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Music

The drama of an orchestra from your computer

MARCH 7, 2009 by: ByLaura Battle

In the beginning was the radio. From its inception and throughout the 20th century the medium was hailed as a platform for cultural evangelism, and classical music was at its forefront: broadcasts by the likes of the BBC's Third Programme, with regular items such as *Live from the Met*, reached large audiences and showcased many of the world's finest musicians. By contrast, television, preferring pop culture, has never allowed classical music much exposure, but the rapid development of internet technology over the past decade has sparked a wave of new opportunities.

The classical music industry, as with other arts, now leans more and more on its internet presence. Most orchestras, opera houses and concert venues nurture profiles on social networking sites, upload teaser videos on to YouTube and share behind-the-scenes information via blogs, podcasts, Twitter messages and photo shares. Even London's Wigmore Hall, an unashamedly quaint and old-fashioned recital room, is now offering a podcast series and RSS newsfeeds (if their internet fan-base is anything like their audience demographic, they have succeeded in galvanising scores of silver surfers) and composers and musicians have been quick to follow the lead of pop artists such as Lily Allen and Arctic Monkeys in using Facebook and MySpace as the primary tools of self-promotion.

The latest, and perhaps most ambitious, innovation in the world of classical music is that of the digital concert hall. Last year MonteVerdi.tv established a virtual forum for enthusiasts and musicologists, offering downloads and a live monthly broadcast, but the most comprehensive project so far was launched by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra this January with sponsorship from Deutsche Bank. Under the tagline "Any Place, Any Time" their website offers live concert streaming for €9.90 per performance, or a season ticket and unlimited archive access for €89. So far the project has proved popular – around 2,500 people tuned into the first concert and more than 10,000 have now registered – but the jury is still out as to whether it marks the further democratisation of classical music or an added threat to its future.

The Berlin Philharmonic already had quite a reputation for trailblazing – in 1980 it became the first orchestra to produce a classical CD, under conductor Herbert von Karajan – and its current artistic director and chief conductor, Sir Simon Rattle, is a technophile. But as Rattle himself explained in a recent press release, the aim was not simply to pioneer a new concert-going experience but also vastly to increase the public's access to the orchestra, and to music in general: "We've been thinking over these last years: how will people want to receive art in their own houses? And we more and more thought that it was people just expecting [it] to be there – like water."

It was Olaf Maninger, the orchestra's principal cellist and head of classical music distribution, who came up with the idea three years ago and who has been the driving force behind the project. "It's no secret that it's not easy to broadcast classical music," he explains, "and I thought it would be a good idea to install a video studio in the Philharmonic concert hall and to broadcast concerts online without needing the support of television channels." Cutting out the middleman seems obvious but it is only recently that internet technology has been up to the job: each performance is captured by a complex system of microphones and high-definition, remote-control cameras, which zoom in on performers and scan the audience like one of Renoir's opera-box flâneurs.

With this degree of audio-visual sophistication there must be plenty of room for error and unevenness. Clearly the website cannot be held accountable for server glitches, or your ageing laptop expiring during a high-octane finale, and they recommend an on-site stream test before registration, but what about the quality of sound? Concert-goers are fastidious about acoustics, and sceptics might assume that digital coding would produce a rather sterile sound. In fact, it is superb: good headphones or speakers are essential but the streaming is far richer and sharper than conventional radio broadcasts.

Even more remarkable, perhaps, is the palpable sense of drama. Of course, anyone who has tuned into a live World Cup match or Grand Slam tennis final knows how well this can translate to screen, and when Rattle makes his opening bow the effect is comparable. In an age when most music is heard through MP3 players, where the listening experience is so often governed by the pause or shuffle reflex, live performance is unique because of its risk and unpredictability, and what Daniel Barenboim has described as "one timeness", and in this respect there is little difference between virtual and actual attendance.

Furthermore, there are no rustles and snuffles from neighbours, and there's no need to dress up (in fact, there's a subversive pleasure to be had from attending a concert in your pyjamas). In short, you can be thoroughly anti-social, and therein lies the problem: will people still support their local symphony orchestra if they can watch the Berlin Philharmonic in their own sitting-room? Maninger rejects such concerns, and denies that the digital concert hall is an attempt to replace or even replicate the traditional concert experience, but rather "a good compromise".

It's worth remembering that radio was once thought to pose a similar threat – in 1923 the redoubtable conductor Thomas Beecham predicted that concert halls would soon be deserted "if the wireless authorities are allowed to continue their devilish work" – and cynicism often greets new media. That other orchestras seem keen to follow suit must be some mark of approval; Chaz Jenkins, head of London Symphony Orchestra Live, confirms that it would pursue commercial online streaming if funding became available, and indeed it is Maninger's great hope that a global infrastructure will develop. "My vision for the future is that you look up Yo-Yo Ma or Anne-Sophie Mutter or the Berlin Phil online, you see they have a concert somewhere, you buy a virtual ticket and you sit down to watch."

Berlin Philharmonic Digital Concert Hall <http://dch.berliner-philharmoniker.de/>

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