

# In with the new

Orchestras need to embrace new ways of presenting concerts and create a welcoming atmosphere for audiences, says Lou Stein

**I**HAVE BEEN A PASSIONATE concertgoer my entire life. Although as a professional I have been largely engaged with drama and theatre in its various forms, I have always loved watching a beautifully performed orchestral work.

Very often I have been shocked to see that venues are half empty, attended only by die-hard aficionados. Why does this seem to only happen in the world of music?

Ten years ago, the visual arts were asking the same questions. Today a commitment to living artists has produced a large number of super-star celebrities – the very mention of their names produces sold-out and sought after exhibitions. The new should inspire curiosity and enthusiasm, as it does in the visual arts and in the theatre.

So why are audiences for contemporary music concerts so thin on the ground? Is there a case for revolutionising how orchestras can capture a new and younger audience by radically re-thinking how classical music, particularly contemporary classical music, is presented?

Having lived most of my professional life on the cutting edge of drama in the UK, I was amazed when I discovered that the theatre audience's thirst for new plays and classics interpreted in bold and highly visual new ways was not reflected in the world of orchestral music.

Highly atmospheric classics with contemporary re-interpretations are the norm in the theatre: why not create new visual contexts for core classical performances? The 21st century audience is much more accustomed to a highly imagistic and visual cultural experience. Can the orchestral world, and its patrons and funders, respond more fully to this demand, and in a consistent and committed way?

Music, particularly contemporary music, inspires me. So it is disappointing



to walk into a concert hall with little or no ambience. In the theatre, careful consideration is given to how lighting and the venue itself can make an audience feel welcome and create an atmosphere of excited anticipation.

There's no such thing in the usually dour concert hall. Atmosphere is lacking in even Britain's premier concert halls, such as the Royal Festival Hall and the Barbican. The lighting of the orchestra itself is usually harsh and vaguely

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focused on the orchestra from huge overhead floodlights.

The orchestra members themselves are often dressed in de rigueur black tie/black dress and although we are interested in their performance in the same way we are in the way actors perform, individually they pay little attention to the details of stage focus and demeanour. More often than not I see players picking at the loose strings of their violins, staring out blandly at the audience when they are not themselves playing.

Many composers have often linked the visual with their music. Wagner and Messiaen have both seen drama and lighting as exciting extensions of their music. Stravinsky actively sought stage designers, artists and dancers for many of his works, which became events in their own right, inspired by the music. These composers were challenging the limited context of the presentation of music.

In our own time, the Kronos Quartet is now internationally renowned and an instant sell out in large concert halls because of its engagement with lights, video, sets, and soundscape. Its musical virtuosity remains as brilliant as ever.

At a performance at the Royal Festival Hall's Music of Today series, Deirdre Gribbin's orchestral piece *Tribe*, with dramatic lighting effects by Bruce Springsteen lighting designer Jeff Ravitz, hundreds of people roared appreciative approval, though three or four people walked out because the concert was not traditionally presented. Although the orchestra's managing director was painfully aware of the chair seats flipping up as they marched out, it seems to me that this is a small price to pay in return for engaging and exciting dozens of people who may have experienced the music in a new and direct way.

Those who walked out may decide that a concert complemented by the drama of lighting is not for them. This is fine – they will continue to go to myriad un-adorned concerts available to them. But for the many who enjoy a fresh approach, they'll be more likely to respond to concerts that offer them a new experience. **IAM**

*Lou Stein is a theatre director and producer. This is an extract of a talk delivered at the Association of British Orchestras conference, which was held in Birmingham 11-13 February*