



Music lessons

The man who co-created Tate Modern is moving to the Royal Opera House. It's a chance for the classical world to learn a few new tricks, says Jessica Duchen

Friday 12 April 2013

When Alex Beard, the deputy director of the Tate, was appointed the new chief executive of the Royal Opera House, the musical world was taken by surprise. Critics had been eyeing candidates with more extensive, hands-on experience of opera to take over from Tony Hall. In fact, his insights from the spheres of art and museums could prove immensely valuable.

There's a cliché that “music mustn't be a museum culture”. Its implication is well-meaning: classical music should feel alive, recreated anew every time it is performed, not set reverentially on a shelf to collect dust. But you can't help wondering if anyone who uses this expression has actually been to Tate Modern, which Beard co-created with Nicholas Serota, or indeed any museum recently. Museums are doing rather well. In terms of tempting people in, providing a rewarding visit and, above all, making the arts they display an integral part of cultural consciousness, they're altogether in better shape than many classical music organisations.

There's no mistaking the huge demand for exhibitions at the UK's top galleries. You have to book way in advance; inside you'll join a varied throng of people of different ages and nationalities. The venues might offer lectures, study days, special packs for children. The forthcoming Vermeer and Music exhibition at the National Gallery in June is even drafting in the Academy of Ancient Music, to perform pieces that the artist's subjects might have played.

The Southbank Centre's year-long festival, The Rest is Noise, is employing an ethos close to this. It probes 20th-century composers' responses to politics, conflicts, art, literature, film, science and more. Talks, discussions, events, all are present; and the place has a tremendous buzz as a result.

There's a strong appetite for these events: concert-goers want to know more about the music they hear. Several weeks ago I gave a pre-concert talk at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, for an audience of 500. Yet such additions still remain the exception rather than the rule. I did that talk twice, because the CBSO likes to repeat an evening concert

the following afternoon. The very elderly and the very young are more likely to attend a matinée. Result: full hall times two.

Galleries have long been adjusting opening times to suit the demands of modern living; late-night openings attract an eager crowd. The vast majority of concerts, though, still take place stubbornly at 7.30pm: a time unfriendly to people's empty stomachs, demanding employers, baby-sitters and so forth. The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment has been addressing this in its own way, offering a variety of presentation times and styles, with encouraging results. Few others have bothered to try.

No self-respecting art gallery would tolerate a situation where its paintings can't be seen clearly, or where the lighting works against the picture rather than enhancing it. The equivalent in music is acoustics. Some newer venues like Symphony Hall, Birmingham, and The Sage, Gateshead, have excellent acoustics. But in London the revamped ambiances of both the Royal Festival Hall and the Barbican offer increased volume and clarity, yet lack any real bloom of warmth. It can feel akin to shining a bright spotlight onto a glass-fronted landscape.

Or take John Eliot Gardiner's Bach Marathon at the Royal Albert Hall on 1 April. This was a nine-hour celebration of the composer's works, featuring some of the world's finest performers. But the acoustics swallowed the oboes whole. And the heating wasn't working. Not only was everyone frozen but, worse, some of the delicate original instruments sounded badly affected by the cold. If anyone encountered such failings at a top art gallery – an ambience that affected the display in such an adverse way – it would be a national scandal. And the sandwiches ran out in the first interval.

UK museums have one final advantage over concerts: free entry. Concert ticket prices are modest compared to a West End musical – but they do cost, necessarily so, as there are musicians to pay. Free or low-cost large-scale performances are nevertheless essential to “accessibility”, when funding or sponsorship allows. The ongoing thrill of the Proms rests largely on the crowd of promenaders who pay just £5. And last year the LSO and its principal conductor, Valery Gergiev, performed *The Rite of Spring* free in Trafalgar Square and pulled an audience of some 10,000. They have scheduled another concert for late May.

This is progress, but there's room for more. Classical music deserves to reclaim the centre ground of British cultural life. It could do worse than take a cue from a “museum culture” that truly moves with the times.