

The logo consists of the word "AMATI" in a bold, sans-serif, uppercase font. The letters are dark grey and are centered within a light grey rectangular box with a thin border.

COMMENT: Dinosaurs, brainwashing and bunkum

Jessica Duchen has seen the phrase “Music shouldn’t be a Museum Culture” a few times too many...

17th April 2015

You know the notion that if you repeat something often enough it becomes true? Actually it doesn’t. It just means you stop thinking about what it means. You parrot it without any understanding of its implications, its realities or the fact that its repetition ad infinitum is a form of brainwashing.

The music world is full of little gems of brainwashed rubbish and the other day one jumped out at me one time too many, from the pages of a CD booklet: “Music shouldn’t be a museum culture.” I seem to see this idiotic phrase at least twice a week, often more, because for “music”, also read “dance”, “classical ballet”, “theatre” – anything, indeed, that involves live performance. It’s well-meant, suggesting that live performance needs constantly to stay alive and fresh, to change, to evolve, to breathe, to interact.

But have you ever paused to consider the implications of the statement? What exactly are we supposed to assume “museum culture” is? Doesn’t anyone ever go to a museum, for goodness’ sake?

The implications are horrendous: the preconception it suggests is that a museum is a Bad Thing. That it is dead, dusty, empty, dull, full of boring bits of something very old that nobody wants to see, sitting about in glass cases. If I were a museum director I’d be jolly cross about this.

The reality is rather different. Contrary to the music world’s auto-brainwash-speak, we could learn an enormous amount from good museums. Not least, museums above all other forms of display have successfully positioned art at the core of our culture, offering something that vast numbers of people know is something they want and need to see.

You have to book ages in advance for a good exhibition. The queues are massive, there are school parties from all over the world with notepads and information headphones, there are pushchairs and grannies and grandpas

and tourists and locals and people popping in in their lunch break. And I've yet to hear anybody call Rodin, Rembrandt or Rubens an "irrelevant dead white man".

Nobody dismisses 600 years of painting or pottery as "something for old people". Parents still take their children to museums, even if the kids are reluctant, because they want it to be something the young ones get used to doing; they'll then enjoy it when they're a bit bigger.

Go to a museum and you can see and learn amazing things from several millennia of human history and beyond. You can see the skeleton of a T-Rex or an exquisitely proportioned vase from ancient Greece, or evening gowns designed by Alexander McQueen. You can see portraits of the people who shaped history – the Tudor monarchs, Sir Thomas More, Shakespeare – or of the ordinary people who lived through the times they created. They seem to become alive in front of our eyes; you empathise with them through the artist, you understand their reality, the continuity of life of which we're a part.

Or you can see the handwritten manuscripts of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, WA Mozart, Claude Debussy. At the Elgar Birthplace Museum you can see not only the tiny cottage where the composer took his first breath, but his pipe and coat and papers; there's a little concert hall where you may also be able to hear his music. In Moscow last year I visited a small museum in Scriabin's home and saw his piano, his light-box (six coloured bulbs, with which to create Prometheus!), his evening suit (tiny). Pianists go there and play his music on his Bechstein.

Museums and galleries mostly provide their visitors with information galore: you can go round an exhibition with headphones and be guided as to what to look for where, or you can simply do it yourself and wander from exhibit to exhibit in your own time. Ample reading material will probably greet you along the way to tell the story of what you're seeing. Or there might be guided tours: groups that rove through a museum with a specialist to talk them through the contents and answer their questions.

You're free to take in as much or as little of all that as you like, but on the whole people probably don't go into a museum thinking "oh dear, I don't know anything about this, everyone says it's difficult and not for the likes of me, and I probably won't like it". You have the confidence that you'll be afforded the information you need as you go along, and that you'll come out knowing more than you did when you went in. Museums, besides, are doing an extremely good job of getting "footfall" through the door. While the permanent collections have a healthy trade free of charge, so do the special exhibitions, which visitors pay to see.

Meanwhile their curatorial task is desperately underrated. Museum curators decide how to display their material to best effect: the surroundings, the conditions, the lighting, the juxtapositions. They take very good care of their objects, which are irreplaceable and precious as can be, so require the right ambient conditions to keep them in the best possible shape for the largest

number of people to enjoy. (By the way, learning from all this goes much beyond simply dubbing artistic directors “curators” – a pretentious bit of arts-speak window-dressing that I’ve addressed in this column before now.)

And it’s not all dinosaurs. The skeletons have their place over at the Natural History Museum, and people adore them. But a visit to Tate Modern can leave you in awe not only of the brilliant architecture and design of the place itself, but the myriad styles, thoughts, approaches, philosophies, techniques and ideas that form its concatenation of art for our time.

So let’s stop dismissing “museum culture” as something undesirable, please. Give it a little thought. Have a look at the reality. Indeed, go to a halfway decent museum – and then see if you think it’s such a bad thing.