

Is Julian Lloyd Webber trying to grab the headlines with his improvised BBC broadcast?

Next week, the cellist will improvise classical music in the background of a live BBC bulletin

By Jessica Duchen
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You'd think that the news was depressing enough without adding the mournful tones of a cello. But audiences turning up at Birmingham's New Generations Arts Festival on 5 June can expect this and much more from a performance that turns several conventions upside-down, and not only musical ones. The ever-popular cellist Julian Lloyd Webber is joining forces with composer Michael Wolters and an ensemble of students from Birmingham Conservatoire to present *And Now, The News*: the musicians will effectively improvise their way through a 7pm live news broadcast from BBC4 relayed into the hall.

Lloyd Webber describes the project as a "one-off experiment" – a creative endeavour in which the broadcast effectively becomes part of a kind of multimedia installation, with the news reports providing a structure for the musical response. "The idea is that the cello will represent the newscaster," he explains.

Wolters has written pieces in a multitude of potentially appropriate moods, but the performers won't know which ones they'll play until the relevant information is fed through minutes before the broadcast, when Wolters will make the selection. After that, plenty of extemporisation will be required to fit sound to speech and image.

But can music and the news ever mix? Most of us watch the news to learn something about what's going on out there. Music deflects and divides concentration. However good one is at multitasking, it's impossible to listen to either music or words in detail when simultaneously trying to take in the other.

If the idea was to be promulgated on a regular basis, just imagine the scenario: a blast of Wagner whenever anyone mentions the Nazis, copious Copland hovering around the White House, and too much Tchaikovsky for images of Russia. Cleverly chosen pop songs with apposite words can and do add entertainment value to certain longer reports and a touch of black comedy to politics. But the dulcet tones of fat ladies singing probably wouldn't have lent any extra dimensions to the Crewe and Nantwich by-election result last week. On a darker note, adding music to the images of destruction from the Chinese earthquake and Burmese cyclone could simply be crass, belittling these vast human tragedies by effectively treating them like a feature film.

Yet music – and improvised music at that – was once standard accompaniment to the news. An entire breed of keyboard player came into its own in the 1920s, improvising sound for silent

films and newsreels in packed cinemas night after night. Among the musicians who earned their living this way for a while was the British composer John Foulds, the visionary maverick whose *World Requiem* was resuscitated after 81 years last November. Even after the arrival of the talkies, in 1940s Britain newsreel soundtracks still involved music – upbeat stuff such as the marches of Eric Coates – to help keep up morale during the Second World War.

And some of the most powerful music in history was written in response to world events. Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony started life as a tribute to Napoleon and was apparently to be entitled the "Bonaparte" Symphony – although when Napoleon crowned himself emperor, Beethoven tore up the dedication and declared his former hero a tyrant. Shostakovich's Symphony No 7 is a lengthy testament to the resilience of the human spirit and a tribute to the suffering of Leningrad under siege.

More recently, the popularity of Henryk Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, written in 1976, reflected the music's immense compassion for the Holocaust victim, Helena Wanda Blazusiakowna, whose words it includes; Krzysztof Penderecki wrote a harrowing *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*; and John Adams's *On the Transmigration of Souls*, a 30-minute choral work incorporating texts from the missing persons notices around New York after September 11, won the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2003. The same composer's opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*, dramatising the 1985 murder by Palestinian terrorists of an American Jewish cruise ship passenger, responded to reality on a larger musical scale and still provokes controversy for daring to show both sides of the story.

All these works, though, were created after the event: they have appropriate distance. Using the news itself as a tool for musical creation might easily become an exercise in questionable taste. Supposing the broadcast happens to involve a new natural disaster or high-level political resignation? Are there any circumstances in which Lloyd Webber would cancel the experiment?

"I don't know – there might be," he admits. He adds that he wouldn't be in favour of adding music regularly to the news: "You already have to endure a minute or so of bangs and crashes before the TV news begins and I find that really annoying. On the other hand, a number of films have been tremendously enhanced by music." He insists that this project remains valid and important. "I've always believed that classical music should be a living, breathing thing involved with contemporary life and culture, and this is part of that. It may work wonderfully well, it may not, but it has an experimental nature, and that's what makes it interesting."

Well, they can probably ditch the happy tracks straight away. The cello, chosen by Schumann, Elgar and Rachmaninov for their most plangent expressions of gloom, seems a sensible centrepiece in the current climate. Perhaps this plaintive instrument shadowing the newscaster's voice can soothe us through the prospect of economic crisis and political meltdown.

'And Now, The News', New Generation Arts Festival, Birmingham Town Hall (0121-780 3333), 5 June