

The cellist who wants to shake up London with a classical mystery tour

The South Bank Centre's new artist-in-residence aims to fill every corner of the venue with new music, he tells Jessica Duchen



Hitting the right note: Oliver Coates

Friday, 21 January 2011

We need more live music at the Southbank Centre. That may sound odd, since the complex by the river is probably the most buzzy, music-filled site in the whole of London. But it's the view of Oliver Coates, a 20-something cellist who has scooped the post of artist-in-residence at the venue and is preparing to "cut his teeth" (his words) on a new venture called Harmonic Series, designed to bring unexpected sounds to unexpected corners of the Royal Festival Hall. So unexpected will they be, that the audience is being asked to assemble at the box office at 7.45pm, ready for Coates to lead them to a mystery location.

"Since the hall's refurbishment a few years ago, all these spaces have opened up," Coates enthuses. "Little intimate corners that you might not have noticed before, like the Blue Room, the Spirit Level, or the Pavilions on the sixth floor, which overlook London in a beautiful way." He set out to woo those that wield control over these areas, "By coaxing them," he says, "and saying: why don't we have more live music here?"

Serving as "curator" of the series, which is his brainchild, he can stage the concerts as he sees fit: "Despite austere budgeting, I have total autonomy, which is extremely rare in this universe." And as a jobbing cellist working with the London Sinfonietta and the Aurora Orchestra, in chamber groups and as a recitalist, he has been well placed to encounter a variety of music in wildly varying contexts. "Whenever I see something that makes me think 'Wow, that was amazing,' I try to 'bank' it," he says.

His eclectic Harmonic Series programmes are partly drawn from that musical piggy-bank. "It's a bit like a charm bracelet: each element is unique and good in its own right, but by the sheer act of connecting them up into an hour's performance, you're saying something about them through that juxtaposition."

Another aim is to "break down barriers" surrounding the perception of concerts, particularly those of contemporary music. Without wanting to sound cynical, I can't help noticing that over a couple of decades I've watched others set out to "break down barriers" in new music. Shouldn't they have gone by now? Why does Coates think this endeavour can work any better than previous efforts?

"I don't," he says, ever-pragmatic, "but I'm not sure what 'new music' means any more. There is one tradition that deliberately turns away from the audience, stubborn and impenetrable, and that's cool – people should do that, because its function is to tease at the edges all the time, setting a challenge. But we've had quite a long era of this, and it's got over itself a bit. There's some really beautiful new music being written now: the experiential aspect is being thought about.

"People care about music so much; it's so divisive – and it's all to do with who we are, our boundaries and the way we see our own identity," he suggests. "For some people classical music has to be the known, the safe and familiar, and for some it has to be the unfamiliar, the stimulating and the unexpected. So you have to be savvy in the way you put things together. But you should never just programme what you think people want to hear, otherwise you might as well just put on Britney Spears."

It's become relatively easy for large venues to attract full houses for what Coates terms "monolith" composers, like Ligeti, Xenakis and Stockhausen, "though it has taken several decades to learn how", he remarks. But the Harmonic Series concerts are altogether different: edgy, experimental stuff across a musical spectrum that is enhanced by immediacy and surprise.

The first programme, for instance, puts together songs written and performed by Mara Carlyle, whose voice is on the Ikea advert with 100 roving cats; virtuoso violin music by the

exciting young Dutch composer Michel van der Aa; a few minutes of performance art involving the combination of light projection and dance with Deng Dori and Meta Drcar; and music by Zemlinsky, a younger contemporary of Mahler.

And the culmination will be Streetwise Opera in *The Nightingale and the Rose* by Emily Hall, a miniature opera based on the short story by Oscar Wilde. It was originally created for film; Harmonic Series will offer it both in its screen version and in live performance. Streetwise Opera is an award-winning enterprise whose performers are all formerly homeless. Participating in music, song and opera helps them to rediscover a sense of self-worth.

Coates has already proved that he's not afraid to push at boundaries: at his Wigmore Hall debut recital last year, he programmed, alongside Rachmaninov and Britten, a new work with electronics for which he had to hire a PA system: "That was a bit mad for the Wigmore Hall," he jokes. But this was where Jude Kelly, artistic director of Southbank Centre, noticed him and responded, he thinks, "to the plurality of it all". His residency at the centre has followed on from that.

More Harmonic Series concerts are to follow in February, March and April, featuring among other artists is harpist Serafina Steer, the Aldeburgh Young Musicians collective and film director Netia Jones; the final event is part of the annual cross-genre Ether festival and is to star an artist currently as mysterious as the space he'll perform in: "An amazing guy," according to Coates, "who's a singer-songwriter and whose work is very trendy at the moment. But I can't reveal who it is." To say "watch this space" has never seemed more appropriate.

Harmonic Series, Southbank Centre, London SE1 (0844 875 0073;
www.southbankcentre.co.uk) 30 January