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Style notes: Classical conductors get a makeover

The staid world of classical music has been getting a makeover – starting with the conductors. Jessica Duchen calls the fashion police

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Once upon a time, you'd know exactly what to expect when you attended a classical concert, at least in visual terms. There'd be a largely male orchestra attired in white tie and tails, led by a matching conductor, and a soloist in much the same. But whether up on the podium, at the Steinway or among the orchestral ranks, the winds of change are blowing through the wardrobes. Conductors are just the latest to branch out from the snowy bow tie. When Daniele Gatti, the Royal Philharmonic's principal conductor since 1996, turned out in a black, round-collared Mao suit to conduct their Prom last week, it was a sign of the times.

Why now? Well, classical musicians are as aware as anyone of society's obsession with image. Attractive sponsorship opportunities sometimes materialise from designer brands keen for the classy endorsement of musical stars: Rolex has enlisted the likes of the handsome young conductor Gustavo Dudamel for its adverts, for example. Besides, the arrival of the 21st century has left many asking themselves why they are still dressing for the 19th.

Periodically a flurry of commentary damns traditional evening dress suits as stuffy, old-fashioned, off-putting, and so forth. It's taken for granted that women soloists should look elegant – since Anne-Sophie Mutter took to wearing exquisite strapless gowns to play violin concertos, it has become a rarity to see a female violin soloist in anything less, or indeed more. But a select few men are trying to catch up – with mixed results.

Among conductors, there's been a move towards a more egalitarian approach to the profession: some, it seems, wish to look as if they're divesting themselves of their excessive power. The simplest move is from white tie to black, as adopted the other week by Pierre Boulez at the Proms. Unfortunately, this can give the effect more of a head waiter than a great musician. Sir John Eliot Gardiner has been experimenting with garments such as the dark green Chinese velvet jacket with high neck and silken toggles in which he conducted at Covent Garden earlier this year. Christoph Eschenbach frequently wears a Nehru jacket plus a black shirt, a look that's becoming increasingly popular. Another trend is the plain black shirt and trousers. This has become the performing uniform of the men of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, as well as some of its conductors – David Robertson dressed thus to conduct them in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony at the Proms. Presumably someone deemed the look cooler than white DJs, but frankly it's a cop-out: plain black shirts just look drab, workaday and miserable. And it shows. "Someone, please – give these guys a pay rise, a holiday or something: anything to lift their spirits and make their concerts a little less depressing to attend," begged Tristan Jakob-Hoff, a blogger for the Proms.

But conductors, never mind orchestras, probably couldn't get away with some of the soloists' outfits. When Lang Lang, the Chinese superstar pianist, appears in gem-coloured silk jackets, it suits his natural showmanship, but the glitter on his pockets and lapels for his recital at the Royal Festival Hall last year verged on the Liberace-like. The French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet commissioned a costume from Vivienne Westwood in which to play Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue at the Last Night of the Proms a few years ago – but then his off-stage costumes are pretty bling, too.

There's less bling and more class for the heart-throb Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes, who credits his concert clothing as "graciously provided by Issey Miyake"; and the flamboyantly hirsute Russian cellist

Mischa Maisky once performed three Bach cello suites at the Wigmore Hall wearing a different billowing silk shirt for each work, their colours coordinated with the mood of the music.

Mysteriously, though, most men look terrific in evening dress; and it provides a vital ingredient often forgotten by those keen to kill off the penguin suit. Evgeny Kissin, the Russian virtuoso pianist, told me that putting on white tie and tails is part of his pre-performance preparation: it helps to create the necessary "sense of occasion".

There is one essential fashion accessory among today's conductors, though: a fine head of curly hair. It's the Simon Rattle effect; the conducting fraternity includes a host of baby Rattles with flowing locks atwizzle. Dudamel is a case in point, as is the London Philharmonic's Vladimir Jurowski; Stéphane Denève, who conducted Carmen at Glyndebourne this summer, boasts an enviable tower of ginger frizz; and Robin Ticciati, one of the youngest on the scene, looks almost like Rattle's little brother.

Every Trinny and Susannah fan knows that looking good means feeling good; and the better the musicians feel, the more that will communicate positively to the audience. The bottom line, though, is that clothing must not distract from the music. And if the performance is first-rate, nobody will give a damn what they're wearing anyway.

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