

What can classical musicians learn from other arts to build audiences?...

The research that Professor John Sloboda and Dr. Biranda Ford presented at the conference paints a bleak picture for the future and sustainability of classical music in the West.

In 1992 the oldest age group attending classical events was between 35 and 45; in 2002 the oldest group was 45 to 55. It would appear to be fair a deduction that classical events have failed to attract new audiences, with the main audience age group having grown older. If classical events are to grip new generations of audiences and survive over the coming years then the information presented at conference would suggest significant changes need to be made. However, the statistics presented did not go into sufficient detail and could only identify a cause for concern offering little insight as to how to tackle the problem of what it is that classical events, and those involved with them, should attempt to do to gain new audiences. We also felt that while the content was interesting the manner of the presentation gave us the impression the speakers appeared less interested in the audience they were addressing; a little disheartening considering the paper attempted to tackle audience interaction and engagement.

Our personal reaction and speculation is that classical music stands aside from other non-classical genres, not just in the most obvious ways of structure and format, but that to a younger generation of music fans and aficionados there appears to be an assumption that it is somehow deserving of an audience without putting in the effort to attain one. For a young music listener it is a buyers' market with contemporary artists constantly approaching them on a multitude of platforms seeking their attention, attendance and affiliation. Classical music (in the broadest sense) is immediately on the back foot due to its lack of social standing with younger people; it is perceived as 'un-cool' and does not seem to be doing anything to change that perception.

Although the body of Prof Sloboda and Dr Ford's lecture focused on alternative approaches classical musicians can incorporate in the rehearsal and presentation of the music, as well as new interactions with fellow performers, actors and the audience, this is one part to play in classical music's social standing with young people. The responsibility to engage people with classical music is not solely that of the musicians. It is a responsibility that all those involved with classical music need to be aware of.

There is of course the question of whether young people are willing to be engaged by classical music and have a potential appetite for it. For those who are their passion and enthusiasm is clear when one considers the heavily over-subscribed courses and prevailing interest in educational institutions and music academies such as the Guildhall School.

Therefore, the issue arising is how does classical music begin to engage young people? While it would appear that Prof Sloboda and Dr Ford have yet to find an answer to this problematic question, we are left with the question, has anyone else? In search of an alternative perspective following the conference we consulted the contemporary Essex based rapper and spoken word performer Scroobius Pip to gain some enlightenment on this dilemma. Perhaps one way to consider this is summed up in Scroobius Pip's view; "music shouldn't come with an instruction manual of how you're meant to enjoy it, and how you're meant to take it in... music can and should be far more open."