This kaleidoscopic collection reflects on the multifaceted world of classical music as it advances through the twenty-first century. With insights drawn from leading composers, performers, academics, journalists, and arts administrators, special focus is placed on classical music’s defining traditions, challenges and contemporary scope. Innovative in structure and approach, the volume comprises two parts. The first provides detailed analyses of issues central to classical music in the present day, including diversity, governance, the identity and perception of classical music, and the challenges facing the achievement of financial stability in non-profit arts organizations. The second part offers case studies, from Miami to Seoul, of the innovative ways in which some arts organizations have responded to the challenges analyzed in the first part. Introductory material, as well as several of the essays, provide some preliminary thoughts about the impact of the crisis year 2020 on the world of classical music.

Classical Music: Contemporary Perspectives and Challenges will be a valuable and engaging resource for all readers interested in the development of the arts and classical music, especially academics, arts administrators and organizers, and classical music practitioners and audiences.

Edited by Michael Beckerman and Paul Boghossian
13. Attracting New Audiences at the BBC

Tom Service

This chapter was originally written at the very end of 2018. The COVID-19 pandemic has palpably changed the possibilities for the BBC’s performing groups and its festivals, and above all the BBC Proms, in 2020—and no doubt, beyond. However, the strategic direction of the corporation in terms of the ongoing necessity to attract younger audiences has not changed, and, if anything, the avenues that the BBC, and BBC Radio 3 in particular, have developed and explored, which are outlined in this chapter, have only become more urgent over the last eighteen months. The pandemic is a potentially existential threat to all live-music making organizations, but the BBC’s ensembles are relatively insulated from financial repercussions by the way they are currently funded through the license fee, so the conclusions presented here as of July 2020 continue to reflect the BBC’s strategy.

1. A Pessimistic Prognosis

The problem has always been staring at us, head-on. It’s just that we’ve scarcely acknowledged it. The word “classical” has a congeries of problematic associations that have accreted over centuries and are still employed across contemporary media to define an art form that has self-consciously manufactured the image that this music is better, greater, and more transcendent than we, its humble audiences, will ever be.

1 The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in this chapter belong solely to the author, and not to the author’s employer, organization, committee, or other group or individual.

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The “classical”—as aesthetic and as lifestyle—has been commodified, re-packaged, and re-distributed across the physical spaces of concert halls and the digital landscapes where most of the consumption of this music takes place to shore up these associations of artistic exclusivity and social and economic elitism.

The pre-history of how we got here might be sketched as follows: the growth of bourgeois audiences and institutions in the Western world, and the concomitant shrinking of the repertoire to an officially-sponsored canon; made even more “official” because the offices of who chose what and when for admission to the classical music Parnassus have always been deliberately hidden by an ideology claiming that the values of the “great” will always win out over the temporal, so the self-perpetuating diminishment of the canon continues. The increasing expense of keeping the vast institutions of orchestras and opera houses afloat, and the consequent inflation of ticket prices charged for admission, mean that the associations of the “classical” and “this isn’t for you” have been allowed to atrophy to the point where no amount of musical education initiatives or well-meaning outreach projects can overturn the one-way tide of elitist-ist reception history.

The “classical” is fighting a battle that it is doomed to lose, and its losses—of listeners, of engagement, of a place in the popular consciousness—are felt especially sharply where they matter the most, in the hearts and minds and above all, the time, of today’s generation of under-thirty-five year-olds. If this age group continues not to do what it already isn’t doing—going to classical concerts, listening to classical radio stations, learning and playing instruments—classical music’s shelf life is short. Will the last orchestra to leave please turn the lights out, when the end finally comes, in around thirty years or so?

Or so a pessimistic cliché of a state of the art form might run. It’s a situation that finds support in a culture in which (in the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in the world) classical music is played in the entrance halls of tubes, metros, and undergrounds as cultural crowd control: the idea is to soothe the furrowed brows of commuters, and to ensure that groups of people don’t congregate there, such is the unbearable torment of having to put up with a litany of terminally un-hip canned classical tracks, played on an ever-changing loop of background music banality—Berlioz, Beethoven, Mozart, Stravinsky, all
reduced to a one-size-fits-all association of classical irrelevance, at best, and malicious social engineering, at worst.

In British culture, the freight of responsibility and opportunity to engage with—and to change—this crisis in the connection between young audiences and classical music is felt by all of its major stakeholders: by its orchestras, opera houses, and above all, by the single biggest employer of orchestral musicians and commissioner of new music in the country, the BBC. Through its exposure of classical music via a variety of platforms—TV, online, and radio stations (especially BBC Radio 3, for whom the author is employed as a presenter)—the BBC is facing the challenges of the future of classical music not only by reflecting and broadcasting what’s happening in the country, but shaping what that future might look and sound like, in the scope of its programming, its broadcast schedules, its ever-increasing roster of online content, from podcasts to social media, and its educational initiatives. At the heart of these projects is a fundamental question: how can audiences aged thirty-five and under engage more meaningfully in the BBC’s classical output, and by extension, in classical music in general? The answers the corporation has found so far, and its ideas for future lines of development, some of which this chapter outlines, reveal a set of concerns and possible solutions that may offer resonant models for others to learn from.

2. The BBC’s Existential Challenge

Before outlining the scope of the challenge that the BBC, and Radio 3 in particular, is addressing, there are some signs that the Cassandran pessimism of our assessment above isn’t as watertight as it seems. In a survey carried out by YouGov for the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, published in 2019, the category of “classical/orchestral” was the most popular genre that young people and students wanted to learn more about and participate in, in addition to its growing popularity across streaming platforms (RPO, 2019: 5, 11).

This does not suggest there can be any complacency around the idea that because just over a quarter of a sample of young people are in some way enthusiastic about classical music that the problem of the culture’s relationship with the mainstream is somehow solved.
But these findings could demonstrate that the cultural work that has gone into creating the firewall between the “classical” and the rest of the musical world has not—fortunately—been as successful as our pessimistic prognosis suggests. As well as the popularity of classical music on mood-based playlists and streaming in general, there is the long-overdue acknowledgement of the decades-long history of classical and orchestral styles in the increasingly sophisticated soundtracks to video games. Gaming is an art form that under-thirty-fives spend more time consuming than any other generation in history, which opens up new opportunities for music as a whole, for everything from live concert experiences to broadcasts of music composed for games such as the *Dragon Quest* series to *Final Fantasy* and *The Legend of Zelda*. One important symbol of this representation is the video-game composer Jessica Curry’s recent show *High Score* on Classic FM, Radio 3’s major commercial competitor—with consistently more than twice as many listeners, over five million as opposed to Radio 3’s two million, as an average of recent RAJAR listening figures (RAJAR, 2020). The first series of *High Score* was the most downloaded show in Classic FM’s history (BBC Radio 3 subsequently commissioned Curry for a series on their network, *Sound of Gaming*, in 2019 and 2020).

The possible erosion of those associations of the “classical” and the “orchestral” with exclusivism and elitism is one of the most powerful pieces of potential evidence that could secure the future of the “classical” in the decades to come. But it’s worth noting that hasn’t only come about through the work of the major performing institutions themselves, but from the ground up, from what composers are writing, what gamers and cinema audiences are hearing, the samples that pop artists are using, and the innovations that broadcasters and music streaming services are developing and leading—or beginning to catch up with.

How the BBC might use these possibilities is our question for this chapter, but the conversations around how the BBC deals with the challenges of the classical need to be placed in a wider context about how under-thirty-fives are engaging, or not engaging, with BBC content as a whole. As the landscapes of TV and film become increasingly identified with the rise of streaming and subscription services like Netflix and YouTube, and given how much more time than their elders the under-thirty-fives are known to spend accessing content that does
not originate with the BBC, their loyalty and sense of ownership of the BBC’s brand is in a state of transition.\footnote{For the BBC's assessment of the challenge of these changes, see Hall (2018).}

As the BBC is financed by a government-agreed Charter (which is next due to be ratified in 2026), and is paid for by the direct imposition of a license fee upon anyone in the country who uses its television services (either through a TV or watching live broadcasts online), the values of trust and the sense that the BBC speaks to the British people in a unique way could be under threat unlike ever before if its future audiences no longer identify its content as inherently more valuable, its news more trustworthy, its dramas and music programming more enticing, than its competitors. The decline in rates of engagement shows that just such a moment may be ahead, were it not for the launch of projects designed specifically to appeal to the under-thirty-fives.

At the end of 2018, the BBC launched BBC Sounds, an app in which all of its audio content has been made available, from live radio to podcasts to programmes that are available in perpetuity for audiences based in the UK, and music shows limited to a thirty-day catch up period, thanks to rights agreements with record companies and the music industry. BBC Sounds was designed to replace the successful iPlayer Radio app, where this content was previously accessible, which closed in September 2019.

Curated playlists—such as the classical-based “Mindful Mix” playlist that was the most downloaded collection when the Sounds app launched at the end of November 2018, proving more popular than playlists of genres of pop and rock, according to the BBC’s internal assessments—are central to the way that Sounds seeks to occupy territory that comparable playlists on Spotify have proved successful in introducing and owning. On Spotify, mood-based or lifestyle-based playlists, organised not by genre but by emotional or temporal states (a random handful of Spotify playlists, at the same time BBC Sounds launched, included: “Classical Lullabies,” “Relaxing Classical,” “Morning Classical,” “Late-Night Synths and Strings”) are downloaded and streamed tens of millions of times.

Identifying this trend, the BBC seeks to own a piece of that increasingly popular digital space. It has competitors not only in the internationally available streaming services, but in the shape of the Global Player app,
launched shortly after BBC Sounds. Global is one of the main commercial competitors for the BBC Radio in the UK, and the app repackages the content of Classic FM into playlists (as well as the output of Global’s other stations, such as LBC, Heart, and Capital). The BBC’s strategic decision was to make the most of their curatorial distinctiveness, given the fact that, unlike Spotify, which has access to its music in perpetuity, their rights to the music they play is dependent upon those tracks having been broadcast on their network in the last thirty days. If the BBC can’t compete with permanent access to the whole history of recorded music, in their presenters and the long-running successes of their programmes, they do have a trusted curatorial expertise, a resource that Sounds plans to mine. It is early days for BBC Sounds, but the future of the BBC as a major player in the increasingly crowded marketplaces of digital and streamed music is staked on its success.

Yet despite the innovations around downloadable playlists, the way that individual programmes are turned into podcasts online after their broadcast, and the realities of gradually declining audiences for the live broadcasts themselves, it remains the case for BBC radio in general and for Radio 3 in particular that the majority of its listeners are still found for linear, real-time listening. The necessity of launching Sounds comes as an answer to a potential future in which audiences for radio as a whole continue to age and dwindle (a version of the same audience problem that classical music cultures all over the world face). Given that Radio 3’s audience is the smallest and oldest of any of the major BBC networks, this is a special challenge for its future.

3. The BBC’s Response: Radio 3

Among other initiatives, Alan Davey, Controller of Radio 3 since 2015, has launched an approach to format and content that is promoted as “Slow Radio”. Developing ideas that were first explored on Slow TV shows—single shots of canal boats on trips lasting for a whole day of broadcasting, long-form visualizations of the natural world, etc.—Slow Radio presents extended radiophonic meditations, performances, and experiences. These include programmes such as the writer Horatio Clare embarking on journeys by foot in Herefordshire (Sound Walk), or retracing Bach’s pilgrimage to visit Buxtehude in Lübeck (Bach
Walks). These programmes are conceived and presented as whole-night broadcasts of the sounds of nature along the walk, interwoven with Clare’s occasional commentary, and the sounds of his feet and body in the landscape, along with a playlist of appropriate and quirkily surprising pieces of music. For Davey, the point about Slow Radio is to associate Radio 3 with a species of listening that’s an increasingly rare commodity in today’s world, and the marketing and messaging about Slow Radio highlights this idea: Slow Radio is “an antidote to today’s frenzied world. Step back, let go, immerse yourself: it’s time to go slow,” as the strapline on the Slow Radio portal on the Radio 3 website describes it.

It’s an approach that is designed to brand Radio 3 as a place associated with broadcast innovation, and to act as a gateway into a more intense way of listening. It’s not only the long-form broadcasts, since the Slow Radio ethos is now heard in regular appearances of unfiltered sounds of nature in shorter segments—birdsong, landscape, weather—as part of the regular programming of other strands, from Breakfast to the network’s contemporary music show. “Listening to these sounds,” Davey says, “is a way of getting people used to the idea of listening to longer pieces of classical music” (Davey, 2018a).

Some of Slow Radio’s messaging puts it in line with the practices of mood-based playlists: there’s a connection, at least in principle, between the idea of an “antidote to today’s frenzied world,” and something like Spotify’s “Peaceful Choral Music” playlist; their soundworlds are completely different, but the idea of classical as a place to escape the stresses and traumas of daily life is common to both.

But while Slow Radio and Mindfulness playlists have proved successful in terms of BBC Sounds and of Radio 3’s brand identity, Davey acknowledges that there could be a problematic future if classical music is only connected with a type of listening, or with emotional and lifestyle characteristics, which are heavily associated with the relaxing, the soporific, or the somnolent. Mind you, that very somnolence can be a positive, in terms of public profile and broadcast possibility: Max Richter’s Sleep was first broadcast on Radio 3 in 2015 from midnight on the 28th of September, a Guinness World Record-beating program in terms of the length of a single piece and performance, and music designed by its composer to allow its listeners to drift in and out of
consciousness: eight hours of music created to be simultaneously listened to and not listened to. Davey feels that the balance between Radio 3’s playlists (every day on the drivetime *In Tune* show, a half-hour long, music-only mixtape is broadcast, often themed around single ideas, moods, or emotions) and the uniquely challenging and in-depth content it also presents—its new music, its discussion programmes, its concerts—means that Mindfulness and Slow Radio can both be gateway experiences that can lead to deeper relationship with classical music and its repertoires. Having experienced the slow and mindful, having been encouraged to listen, Radio 3 wants its listeners—and its younger audience in particular—to discover the shocking, the new, and the visceral, to experience classical music as something that makes you listen intently as opposed to creating a background noise of mood-enhancement.

That marks a clear strategic difference between Radio 3’s priorities and those of its main commercial competitor, Classic FM, and the streaming services that BBC Sounds is designed to complement. Where the essential rationale behind those networks, their on-demand playlists, and their social media presence, is to maximize the number of listeners, clicks, and engagement with content in order to satisfy the needs of advertisers and the market, Radio 3’s playlists, its increasing roster of podcasts, and its own online resources have a superficially similar but radically distinctive policy. The BBC and Radio 3’s endgame is about deepening the journeys of discovery that any listener can embark upon. These are geared not towards a mass diversity of sameness—the goal of recommended playlists on Spotify and elsewhere—but towards a series of fractal connections that will lead you towards musics and repertoires you may not have known before. That should mean exploring corners of the musical universe—new music, musical cultures from all over the world, early music, less familiar orchestral repertoire—that the BBC represents in ways that none of its competitors can, thanks to the license fee. The principle makes sense: the question of how these journeys are brought to individual listeners through the operation of the music- and audio-recommending algorithms of BBC Sounds will be proven in the years to come.
4. Radio 3’s Performance Possibilities

But Radio 3’s possibilities and opportunities extend beyond the broadcast, the podcast, or the playlist. The ensembles directly employed and created by the BBC (its five orchestras: the BBC Symphony, BBC Philharmonic, BBC Scottish Symphony, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, BBC Concert Orchestra, as well as the BBC Singers, Britain’s only professional full-time professional chamber choir) represent the single largest roster of orchestral musicians whose music-making is overseen by a single corporation in the UK. Their live and pre-recorded concerts are vital to the audiences in their home concert halls from Glasgow to Cardiff and to the broadcast schedules of Radio 3 as network. In addition, the BBC Orchestras perform more BBC Proms concerts at the Royal Albert Hall than any other groups. Across live concerts and broadcasts, they are the most frequently heard orchestras in the country (although Radio 3 also has broadcast partnerships with all of the country’s major orchestras) and have the greatest potential to offer new visions of how an orchestra might relate to all of its listeners, from concert halls to on-line. Thanks to the BBC’s funding arrangements, there is a chance for the BBC to go further than other ensembles in terms of experimentation not only with programming (collectively, the BBC orchestras perform more commissions and a higher proportion of new music than comparable ensembles) but also with formats, function, and future opportunities.

These individual projects include the BBC Philharmonic’s Red Brick Sessions, taking the orchestra to sites associated with the industrial past of the North-West of England, putting the orchestra in disused warehouses and factories, creating site-specific experiences in which a piece is opened up and explained in the first half through presented discussion and exploration before being played complete in the second. Another of the Philharmonic’s initiatives, Philharmonic Lab, encourages audience interaction through technology, and the orchestra wants listeners to keep their phones switched on during performances to download live program notes that change and update during the course of the concert.

The BBC has a long history developing the principle of explanation of musical works through long-running programs such as Discovering Music on Radio 3, but today’s world offers new ways of achieving a
similar engagement through different means. As well as the BBC’s own programmes, recent collaborations between Aurora Orchestra and the Proms, in the 2015, 2016, and 2017 seasons, featured memorized performances that were preceded by on-stage explorations of symphonies by Mozart, Beethoven, and Shostakovich. The Proms has proved a catalyst in recent seasons in taking concerts out of the Royal Albert Hall to regional venues and locations such as a car-park in Peckham on South East London. In Peckham, the Multi-Story Orchestra’s concerts for the communities of Peckham, including groups of schoolchildren not only in the audience but performing as part of the Prom, reached exponentially more listeners thanks to their broadcasts as part of the 2016 and 2017 seasons, with concerts that included works by Steve Reich and John Adams. That’s another way in which the BBC catalyzes work designed to engage younger audiences, by working in partnership with innovative, project-based orchestras like Aurora and Multi-Story to enhance the reach and power of their concerts across broadcast on-air and on-line.

The BBC’s most ambitious music education project is its ongoing Ten Pieces project, which began in 2014, in which films, audio, and online resources about a wide range of short pieces of classical music—such as excerpts from Holst’s *The Planets* and Verdi’s *Requiem*, as well as new works by Kerry Andrew and Gabriel Prokofiev—are made available to every primary school in the country, for pupils aged 7–14 and their teachers (corresponding to Key Stages 1–3 in the educational system of England, and the First and Second Level in the Scottish education system, the period in which music is a statutory part of the National Curriculum). Ten Pieces’ multi-dimensional realizations have left a permanent legacy of content that allows teachers to introduce these experiences to their classrooms through freely available lesson plans and other resources. The project was the result of a series of partnerships that connected the BBC’s music and education offers with national institutions like the Association of British Orchestras and the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, and the Music Hubs who deliver music education across the country. Ten Pieces also took over individual Proms concerts, and lavishly produced films of the pieces, performed by BBC Orchestras, were shown in cinemas. While Ten Pieces is a classical music-focused, the participation of programmes and presenters from
the BBC’s internationally popular CBeebies channel ensured a high level of visibility and take-up from schools all over the country, and its resources are updated and available in perpetuity.

But the most ambitious opportunity for the BBC Orchestras in the future is the chance to re-site the BBC Symphony Orchestra in a new home in East London, on the former site of the 2012 Olympics, at the heart of a suite of studios, replacing the Maida Vale recording studios that have been the home of the orchestra since 1934. As Davey said in a speech given at the end of 2018 (Davey, 2018b), the idea is to reanimate Ernest Fleischmann’s concept of the orchestra as a “community of musicians” in ways that live up to that aspiration for the twenty-first century, to make the most of the new sets of possibilities that digital technology can unlock for new audiences and across genres undreamt of when Fleischmann outlined his vision in the 1960s.

The potential program around the building, which would open in the early 2020s, is to be embedded as no BBC orchestra has been before with the needs of the London borough where the studios will be situated, Newham. Schools and schoolchildren will be part of the orchestra’s work, to realize Newham Council’s stated ambition to embody the ideals of “Every Child a Musician”. As Davey says, “This area of east London is one of the poorest, most diverse, and youngest populations in the UK. The aim is to use the move to reinvent the role of a classical music ensemble, working with creative partners including colleagues involved in Rock and Pop and other art forms [...] We would be able to invite schools in for learning sessions with musicians in the studio itself—something we can’t do with our current facility—and also to experience rehearsals and bespoke concerts from smaller ensembles as well as the main ensembles. Added to this will be work in schools, with ensembles playing there, and using the BBC’s Ten Pieces and digital resources as a backbone” (Davey, 2018b). Collaborations with the creative partners who will also be in the new studios—Sadlers Wells Dance Company, the London College of Fashion, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and University College London—offer another creative horizon for new engagements with younger audiences, all built around a central notion of how the BBC’s salaried musicians can be useful to their immediate communities of schoolchildren, Music Hubs, and audiences, alongside their concerts, broadcasts, and Proms.
5. The BBC’s Part in the Future of Classical Music

To summarise the BBC’s current position: this work is being carried out in at least three main ways. Firstly, the BBC is competing with the largest commercial providers of playlists and streaming content on their terms, to make sure the BBC’s voice and distinctively adventurous ambitions for the development of listening are reaching the largest number of under-thirty-fives as possible, through the BBC Sounds app, the inclusion of Slow Radio as part of Radio 3’s schedules, the development of bespoke podcasts, and the offering of further journeys of discovery based on the BBC’s uniquely diverse archive. Secondly, the BBC is developing new formats of programmes, broadcasts, and concerts, to serve equally their audiences online and those attending and experiencing their orchestras in concert halls from factories in the North-West of England, new locations in the East End of London to the Royal Albert Hall. And thirdly, there is the BBC’s ongoing commitment to educational projects, from the largest scale of Ten Pieces and its national reach, to the smallest but arguably most profound scale of individual encounters with musicians in the communities that the orchestras and ensembles serve.

For all their innovation, none of these BBC projects is happening in isolation in the UK, as orchestras all over the country continue to promote the education and outreach projects the country has pioneered and developed over the last forty years. However, as the biggest employer and sponsor of orchestral culture in the country, and as the public service broadcaster of classical music and its cultures, the BBC’s projects have the greatest potential impact in creating the participative engagement with classical music that is the most meaningful way of securing the art form’s future.

The BBC has assessed the state of the challenge, as the foundation of BBC Sounds shows and as the aspiration for a new model orchestra in the East of London demonstrates. The answers these and other schemes provide will not only be a passive reflector of the future place of orchestral and classical music in the cultural life of the UK, but will continue to shape it. There has never been a time when more is at stake, or when there is so much opportunity. The next decade of the BBC’s classical music output is, arguably, the most significant in its history in
the ongoing story of the corporation’s relationship with and promotion of the art-form.

At the BBC, the clichéd pessimism that opened this chapter has been replaced by a clear-sighted analysis of the problems that a diminishing and aging audience presents. The optimism will come once it is clearer how the BBC’s projects are bearing fruit in the deeper engagement and participation of younger generations in classical music. That result will be crucial for the UK’s musical life.

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