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Classical music venues: Not for the faint-hearted

After passing out during the summer's hottest Prom, Jessica Duchen wonders why Britain is so short of venues for classical music that are comfortable

In the corridor outside door H, I was on the floor and a helpful usher was fetching the Royal Albert Hall medic. In the auditorium, the Prom from which I had extracted myself, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, was in full swing. I feared the emphasis might yet fall on the word "die".

Six thousand people in a Victorian bullring on a hot night: the Tube couldn't compete. No wonder I conked out, and I had only made it through the first hour of six. A colleague had spotted another fainter being hauled out of the performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony the night before.

Is it unreasonable to expect not to faint at the summer's most exciting Prom? Of course, it can happen to anyone at any time and from any cause. But audience expectations are rocketing and so is the temperature and our concert halls cannot keep up. A few years ago something was done to the Royal Albert Hall, at vast expense. I wish they would try again.

You may think classical music lovers are dinosaurs, but that doesn't mean we are happy to live in a swamp. I often feel that when concert halls are built or refurbished, the needs of the audience are the last things taken into account. Going to a concert can be like budget air travel: venues pack in as many seats as possible, skimp on the loos and ventilation and fill the foyer with outlets to make us buy stuff that we don't need.

Why can't we have venues in which we can see natural light; hear music, thanks to good acoustics; enjoy decent sight-lines; feel close to the performers even when we are far away; go to the loo without queuing for the whole interval; and, crucially, breathe? Why can't we have a little more room for our seats and somewhere to balance a glass of water - indeed, permission to take one inside? Why are glasses of liquid *de rigeur* for rock, pop and world-music gigs, yet when the same venues host a classical concert they come over all health-and-safetyish and ban drinks in the auditorium? In a hot hall, access to water is essential to health and safety. So is oxygen. Is it still impossible to make air-conditioning quiet enough to be compatible with music?

Obviously, all that would cost too much (except for the water) and we cannot expect any fine new halls to spring up any time soon. I will open something bubbly if the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the

Barbican are razed and the best architects and acousticians in the world are employed to start over again, but the bottle I'm putting aside could be worth a lot by the time that happens.

Refurbishing a hall costs millions and crackpot ideologies, commercial goals and listing restrictions can conspire against progress. At the Royal Opera House, despite a glitzy overhaul, the amphitheatre is still suited only to munchkins. The Royal Festival Hall is better for its recent brush-up but it will never have much more ambience than the nearby Waterloo station. At the Barbican the sound has been improved but there is no escaping the concrete. No matter how fine a performance is, I always cross the threshold with a sinking feeling, counting the hours until I can get out. If a venue is misconceived, it is almost impossible to put it right.

We can, partly, blame the Luftwaffe for the fact that London does not have a world-class concert hall. The much adored Queen's Hall, an Art Nouveau-era construction next to Oxford Circus, was destroyed in 1941. It seated 3,000 in an interior that was painted the colour of "the belly of a London mouse" and its acoustics were described as "perfect". Nevertheless, after the war a seriously duff decision not to rebuild it was taken. Instead a new hall, for the Festival of Britain, took shape in the then rather nothingish area of the South Bank.

At the risk of sounding desperately un-PC, I wish people would stop putting halls in areas that require regeneration, thinking that it is all it takes to do the job. Instead of dragging an area up, the halls are often dragged down. The better part of 50 years passed before the South Bank was transformed into a bustling hub of cafés and bookshops and it took investment in the surroundings to change it, not just the existence of its concert halls.

Kings Place, a state-of-the-art chamber-music venue that opened in central London in 2008, often struggles to fill its few hundred seats. It sports snazzy design and sound and has good facilities but its location, in Kings Cross, is a disaster. By contrast the Wigmore Hall, with which Kings Place should be competing, is a gorgeous space in a quality spot near Oxford Street in the West End, featuring the finest of chamber music and lieder. It will be 110 years old next year and it is so popular that often you cannot get in.

However, my favourite hall in the UK is not in London (the Wigmore comes second, thanks to stuffiness in several senses). It is the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester, which is designed to feel intimate despite its size and which has excellent acoustics. Symphony Hall in Birmingham is also superb - its acoustics were designed by the field-leading Artec Consultants Inc, from New York. However, it lacks ambience, despite nice wood features and some stunning musical paintings by Norman Perryman in the foyer. I would, of course, get along to these venues more often if the train companies could be persuaded to run services back to London after the concerts have finished.

There are alternatives, including tucked-away churches and adapted big houses, though it is sad that the music industry's rising costs have dealt death blows to countless local music clubs. However, a church near where I live in London stages a concert series involving excellent young soloists and chamber groups. Admittedly, All Saints cannot put on Meistersinger or borrow Plácido Domingo from Covent Garden. But some professional chamber music series attract audiences of around 30 to 40 and I have played to similar numbers in a friend's Victorian terraced house.

Perhaps David Cameron's "big society" and badly needed adjustments to the live music licensing laws will resuscitate local concert-going. Got a decent piano and a little space at home? Put on a concert. Young musicians are desperate for chances to perform. Invite neighbours; let them bring

food and drink and socialise with the musicians. It is not only a physical breath of fresh air that we need.

Though that would help.

For further reading: 'Performing Architecture: Opera Houses, Theatres and Concert Halls for the Twenty-First Century' by Michael Hammond (Merrell, £29.95). Order for £26.95 from the Independent Bookshop: 08430 600 030

World champions: The four best concert halls

Musikverein, Vienna

Theophil Hansen's "Golden Hall" is so nicknamed because it is just that: gold, wood and ornate 19th-century carving adorn this shoebox-shaped venue. But it is not only about visual beauty: two notes of Brahms or Mahler in the glowing embrace of its distinctive acoustic - where many of the two composers' works were heard for the first time - and you understand how Vienna became the capital of the musical universe.

Philharmonie, Berlin

Sit anywhere in this multi-layered marvel and you can hear the music clearly and warmly. Apparently placed deliberately close to the Berlin Wall, on its western side - one suspects for the purpose of gloating - it was highly controversial when it was built in the early 1960s, to a design by Hans Scharoun. But it was ahead of its time and it is now in the middle of bustling modern developments. A worthy home for the mighty Berlin Philharmonic, it is also a fine setting for chamber music.

Concert Hall, Culture and Congress Centre, Lucerne

Opened in 1998, this must be the most beautiful new hall, in design and location. The latter is simply staggering: the hall is surrounded by mountains and it was built literally *on* the lake, which laps gently into the foyer. Jean Nouvel's design (above right) brings the hall sharp and clear sound and plenty of light, featuring bright wood inside and terraces overlooking the gorgeous panorama outside. An evening here is one you will never forget.

Carnegie Hall, New York

Launched in 1891 by no less a conductor than Tchaikovsky, William Burnet Tuthill's Carnegie Hall has as many venerable associations as it has benefits to the concert-goer. It boasts a warm and resonant acoustic, despite some controversies that surrounded its refurbishment, and it has a sense of old-world occasion, bang in the heart of Manhattan. Despite its size, a sense of communication from stage to audience is well maintained. Those who play there love the experience too.