

# WHO NEEDS MODERN MUSIC?

*The Classic Symposium met again at The Warehouse to enjoy a lively – and in this case explosive – debate. The subject was contemporary music: who wants it? Charlotte Fairbairn sums up and invites readers to write in with their viewpoints*



**W**as it merely a coincidence that at our third Classic Symposium we drank twice as much wine, The Warehouse Dining Room

was several degrees hotter, the vocabulary was saltier and the debate altogether more adversarial than at either of our previous evenings?

"You're a conversation hogger!"

"At least I don't sulk!"

"You try selling contemporary music, then!"

Or was the question "Contemporary music – who needs it?" particularly provocative? Either our concoction of guest symposiasts was unusually explosive, or – more likely – contemporary music arouses strong feelings.

Paul Barker (composer), Anthony Payne (composer and critic), Steve Martland (composer), Keith Burstein (composer and founder-member of The Hecklers), Sally Groves (head of contemporary music at Schott), Lucie Skeaping (broadcaster and early musician), Alexander Waugh (music critic on *The Evening Standard*) and Timothy Atkinson (barrister,

representing the view from the pew) found plenty to disagree on.

For the hosts – Lisa Barnard, *Classic FM – The Magazine's* editor, Ross Pople, conductor of the London Festival Orchestra, and me – the spectacle was a wonderful if stressful thing.

Keith Burstein threw down the gauntlet. Readers may remember that last year he grabbed the headlines, in his capacity as a founder-Heckler, by launching his campaign for more tonal music during the performance of a work by Sir Harrison Birtwistle. He loathes modernism in all its horrid, squeaky guises – the modernism which, he explained, is difficult, obscure, esoteric and technically complex. (And no, that does not mean late Beethoven as one wag helpfully suggested.) It later transpired that Burstein, an accomplished pianist, had earned his living in the 1980s performing the music of many of these modernist composers.

For Burstein, this is the only kind of contemporary music which the Arts Council and the BBC support, and is therefore the only kind of contemporary music we are allowed to hear. Moreover, he added, these well-supported modernist composers never receive unfavourable reviews. Why was it, he asked, that Birtwistle's opera *The Second*

*Mrs Kong* received only one unenthusiastic review (from Alexander Waugh)? The Hecklers argue that the modernism forced upon us by BBC Radio 3 and the Arts Council brings little pleasure and mocks our entire musical tradition; and there is room – even demand – for romantic, melodic and accessible music.

"Modernism, as a language, has failed. It does not connect," says Burstein.

For Anthony Payne, however, the word "accessible" is a dirty one. "I speak the language of my time," he said when asked why he believes in his own work. Musically, he is "suspicious of composers who encompass too much of the past – it's like walking on crutches". Not for him any dilemmas of conscience about who needs contemporary music or who should be allowed to enjoy it. Moreover, Burstein's view of the modernist conspiracy was – to him – a load of (unrepeatable metaphor). For Payne, "a piece of music is like a person, it is a friend, someone you know. Schoenberg, for example, is a difficult man."

For Paul Barker, contemporary music is not an art form but an excuse for audience participation, more conceptual than sensual. "I don't know whether anyone has noticed that in the last 20 years, music has

been revolutionised. It is not something that people do. Contemporary music is the means by which people can learn to express themselves.

Steve Martland, in answer to Lisa's question, "What do you say to concert promoters who think that contemporary music is the kiss of death?", responded immediately with the huge figures of the Kronos Quartet's *Pieces of Africa* album, and alluded to the success of Miles Nyman, Steve Reich and Philip Glass. He quoted the statistic that Jimmy Hendrix has sold more records than Handel, and pointed out that the surge in interest in the work of composers such as Nyman and Reich could be no small debt to pop.

Alexander Waugh tried valiantly to steer the argument towards the question of who should pay for it all, and Timothy Atkinson admitted that when attending a concert incorporating a work by Boulez a third of pleasure is derived from a desire to be trendy, a third from intellectual snobbery, and only the final third from actual enjoyment of the work.

Lisa and I wanted to know why people don't attend concerts which include a contemporary work in the programme, and most concert-goers shrink from anything written after the V

Lucie Skeaping said that in order to fill the Windsor Festival, she could not put on contemporary music. And she rarely encounters when playing in other festivals around the country.

Four composers snared our attention and yet they were the most resilient when it came to defending their trade. When Timothy Atkinson asked, "What do I get out of listening to your music which I can't get out of listening to Mozart?", only Anthony Payne ("It's the way I see the world") came close to answering the question.

Burstein's real fight, he admitted, is with the bigwigs of BBC Radio 3 and the Arts Council – it is essentially a political debate among the musical elite.

Anthony Payne wished to argue only for his own right to compose. "You can say in music what you like and someone will be listening to you." Paul Barker "honestly, truly and really doesn't give a stuff" whether anyone listens to his music after he is dead or not.

Steve Martland's position might represent an answer to the question, as he does not receive any Arts Council funding and he does have a major recording contract. If, as Ross said, "Good art is business", are the record companies the way ahead? Should it depend on commerce whose music is supported and whose allowed to disappear? If the public buys it, then perhaps they are the ones who need it.

How does a successful artist survive faced with the establishment's prejudice against success? When Ross cited John Gutter's view that his music could earn his living, Sally Groves dismissed him with: "Oh, it's the one who writes carols."

Lucie Skeaping pointed out that "in the old days music always had a purpose. It was usually as a masque or to do a job on the King or for some commercial reason. Nowadays, it happens through film. The average punter who listened to the music from Terminator 2 thought the pictures would find the noises very difficult."

So we do need it, and we do

get it, but half the time we don't realise that the sounds accompanying the wilder gestures of Harrison Ford or Paul Newman are indeed contemporary music.

We invited composer George Benjamin, who sadly could not attend, but he wrote in his note of refusal that he hoped that we would come to the correct conclusion – that we all need beautiful contemporary music. For my money, it's the word "beautiful" that counts.

*Nobody is saying that anyone who writes a C major chord is going to be brilliant.*

**Alexander Waugh**

*I don't want to see concerts being reduced to the musical equivalent of going to a museum.*

**Anthony Payne**

*Of all the centuries in the history of music, this one is dominated by the past.*

**Paul Barker**

*Give it a beat and any music will appeal to anyone.*

**Lucie Skeaping**

*The avant-gardists have the reins of power. Voices like mine are simply protesting out of a sense of dire need.*

**Keith Burstein**

*It saves you from the tedium of being a lawyer if you can say you have been to a concert by Boulez.*

**Timothy Atkinson**

*I believe in plurality and variety – there's more than one audience.*

**Sally Groves**

*Only one per cent of the world's music is written down, so who can judge anyway?*

**Steve Martland**

**! ! Please write in with your views to Symposium Feedback, Classic FM The Magazine, John Brown Publishing, The Boathouse, Crabtree Lane, London SW6 6LU.**

## SYMPOSIUM FEEDBACK

*Our readers respond to March's Symposium which discussed the problem of dwindling audiences for live concerts*

### Stuffy atmosphere

When I go to a pop concert by a band such as REM or U2 I know that the show can never be experienced through listening to a CD, but when I go to a classical concert I usually come away feeling that the money would probably have been better spent on a CD of the music.

This is not the fault of the soloist, the orchestra or the conductor, but is the result of the stuffy, negative and constrictive atmosphere that surrounds a classical performance.

Last year my girlfriend and I went to hear Brahms's Violin Concerto at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. This piece is one of our favourites. When we listen at home, especially at the end of the first movement, we both feel compelled to praise loudly the magnificent playing that we have just heard. But when we got to the end of the movement at the concert we had to stifle our applause, much to the annoyance of my girlfriend. If concert organisers want to fill their halls they need to breathe some life into the shows so that people can, like they did at Haydn's concerts 200 years ago, show their emotions and really let their hair down.

*Alan B Cabris, Paisley*

### More research needed

We at Youth and Music, with our successful Stage Pass ticket scheme, have some 50,000 young members across the country, and are the leading agency for encouraging young people to attend concerts on a

regular basis. Even so, we are well aware of the difficulties involved in building the audience of tomorrow.

Later this year, we are convening a national conference to consider the way forward to arrest the decline in audiences and the creation of the future audience. However, we wish to avoid yet another talk shop, and hope that some practical, and if possible, unified national plan of action will be the result of this enterprise, to the benefit of all.

*Alan Fluck, Artistic Director, Youth and Music*

### Just too much music?

Perhaps one reason why audiences are thinner in the major concert halls, especially in London, is the glut of music and musicians. There is too much on offer, and too many musicians to fulfil existing demands.

London-based orchestras, fine though they may be, need to realise that the world, governments and private sponsors don't owe them a living. Hopefully not too late, future audiences will be fostered by schemes such as the LPO's Family Concerts (at attractive prices, and entertaining as well as educational), and the LSO's drive to take music to schools, where players work individually with children. A live performance can be, and ought to be, a stimulating event.

Some claim that classical music is difficult to understand, or that it is for the elite. Some of it might not have immediate appeal, and appreciation of a symphonic movement needs an elementary knowledge of form and structure, but it is the aural experience that captures most listeners' attention, whether it is the elegant purity of Mozart, the driving spirit of Beethoven, or the colour and emotion of the 19th-century Romantic composers.

It is the elitism among the musical profession and the cognoscenti that gives cause for concern. How often have I heard disdain meted out to the promotion of Tchaikovsky concerts. It is not even considered that some members of the audience might be