

HERE and now

THE LONDON CONTEMPORARY ORCHESTRA IS DETERMINED TO BRING NEW MUSIC TO THE FOREFRONT OF THE CAPITAL'S CULTURAL SCENE, AS **CLAIRE JACKSON** DISCOVERS

Contemporary classical music is like Marmite – forever branded with an altogether undesired you-either-love-it-or-you-hate-it bumper sticker. The genre is frequently tarnished with oversimplified generalisations; people often say that the music is ‘too dissonant’, or too complex for the audience to ‘get’. This is to do the discerning listener a disservice, for although there are plenty of discordant, difficult and theory-reliant pieces, there are also numerous intricate, beautiful and moving works.

One group that is opening itself up to the varying levels of modern classical is the London Contemporary Orchestra (LCO); a young ensemble headed up by artistic directors Robert Ames and Hugh Brunt, the latter of

whom also doubles as principal conductor. The duo wants to promote fresh and exciting music to a wide range of listeners who might not otherwise engage with new sounds, as well as giving under-the-radar composers a canvas upon which to paint.

What is the LCO?

Robert: The LCO draws together London's brightest young talent to explore and promote new music of the highest standard to an increasingly wide audience.

Can you give some examples of the type of music/composers you support?

Hugh: We work with a broad cross-section of musical styles, genres and art forms, for example, collaborating

with the likes of Mark-Anthony Turnage, Matmos, choreographer Darren Johnston, United Visual Artists and Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead. We also aim to provide a platform for up-and-coming composers through commissioning new works. The next young composer we're looking forward to working with is Shiva Feshareki, performing her turntable concerto alongside music from Steve Reich, Biosphere and John Cage at the Roundhouse in January 2010.

How do you think contemporary music is commonly perceived?

Hugh: I suppose at one end of the spectrum it is perceived as cold, difficult and alienating; at the other, stimulating and engaging. Either can be justified – there's a lot of affected

music that gets written, as well as some truly beautiful and original stuff.

Robert: I think people's views on contemporary music are changing for the better. And with the recent surge of fusion projects and the presentation of these kinds of events in less conventional venues, it's becoming increasingly difficult to define exactly what ‘classical’ contemporary music means nowadays.

Do you think classical music needs to modernise?

Hugh: Not really. I don't think it's something that can be forced. You see a lot of awkward crossover collaborations where musical styles are diluted rather than enhanced as a result. Younger audiences know the difference between being patronised and being challenged.

**'YOUNGER AUDIENCES KNOW
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING
PATRONISED AND BEING CHALLENGED'**

Robert: While it's important to reach out to as many people as possible through classical music and present an accessible face, it's dangerous to try and be all things at all times.

What are you doing to broaden your audience's horizons?

Robert: Presenting the right mix of 20th-/21st-century works with new commissions and collaborations, and staging events where the audience can be closer to the performance in a less stuffy environment.

You perform at LSO St Luke's (an Anglican church in Islington) – is there a paradox to be found in performing modern music in a historical building, or do you feel a union between arts old and new?

Hugh: I can't think of many venues in London that don't in some way have historical connections. We also play at the Roundhouse and Village Underground in Shoreditch – both Victorian buildings, a train engine shed and warehouse respectively. Be it venues or programmes, I think threads with the past are vital when dealing with contemporary music.

Is there enough support for contemporary classical music?

Hugh: In some ways yes, but [that support is] perhaps not always going to the right projects. Some of the fringe organisations where the real creative and interesting work is being done deserve greater support. Having said that, if we've learnt anything from setting up an

orchestra in this climate, it's that in many cases the leaner the budget, the more focussed the project and rewarding the outcome.

In terms of LCO, we receive crucial support from the likes of the PRS Foundation and Britten-Pears Foundation, as well as backing from a circle of founder-patrons.

Without the generosity of philanthropists, the contemporary music scene in the UK would be very different.

What do you do/where do you go if you need to feel inspired?

Hugh: Tate Modern.

Robert: I spend an evening with a great group of composer friends listening to loads of music with some good whisky.

What are your most played tracks on your iPod?

Hugh: Beirut, Nick Drake and the choral music of Nicholas Ludford – arguably some of the most 'modern' music to have come out of this country in my opinion.

Robert: I don't have an iPod, but if anyone has a spare... ■

The LCO performs at the Roundhouse, London on 23 January; tickets are priced from £7.50.

There is a pre-concert talk in association with Young People in the Arts at 8.30pm; the gig starts at 9.30pm. The concert includes the UK premiere of John Cage's Seventy-Four, as well as Steve Reich's totemic work Different Trains.