

Mind the Bach: Classical music on the underground

As classical music is piped into 40 Tube stations to reduce antisocial behaviour, Jessica Duchen asks if we really want rush hour symphonies

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Trundling through the packed ticket hall at Vauxhall Tube station, I and several hundred other travellers recently found our ears filled with the strains of Mahler – to be precise, the slow movement of his Symphony No 1, a spoof funeral march based on "Frère Jacques". Whoever chose to pipe this through the station loudspeakers at 8.30 on a Monday morning must have a slightly twisted sense of humour.

Classical music has been part of Vauxhall station's way of life for some time now, but now it has been announced that Transport for London's scheme to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour by piping such music through stations has been so effective that it has been extended to 40 locations across the network, with more likely to follow.

The notion originally came from Canada – in Montreal, in the mid-1990s, an experiment was carried out to see whether classical music could clear away crowds of yobs who didn't happen to like it. The idea was first tested here outside supermarkets troubled by assembled hoodies, and on the Metro system in Tyne and Wear in 1997. Signs were that it did the trick, and Elm Park on the District Line became the first Tube station to try it in 2003 – a place where there was such a gang problem that train drivers were afraid to stop there. Within 18 months, robberies were cut by 33 per cent, assaults on staff by 25 per cent, and vandalism by 37 per cent as the voice of Pavarotti made troublemakers scarper.

Theories vary as to why it works. One is that it doesn't fit with antisocial youths' perception of cool; another that teenagers can hear high-frequency overtones that adults can't detect, which upset them (though music students of a similar age are evidently immune). As for the rest of us, when TfL did a survey of 700 commuters, "they overwhelmingly agreed that hearing classical music made them feel happy, less stressed and relaxed". It's also part of the

current conviction amid the powers that be that people need protection not from crime – which may have been reduced by the scheme but certainly hasn't been wiped out – but from the fear of it. Play them a little Beethoven and they may feel braver.

The Tube's 40-hour playlist, chosen by a subcontractor named Broadchart, consists of music mainly from the 18th and 19th centuries, some well known, some obscure, all of it tonal and tuneful. Most people seem to like it (disproving the common fallacy that classical music isn't popular). No doubt there's a piece to suit every situation: you could enjoy Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony when delayed due to overrunning engineering works; prepare for the marathon of walking up a broken escalator via Strauss's Alpine Symphony; or be comforted by any number of wintery pieces – Vivaldi's from The Four Seasons, Prokofiev's "Winter Fairy" from Cinderella, or Tchaikovsky's "Snowflake Waltz" from The Nutcracker, say – when faced with frozen points.

Of course, there have been groans, and justifiable ones, over the notion of reducing the great artistry of composers such as Handel, Brahms and Rachmaninov to mere ambient mood-music. On the one hand, it beats hearing the tinny thump-thump of other peoples' iPods, or their half of a mobile-phone conversation. But on the other, if the scheme is too successful, it might be extended to the point where everyone will encounter Bach and Beethoven almost every time they step out of their front doors – and if excessive repetition inures us to the sentiments of Schumann or the power of Puccini, how will they ever stir us again? They're supposed to move our souls, not our feet.

Whether or not familiarity does breed contempt, music can't help but alter mood, and that recognition is nothing new – rather, the use of music as public crime deterrent represents the rediscovery of an ancient wisdom and its appliance to a 21st-century situation. The Greeks, for example, recognised very well the degree to which music could affect human passions. "Music is a moral law," wrote Plato, around 300BC. "It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything."

In fact, in most eras of history – with the remarkable exception of the 20th century – the inherent properties of the vibrations set up by different musical intervals to inspire calm and stability or chaos and aggression have been acknowledged.

Thus, if calm and stability are alien to you, you probably won't be able to stand Mozart; and your average commuter will probably run a mile if assailed by gangsta rap or Stockhausen en route to the office. Not that hoodies are particularly likely to take to Stockhausen either.

Music to travel by

Mind the Gap: Haydn, "Surprise" Symphony

Change here: Steve Reich, Different Trains

Track repairs: Beethoven, "Hammerklavier" Sonata

Signal failure: Schumann, Blumenstück

Leaves on the line: Arnold Bax, November Woods

The wrong kind of snow: Liszt, Transcendental Study No 12, "Chasse-neige" ("Snow Plough")

Lines suspended: Palestrina, Missa Papae Marcelli

Seasonal breakdown: Mendelssohn, A Midsummer Night's Dream

Heading for a champagne party? Mozart, The Magic Flute

Braving Harrods sale? Eric Coates, the "Knightsbridge" march from the London Suite

Using the Heathrow Express? John Adams, Short Ride in a Fast Machine