

## Hooked on classics: Rock stars who attempt the crossover

**Paul McCartney and Sting have been pilloried for experimenting outside the pop sphere. At least they're trying, says Jessica Duchen**

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How dare rock stars go classical? What is Sting doing, taking up a 16th-century gloombag named John Dowland? Why is Paul McCartney trying to write another oratorio? But Sting's *Songs from the Labyrinth*, with the Bosnian lutenist Edin Karamazov, and McCartney's *Ecce Cor Meum*, with full orchestra, chorus, boys' choir and soloists, are just the latest genre-bending albums to cause a furore.

That great divide, rock vs classical music, doesn't begin with the musicians. McCartney sang in a church choir as a child. Sting has been intrigued by Dowland for 25 years. Pop celebrities whose passion extends to classical music include Jon Lord of Deep Purple and Elvis Costello, who wrote for and recorded with the Brodsky Quartet and attended all of András Schiff's Schubert cycle at the Wigmore Hall a few years ago.

Plenty of young classical musicians love clubbing. Opera singers have been trying to sell "crossover" albums for years - although perhaps that has more to do with wanting to tap into a new market than with genuine conviction. But "true artists", if we can use such an expression, never stop exploring. They always want to push the boundaries, try new ideas, feed their creativity. So rock stars can and do go classical, from time to time. It's not, as yet, illegal.

So how do these two albums measure up? Sting's Dowland album is certainly unexpected: its total effect is immediate, insightful and atmospheric. It has even induced a couple of commentators to remark that it's a breath of fresh air compared with the prissy, prescriptive early music specialists who often bore us to tears in this repertoire.

Ensuring variety in an album probably comes as second nature to a rock star - for a classical musician to illustrate a programme of songs and lute solos with the composer's letters read against the accompaniment of birdsong might still be regarded as pretty radical, though it makes sense and sounds great. I'm less sure about the handful of multi-tracked vocals, since their timbre is a little too like The Beach Boys. At other times, though, the creative adaptations are absolutely beautiful: the last verse of "Come again, sweet love doth now invite"

begins unaccompanied, then moves gently across to the lute alone, as if fading into memory.

Sting's singing has its limitations: breathy pop articulations pepper the whole CD, the American twang is puzzling (Sting is a Geordie) and, if one had to judge him by classical standards, one might speculate about the long-term effect on his voice of decades spent belting into microphones in outside stadiums. All the same, the personality is powerful and he makes the songs his own with it, focusing on their passion, bitterness, inventiveness and sensitivity; and Karamazov's fabulous lute playing could win many new fans for the instrument.

Paul McCartney's *Ecce Cor Meum* (Behold My Heart) seems to be going over as his best classical work to date, after *Standing Stone* and the *Liverpool Oratorio* had mixed receptions. Again, I found it occasionally frustrating, but often extremely appealing. The melody of the second movement, "Gratia", had it been a Beatles anthem, might have hit the charts. *Ecce Cor Meum* is permeated by grief over the death of McCartney's first wife Linda; and it hits home.

It's hardly news that classical music shot itself in the foot when a whole stratum of composers lost touch with their audience sometime in the 1950s. Today, though, there's more diversity in contemporary music than ever before. But even now few classical concert-goers are willing to take a risk on the words "world premiere" because they're convinced they'll hate it. It's unlikely that McCartney's work could fix that perception single-handed - but this piece could prove to a large number of otherwise hesitant listeners that new works in a classical idiom can engage with them.

To be picky, *Ecce Cor Meum* doesn't always follow through emotionally or structurally. After deeply touching episodes (the start of the last movement, or the oboe solo in the Interlude), McCartney often breaks the mood with something altogether less satisfactory - a chirpy episode, or the bizarre organ solo in the middle of the last movement. Still, he's not the first composer to induce feelings of frustration: I sometimes experience similar tooth-grinding moments with Bruckner, who has a depressing tendency to lose the plot at what should have been his best moments.

As for the English choral tradition, it may not seem the most natural medium for McCartney, but this piece is better than some of what's been out there long-term, masquerading as good art because its composers happen to be: a) establishment-approved and b) dead.

There's a sadder side, inevitably, to all of this. Hundreds of early-music practitioners and impoverished, struggling contemporary composers are choking over the fact that Sting and McCartney attract such a large marketing budget and so much media attention. Why should an inspirational singer such as the counter-tenor Andreas Scholl be doomed to a smaller, specialised following for his lute song CD *A Musically Banquet* than Sting in similar repertoire? What price hard-won scholarly fidelity to early music performance practice when Sting sweeps the board for singing Dowland with pop inflections and an American accent? Why should there be more of a fuss over *Ecce Cor*

Meum as a new British choral work than, say, James MacMillan's brand-new Sun-Dogs, or Roxanna Panufnik's Westminster Mass of 1997?

Sour grapes aside, I'm willing to stick out my neck and say that whether or not you like the results, and whether or not it's fair, both Sting and McCartney have done something worthwhile. They've broken the mould; they've kept pushing the boundaries; and though the results may be patchy, in the main these albums work because they're fuelled by genuine creative drive. If Sting and McCartney can bring creativity, conviction and communication centre stage then, like it or loathe it, let them try.

*Sting's 'Songs from the Labyrinth' is out on Deutsche Grammophon; Paul McCartney's 'Ecce Cor Meum' is out on EMI Classics. 'Ecce Cor Meum' will be performed at the Royal Albert Hall, London SW2, on 3 November (020-7589 8212)*