional' audience. I rattled off a number of traditional pieces I could play but

Berlin Philharmonic/Rattle

Royal Albert Hall, London

★★★★★



Tim Ashley

The Guardian, Tuesday 7 September 2004 09.09 BST

[Article history](#)

The programme for Simon Rattle's first Prom with the Berlin Philharmonic consisted of Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony - both essentially idealistic works with iconic status, each marking, in its way, a revolutionary turning point in musical history.

Rattle's interpretations consequently had a number of aspects in common. The historical perspective was very much to the fore, with the pivotal nature of each work surveyed in the context of evolving tradition. The flickering ostinati that open Schoenberg's Variations were reminiscent of Debussy, while the leaping string lines peered forward, inevitably perhaps, to the lyrical sensuousness of Berg's Lulu.

Rattle's performance of Beethoven's Ninth, meanwhile, contained strong pre-echoes of Brahms, in the cell-like figurations of the opening movement, and Wagner in the Dionysiac rush of the finale; and Mahler seemed to hover like an unheard link between the two works. The slow movement of Beethoven's Symphony sounded more prophetic than ever of the quintessential Mahlerian Adagio, while Schoenberg's debt to Mahler was everywhere apparent in the Variations' marches, waltzes and exquisite nocturnes.

There were flaws, however. Both performances covered a wide, at times exaggerated, dynamic range, which meant that some of the detail simply vanished in the Albert Hall's cavernous acoustic when the orchestra was playing softly in the Schoenberg. The unity of Beethoven's Symphony, meanwhile, was at times under threat. The first two movements were tremendous in their combination of tension and drama, but Rattle's decision to allow the soloists onto the platform after the scherzo led to applause that fractured the mood.

There was another protracted pause after the Adagio, which meant that the breakneck opening of the finale lacked its usual power. The choral singing, from the City of Birmingham Symphony Chorus, was consistently thrilling, although the soloists, with the exception of tenor Timothy Robinson, were markedly indifferent.

also made it clear that presenting new music was really central to my work and performance as a musician. So when I wasn't selected it was pretty easy to guess why! I think music should always push both the listener and performer at times (not all the time) otherwise it gets a bit boring, doesn't it?

And this brings me to the crux of the problem, because it is partly understandable that arts organisations, orchestras and concert series do not take these risks on modern music, due to the ongoing funding situation of the arts.

These are particularly difficult times for arts funding, as the current arts budget is pitiful. Even during the supposed spending boom under the previous Labour government the budget was still rather low compared to countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, making the current cuts so much more painful. I think this is in part down to the rise of celebrity culture in this country, compared to other European countries who take more pride in the safeguarding and development of their own arts culture and identity.

For the orchestras and other musicians to get, or qualify for, funding, they must be able to guarantee a certain amount of bums on seats – hence more traditional programming. However if this trend continues in the long term, the future for contemporary classical music becomes unclear, as such programming usually (though not always) attracts a slightly older concertgoer, somehow bypassing the younger generations needed to ensure that the music lives on.

Finding a younger audience and developing their appreciation of new music is key, and we must be proactive in this, by having a serious think as to how we might challenge the public perception of contemporary art music, whilst finding a way to make it relevant to people and just exposing them to it, whether in workshops, classrooms or even instrumental lessons.

A recent ofsted report into music stated that 'There is not enough music in music lessons in many schools in England at a primary level.' Here is a link to an article on the BBC website <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17226187>. The article really highlights the fact that more needs to be done from the grass roots upwards. This probably actually applies across most levels of education in my view; there are some A level music boards that actually do not require their students to read or write music! Utter madness.

I often play my students a wide variety of new music, almost as a challenge to open up their ears, hopefully developing over time into an appreciation. So far we've had Crumb: Black Angels, a bit of Sam Rivers and even some Lutoslawski. So far the Crumb has been the most successful, one even went home and got their parents to buy a copy!

Getting people listening to more adventurous music won't be easy; it requires perseverance on the part of the listener. I'll be honest, the very first time I listened to A Love Supreme by John Coltrane I didn't get it. Fast-forward a couple of months and that completely changed, it is probably one of the most creative pieces of music I've ever listened to.



So there is something to be gained from being persistent and learning to appreciate less traditional music, not least the breaking down of the idea and boundaries that new music is 'difficult'. It certainly requires concentration, but it needn't be hard work if one knows what to listen for, or if the lesser-versed concertgoers allow themselves to be open to new experiences, then there is a lot to value and appreciate. If more had a positive attitude towards new music and were exposed to it on a more regular basis, then it would allow it to be commissioned and programmed

more readily, creating an upward spiral, and enriching creative life in the UK and the rest of the world. And at the end of the day creativity and personal development is what life is all about.

By Matt London

Related websites:

mattlondonmusic.com

mattlondonmusic.blogspot.com

tenorsaxindex.info