

The music speaks

As the pianist plays Brahms, the composer's love letters are read aloud. Purists may be horrified by the idea, but it's hooking new audiences, and Jessica Duchen is all in favour

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This desperate declaration of love was written by the 21-year-old Johannes Brahms to Clara Schumann in 1854, describing his feelings by copying out an extract of *The Thousand and One Nights*. But how many concert-goers, appreciating performances of Brahms or Schumann, ever have time to discover this, buried as it is in a 600-page volume of the composer's letters? Now, however, there are other ways of bringing the history behind music to vivid life - on the concert platform itself.

When I accepted a commission from the pianist Lucy Parham to write a script entitled *Beloved Clara*, an evening telling the story of Brahms's intense friendship with Robert and Clara Schumann through their own words and music, I didn't yet know that we would be taking part in a new global trend. The story explores the stormy marriage of Schumann and Clara and their meeting with the young Brahms, the mental decline and death of Schumann and the complex relationship between Clara and Brahms. The enthusiastic audience at the Wigmore Hall premiere in October 2002 was a sign of things to come: *Beloved Clara* has what the thespian world calls "legs". Bookings are now arriving for 2006; more immediately, it will be performed at the Chelsea Festival on 20 June.

Today, increasing numbers of musicians seem to have a music-and-words project up their sleeves. The pianist Lars Vogt has been performing music and literature evenings with the leading German actors Klaus Maria Brandauer and Konrad Beikircher; the violinist Daniel Hope has also invented a number of projects with Brandauer, integrating music and words intimately. The cellist Raphael Wallfisch has a Bach programme scripted by the musicologist John Butt. And in Finland, the Turku Philharmonic has launched an evening called *Stravinsky Scandal*, recreating the notorious world premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* complete with audience rioting. The possibilities seem limitless, fertile and dynamic.

Lucy Parham came up with the idea for *Beloved Clara* through talking to audiences at her own recitals. "I always talk to the audience before playing, but I used to get carried away and find myself speaking for five minutes before playing Schumann," she explains. "Once, I read out a quote about the Schumann G minor Sonata, which Schumann addressed to Clara as 'One single cry of my heart for you, in which your theme appears in every possible form'. Afterwards, people told me this had added greatly to their appreciation of

the piece; the response was so strong that I realised it could be taken further. *Beloved Clara* has had the most positive response of any concert I've ever done. It's an extremely emotional story, and even if you know nothing about music, you can't help but be drawn in by the human content."

Audience appeal is key to this new genre: the elusive, new, younger audiences that the music world is desperate to attract simply love storytelling. The actor Malcolm Sinclair, who reads the words of Schumann and Brahms in *Beloved Clara*, remarks: "Storytelling is the most ancient form of art and that's still true today, when music and poetry have just about disappeared from our TV screens. People love being read to. And for someone like me who doesn't sing but loves music, it's extraordinary to be part of a musical performance. My first experience working with musicians was when I had to replace Meryl Streep at short notice, narrating *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Extracts of the play make more sense of the music, but to speak Oberon's words over that wonderful Mendelssohn score is overwhelming."

Not surprisingly, it is the younger generation of musicians who are most eager to develop this new form of music theatre. The violinist Daniel Hope, 29, who was awarded this year's Classical Brit for Best Young British Artist, has been collaborating extensively with Klaus Maria Brandauer. He has discovered that the results not only galvanise his own generation into hearing music they might otherwise avoid, but also add hugely to the possibilities of his repertoire.

"I have friends who wouldn't be seen dead at a classical concert," Hope remarks. "But they'll come to a Brandauer evening, which strikes them as being different and creative, with something going on, and then they'll like the music. The amazing thing is that you can put anything into that concert. You can play Schnittke, Kurtág or Ligeti and they will still enjoy it. It's absolutely possible to show people that this music is marvellous and "accessible" just by adding that visual, narrative element, without turning it into a circus and without detracting from the music in any way."

Hope and Brandauer's first project was entitled *War and Pieces*, centring on Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* but integrating readings from Goethe and the poetry of young Bosnians caught up in the Balkan conflict and even arranging Beethoven's *Egmont* Overture for the same musical forces as the Stravinsky. Next came a programme entitled *An Audience with Beethoven* for the Beaux Arts Trio (Hope is its violinist), which Hope wrote himself, advised at a distance by his father, the South African author Christopher Hope. "But for the premiere in Savannah earlier this year, Brandauer was ill with pneumonia," Hope recounts, "and the replacement actor we found at the last moment was... Mia Farrow! I had to rewrite the entire script in three hours so that she could play the role of Beethoven's housekeeper instead of Beethoven himself. She was magnificent."

The German pianist Lars Vogt has recently recorded his own latest music-and-words project for EMI: Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, its pieces interspersed with texts illuminating their content and philosophy, read by Konrad Beikircher. "We've tried to recreate this roller-coaster journey through the emotions in this exhibition," says Vogt. He has also worked with Brandauer: "We did a programme where he read from Thomas Mann's *Dr Faustus* and I

played Beethoven's late sonatas. Working with people such as Brandauer and Beikircher is, for me, a little like playing chamber music, with the same sense of give and take. And for the audience, when such programmes are well created, both sides help the understanding of the other."

Such ideas are being taken up with enthusiasm not only by musicians eager for new audiences but also by actors who are less than happy with the state of today's television content. The actor Joanna David, who stars with Sinclair in *Beloved Clara*, says: "A show like this can be a gem amid a wasteland of mediocre TV. There is virtually nothing shown today resembling the wonderful music documentaries that Ken Russell used to make. Giving these performances around the country, especially in places that don't have much cultural activity in general, the audience is proof of the hunger for it.

"I think the power of words and music together is extraordinary. It's shown in *Beloved Clara* because I, for one, have discovered all sorts of things about Brahms, Schumann and Clara that I didn't know before. To combine the power of their words and the power of their music is incredibly moving."

What is it that these projects can do that a plain concert or theatre evening cannot? Hope puts it succinctly: "It attacks you from all sides. A wonderful concert gives you all the emotions, but it's one-dimensional. Whereas if there is text as well, it's a double stimulation and the music takes on a different role. Audiences at our Beethoven concert heard the slow movement of the "Archduke" Trio with that incredibly moving Beethoven letter the Heiligenstadt Testament read over the top - the letter in which he talks about how, facing deafness, he considered suicide, but "my art held me back". They didn't know whether to listen to the music or the words, so they opened every edge of their ears to listen - and they told me it was an unbelievable experience. It takes charge of your whole being."

Unfortunately, music-and-words projects as yet have no widely recognised genre label and the combination of such hitherto nearly segregated areas can cause sorry confusion. Faced with a combination of speech and music, some decision-makers find it remarkably hard to understand that this is both, as opposed to neither. "Classy recital venues and music societies can be unwilling to take the risk of putting on a concert involving spoken word," says Parham. "But if they do take the plunge, it will pay off."

I think it will - and in many ways. The day after the premiere of *Beloved Clara*, my 24-year-old neighbour bounded up to tell me that although she had never heard a note of Brahms before the performance, she had just rushed out to buy her first CD of Brahms symphonies. That says it all.

'Beloved Clara', State Apartments, Royal Hospital, Chelsea, London SW3 (020-7881 5298), 2.30pm, 20 June