

Review



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By Michael White, 10 January 2011

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies must remember that modern composers can be lazy too

You have to hand it to the Master of the Queen's Music: he may not be the firebrand he was as a youngster when his whole life seemed to be about delivering six of the best to the bourgeoisie (and otherwise scaring them into submission with ultra-abrasive scores like *Eight Songs for a Mad King*), but he doesn't give up. Not even at 76.

It emerged over the weekend that he now has conductors in his sights. He thinks they're lazy in their lack of readiness to knuckle down to the hard graft of performing new music, and he's saying so to whoever will listen. Which is his prerogative as MQM, and to some extent, of course, he's right. Learning new scores is hard work and a thankless task when it involves the kind of challenging musical language that audiences don't like and orchestral managements aren't going to ask for again. It becomes a duty: a chore undertaken out of a vague sense of responsibility and accordingly rationed.

But that said, there have always been conductors who build careers and make their living out of exploring the new – and, indeed, who do it with genuine dedication. If you want a good example, try Francois Xavier-Roth: a Frenchman with wide-ranging interests (some years ago he founded a period performance band) but who spends a lot of time working with the LSO on their Panufnik composers' scheme which, as I found out on Saturday, has now absorbed some 33 young composers into its continuing programme.

The idea is to give them the all-important chance of working with a full-scale symphony orchestra and hearing what their music sounds like – in reality rather than in their head or on a computer. There are intensive workshop sessions that also involve the composer Colin Matthews as a sort of mentor. And over the past few years of operation several scores have been air-lifted out of the workshop for public performance. Courtesy of M. Roth.

One interesting thing about the composers on the scheme is that not all of them are conservatoire-trained: they come from truly diverse backgrounds that in some cases edge into the worlds of jazz, pop and cabaret – which if nothing else means that the composers in question know something about the need to please an audience as opposed to merely

baffling it with academic process. And it was also interesting that the latest round of the scheme was celebrated with a party at LSO St Luke's on Saturday night that featured various of the participants doing cabaret turns. Listener-friendly, soulful, human, very much *not* Brian Ferneyhough.



None of this invalidates Max Davies' point: for every LSO Panufnik scheme and every Roth there are indeed dozens of orchestras and conductors who do damn all to nurture new music. But as Saturday night's party suggested, it does help when new musicians are prepared to meet their public half way. I'm not talking about compromise: simply a recognition that writing music isn't like writing a diary – unless you truly expect no one but yourself to take notice of it.

If you want an audience you have to win that audience. Too many composers of the past half century haven't been prepared to make the effort. But if and when they do, the conductors, orchestras and punters on whom they depend will come running.