

Don't roll over Beethoven

The Roundhouse is more famous for rock than symphonies, but it could be just the venue to build up a young classical fanbase, says Jessica Duchén

Monday, 18 January 2010

How to persuade young people to attend classical concerts is an issue that has troubled the music world for decades. Attempt after attempt has bitten the dust, leaving the largely over-50s demographic of classical audiences virtually unchanged, give or take a little marketing via Facebook.

Now a dynamic new series in Camden Town is set to break the mould. Reverb at the Roundhouse, featuring everything from Beethoven to cutting-edge new works, is bringing classical music into a venue that has a devoted following among young fans of the coolest rock and pop gigs.

Will the teens and twenty-somethings of north London be ready to sample Bach or experimental percussion? Marcus Davey, chief executive and artistic director of the Roundhouse, is certain they will. The Roundhouse runs programmes at its studios in which local youngsters explore music-making, broadcasting, film-making and music production. One day, offered a box at a Prom, Davey gave the seats to some of the Roundhouse teenagers who had never been to a classical concert. "They were absolutely blown away," Davey declares. "They said: 'You ever heard of this amazing Stravinsky bloke?' They loved the energy and the fantastic playing."

Concerts targeted at young people have tended to water-down classical music to make it "cool". Most teenagers see through such gimmicks straight away. "They know when they're being patronised," Davey says.

The Roundhouse is no stranger to classical performances: in the 1970s it hosted a series of contemporary-focused concerts by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Pierre Boulez, and the piano duo of Katia and Marielle Labèque made their London debut there. The Labèques are returning for Reverb.

One of the most exciting contributions comes from the London Contemporary Orchestra: launched in 2008, its players' average age is 25. "All of us are passionate about contemporary music and thrilled to devote so much attention to it," says the LCO violinist Davina Clarke.

The LCO's founders, conductor Hugh Brunt and violist Robert Ames, have a secret weapon: the chairman of their board is Simon Ambrose, the winner of *The Apprentice* in 2007. Ambrose developed a passion for contemporary music when he heard the works of Cage and Stockhausen at school. "I'd question whether classical music really is losing popularity," he says. "Many of our supporters and audience members see classical as just one part of a lively musical diet."

The LCO's adventurous programme for Reverb includes a new Concerto for Turntable by Shiva Feshareki, the UK premiere of John Cage's *Seventy-Four*, and Steve Reich's *Different Trains* with live film created by the youngsters of the Roundhouse Studios. More thrills are promised from the likes of the pianists Joanna MacGregor and Rolf Hind, and the Britten Sinfonia with the popular young American composer Nico Muhly.

And how will the big historical classics go across? The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment is bringing in its ground-breaking Night Shift concept. They'll perform Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* conducted by Vladimir Jurowski, with a band before and club night after provided by the Roundhouse Collective.

Has the Roundhouse solved the young audience problem at last? Ambrose says. "What's important is to be open-minded." Maybe that's the most crucial thing of all.

22-31 January (0844 482 8008; Roundhouse.org.uk)