The Concert of the Future
Transcript

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by

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In The Concert Of The Present, Tim Joss and I were contemplating the pressures that have, by stealth, greatly changed the concert fare on offer in the UK in recent years. Today we peer into the future of live concert music; before attempting that with today's guest, however, I need to explore these new and growing pressures in more detail, for today's guest has certainly thought much about their bearing on how we are to present live music.

I suggested last time that our political class, itself circumscribed by the ballot box, can no longer recognize any values except those demonstrable by the artistic equivalent of electoral popularity (1). In fact nothing is intrinsically worthwhile any more, for that leadership role of promoting continuing cultural values is now held to be a horrendous cultural imperialism tantamount to daubing the country with one’s own image, like some dictator.

The only safe cultural value is football - so senior politicians lamely parade learned quips that will afford coverage in their local paper. There are no votes in quoting Proust. Artistic training - the prolonged assimilation that introduces us to cultural practice - is, of course, anathema to our leaders, bearing fruit as it does only years later, after the electoral promises and slogans have been forgotten. As Sir John Drummond said of our politicians in his seismic 1998 RPS lecture (2),

“One never has the feeling that they are glad that arts exist or that they do anything for, to use their phrase, the ‘quality of life’ of the country and its citizens.”

And my guest today has written (3) in like vein

“I’m worried about the Prime Minister because he is signalling that Oasis is as important to Britain as opera; that chat shows are as important as live theatre; and that all sorts of other key ingredients of the arts matter not at all.”

That sense of cultural value, now abrogated, has been replaced by a grotesque bye-election in terms of the perceived importance of art forms. In terms of theatre and drama, the winner will be something recognizable off the television - in music; this means anything whose juicy bits have been widely packaged by Classic FM and EMI. Art-forms that eschew packaging and product-management are relegated to those ‘nine other parties also standing’ that newsreaders are obliged to mention; but I always think they look the most interesting, with names like ‘Vote for Green Mice on Tuesday Party’. Among these Monster Raving Loonies, losing their deposits in our electoral analogy, is poetry, which used to be widely learned by heart (what a great phrase that is: durable learning is for the ‘heart’, not ‘head’). Then there is today’s art music, or ‘avant-garde’, a ‘Green Mice on Tuesday’ Party if ever there was one.

The rocky road that reaches across this barmy landscape to the artistic work is, for some skilled practitioners, just too long and too winding. Who can blame them? The music world is, in classical terms as in pop, full of young people offering the same skills, and their dedication, for feeble economic rewards, is awesome. It is no wonder that some will dream up faster ways of drawing attention to their skills, especially in the age of big money in the media. So our concert world is now full of artistic short cuts, packaged off-cuts from the real thing for those with no inclination to concentrate for more than two minutes. These were, for a few years, striking oddities, that brightened the concert circuit and would probably not have been part of my topic today; however, in a short time they have come to be taken by some as cultural paradigms, so that none of us in mainstream arts can ignore their implications. The less their distinction, the more prevalent they are.

A recent article (4) in our nation’s most widely read periodical, Radio Times, paraded the values of the aforementioned culture that assesses by counting bums upon seats. The article gasped at the success of these pseudo-classical acts, who bring showbiz razzamatazz to artistic materials; girly string quartets and wealthy stadium tenors were dangled in front of leading mainstream practitioners, who were invited to jump the barrier and join this colourful dash for cash. Happily they all refused, with Sir Simon Rattle using unambiguous language to dismiss ‘cross-over’ products as a distraction: “what's important is to do something well”, he reiterated – needlessly, you might have thought, but hardly so when it is being seriously advanced that this is ‘the new classical music’.

The gist of this article was that the rest of us are left sprawling by the record sales of various Baberazzi and swollen tenors. It assumed that we are all running one race: the serious muso’s are lolloping along way behind, as scantily-garbed nubile soloists dash across the finishing-line, clad only in strings of dollar bills, tenors riding upon their slim shoulders and belting out the theme from Match of the Day in full voice. It probably would pose a dilemma if we were all doing the same thing - running that same race - but we are not.

There is, in fact, a big confusion here: because commercial pressures dog our every move in day-to-day planning of classical music, and we always have the begging bowl out, it is wrongly assumed that our goal is the same commercial success as those who, well, sell out. It is not: funding is a means, rather than an end. While composers and artists want the maximum audience to experience what we do, what we do is not geared to maximizing that audience. That is the difference. Is it so hard to understand?

Nothing underlines this chasm of intention than the article’s quoted words of a record executive, “the only judgement you can really make is whether people want it.” There we have it – the artistic credo of our time: to churn out what people will buy. But while that is undoubtedly good advice for running Universal Classics Group, it is not ‘the only judgement you can make’ if you are trying to write an orchestral piece for the LSO, or make a piece of stonework that will stand for 150 years in a public place. Then ‘the only judgement you can make’ had better be that of Simon Rattle, that doing something well is never a bad idea. It takes longer, and the money is usually lousy, but as you will be identified by it forever, it is a good idea to use your inner compass. You are on a different journey, after all.

The compass pointing to ‘what people want’, meanwhile, is a notoriously dicky instrument. Even if it should point them to commercial gain, artistic practitioners may find that what they produce hangs round their neck for longer than they expected when producing it, and would do well to think first how they wish to be remembered.

This gives me a flimsy excuse to retell the story about Professor Maurice Bowra, sunbathing nude on the river at Parson’s Pleasure during an Oxford summer. When a punt full of ladies came by and his colleagues hurried to cover their nether regions, Bowra covered his face, noting, “I don’t know how you chaps are recognized in Oxford, but with me it’s my face”. You may feel the moral of this story is that it is hard to be known by your face, so to speak, if you are to be commercially rewarded in today’s cultural climate.

My own critique of the various ‘Babes’ and lost opera-singers is to reiterate this distinction between artefact and commercial product – also one of the chorus-lines of this lecture series. I prefer to distinguish than to condemn, for I have no right to object to the packaging of highlights from music, so long as it is recognized as such. In any case, any musicologist will tell us that the highlights industry is the second-oldest profession in the world (which is interesting, since it is not unrelated to the oldest).

So I object only to the idea that marketed chunks somehow become the thing itself, that they be taken for the art of which they are just all-singing-and-dancing edited highlights. They are a wholly different animal, just as nuggets are not chicken but allegedly contain ‘minimum 39% mechanically-recovered chicken product’ – a percentage well above the meat-content in some versions of classical works. The distinction needs to be shouted from all concert-halls and theatres. They are products - that is, bite-sized elements honed toward maximum consumption and commercial gain. Art itself differs, as I said, in giving no priority to rapid dissemination (though some practitioners are masters at self-advertisement). Whether the maximum audience will like your work on first or only encounter is not the issue; if it is, you are making a product, and we are discussing an industry - ‘the music business’ – whose culture is the result of popular endorsement.

This is a confusingly different world, one that rewards the swiftest peristalsis through the national digestive system – though we know where digestive systems lead. My alimentary analogy is not meant to suggest that art should be indigestible, but that there should be something to digest; a national junk diet is bad news for quiet and intricate forms of artistic expression. The assumption that these are driven by the engulfing ambitions of this ‘music business’ also leads to a pessimistic received orthodoxy about today’s topic, the future of classical concert-going. The article I mentioned above took this swipe in passing: “The trouble is, there’s only one Simon Rattle, and, at a time of dwindling interest in classical music…” We should remember this ‘dwindling interest’ when the same magazine has one of those time-honoured ‘Five Classical CDs for £10’ offers that seem never far from its back page – or when, no doubt, it runs a spread later this year about the next BBC Young Musician competition, of which television coverage seems annually to grow.

The more that serious art keeps a quiet place in the lives of serious numbers of quiet people, the less our opinion-formers seem aware of it. The easy obituaries demonstrate that for them and for funders, the box-office machine is the only show in
town. The more conscious of business-style balance sheets we become, the worse classical music looks on paper. This is because these popularity ratings measure only the size of audiences, not the depth of their artistic experience. It is the same illogic that besets the fad for ‘league tables’: profound benefits cannot be quantified, so we must measure something that can be, even if it is the wrong thing. My magazine article noted that Rattle’s Mahler 5 recording topped the classical charts with sales of “a fairly modest 50,000 compared with the cross-over big hitters” – as if the experience of Mahler’s 5th Symphony can in any way be compared with that of the theme music to World Cup broadcasts, which netted bigger sales! The only quantifiable dimension is actual sales, so that must be the unit of comparison before which we all genuflect (5). Our guest today writes of this assault on the arts (6) thus:

"They already stand naked and without defence in a world where what cannot be measured is not valued; where what cannot be predicted will not be risked; where what cannot be controlled will not be permitted; where what cannot deliver a forecast outcome is not undertaken; where what does not belong to all will be allowed to none. That is the agony."

And that last is the greatest agony – survival by focus group. The breathtaking shallowness of this outlook should be exposed, and we can start by pointing out that a ‘full’ concert is a concept relative to its venue. Audiences for opera and concert music are usually at least respectable, and the same were thought to be ‘large’ audiences until the advent of stadium rock in the 1960s. Only now that we are used to size in everything, and ‘mega’ is a term of quality rather than size, can a gathering of 150 people enjoying 150 intense, private experiences be seen as symptomatic of ‘dwindling interest’. As I said above, this distortion is possible because experience cannot be quantified, while attendance can. I recently attended Berg’s Wozzeck at Covent Garden, a shatteringly dark and morbid vision, as avant-garde in that production as anything from the 20th Century - yet the house was packed. Tickets had been halved as a promotion, but I think they were by no means free – and they were snatched up. If the entire production and audience had been transferred to the Birmingham NEC or a football stadium, it would have been revealed as less ‘popular’ than a Madonna concert - but in our world of choices, porcini mushrooms are in less demand than pot noodles, and are all the more important for that.

Art has not become, and is not about to become, ‘easier’, which is why the only true access to it is education - whether we say it once, or three times. In other words, we need to learn to listen, if we are not to subside into cultural obesity on a junk diet. Today's guest, unencumbered by my dietary metaphors, warns (7) that “the audience for... the historical canon... will wither because less has been taught and therefore less is understood.”

This was consummately demonstrated by the ‘Nessun Dorma phenomenon’, which turned out to be a mania not for opera but for - yes, Nessun Dorma. Liking a tune is nowhere near as demanding or time-consuming as liking an opera, which is why opera composers since 1600 have sought to salvage at least a hit song to reach our lips on the streets. Nessun Dorma passed the record executive’s test of ‘whether people want it’, while opera as a whole never will, because it is essentially demanding, if only in time-span.

The same is true of orchestral music, as the fad for Gorecki's 3rd Symphony showed. The latter trend did nothing to make household choices of Gorecki's other music, much of which is experimental and hugely challenging to the listener.

EX Gorecki: Lerchenmusik

Before I am challenged, I must say I do not mean by lauding arts ‘education’ that you will only enjoy Radio 3 after evening-classes: I mean that you will only enjoy Radio 3 after enjoying Radio 3 - repeatedly; great art is too smart to give up all its secrets in one blurt, and you have to make the time to live with it. No one is excluded except by their choice, but our culture of instant sound-nibbling is an exclusion zone in itself.

These contradictions matter, because if we care about continuing access to real music played - in full - by real artists, we can no longer just sit and hope for the best. We need to know what is going on, or mechanically recovered music will be the only item on our menu, on the grounds that no one wants anything else. What we are allowed to see and hear is shifting, driven by all sorts of boardroom speak and arts funding reports about ‘access’, and we know little of this until the brochure hits our mat.

My last talk took a jaundiced look at the flaky ‘themes’ whose trifid march has left not just festivals but orchestral planners with stars in their eyes. We might conclude that this is a harmless nonsense, yet these themes are already dictating whether or not, for example, a composer is commissioned - depending on whether his ideas ‘fit in with the theme’ - and are arguably another wing of the lemming-march to replace judgement by focus group majority. Presumably ‘themed’ programming is thought ‘easier’ or sexier for UK audiences, as if we have never quite got the hang of difficult/unsexy concerts presenting an overture, concerto and symphony unhampered by being ‘about renewal’. 
So I am clear that music should be defended against packaging and reprocessing, if we want a durable sensation rather than a fashionable stroking. It is right to ask now, when it is still not too late, where such idiocies are leading our concert life, and what we can do about it if we care.

I have stressed in various discussions the idea that art - OK, music - should be a fixed point that we approach through preparation, rather than the other way around – watered-down or hotted-up versions offered to a public assumed to be unable any longer to cope with the original. To me that stability is needed because art, however outrageous, is the expression of ‘human-ness’ (more than ‘humanity’ I mean ‘what it is to be human’), and this is something that has not changed. As long as we continue to be children, spouses, parents, leaders and followers who run the gamut of emotions in those roles, we will need from art the same as ever enriched us in the past. My wish as fairy godfather for the infant that is the Concert of the Future would be, therefore, that it be protected from all superfluous ‘relevance’, ‘branding’, ‘goal-orientation’ and ‘innovative strategic objectives’, in favour of the self-effacing presentation of music. My guest, though, may now tell us that it is not as simple as that...

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Notes

1 Truth always overtakes fiction in matters of state philistinism. Only last week our new Education Secretary of the moment was reported as questioning the validity of studying Classics. Since his point was that ‘students should have a tangible relationship with the workplace’, it follows that his attitude is equally applicable to all Humanities subjects; no learning is intrinsically worthwhile.


3 Tusa, John I'm Worried About Tony in Art Matters, Methuen 1999, p.76

4 Sweeting, Adam The Shape of Strings To Come, Radio Times 7-13 Dec 2002 p27

5 Even sports are locked into a beauty-contest: we hear people apologising for nonconformity by enjoying - the term says it all - ‘minority’ sports: ‘I'm afraid I watch Bowls’.

6 Tusa, John The Arts in the Twenty-First Century - The Agony Or The Ecstasy? in Art Matters, Methuen 1999, p.28

7 Tusa, John ibid. p.25