

Score in a minute

With talents like Thomas Ades, classical music is more exciting than it has been for a generation. Fans of Radiohead or CSS don't know what they're missing, says Peter Culshaw

Peter Culshaw

The Observer, Sunday 20 May 2007

Peter Sellars doesn't think the age of genius - of great classical music - is dead. At all. When I last met him, wandering the streets of Vienna, he was raving about John Adams's latest opera *A Flowering Tree* - 'You can put his recent pieces up against anything of Verdi' - and the new Kaija Saariaho oratorio *La Passion De Simone*, which he called 'breathtaking'.

Sellars could be right. This is the most interesting time in classical music for at least a generation. It's safe to get back in the water after the chilly era of the over-intellectual avant-garde (the legacy of Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone technique) or the initially exciting but occasionally facile repetitions of the Philip Glass and Steve Reich generation (cited as an influence by pop acts as different as Giorgio Moroder and Sonic Youth). Some of the most inspiring, moving and challenging - and also some of the most daft and insane - music of this century has been written by contemporary composers.

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, the Master of the Queen's Music, in a widely reported speech recently complained about 'extremely loud music with a gut-churning thudding bass beat' - meaning modern pop. Perhaps he wasn't aware that the most feted of his younger contemporaries is a keen fan of house music. There is a new group of classical composers for whom everything is suddenly up for grabs.

Sellars has been a key figure as a catalyst, director and inspiration. He has a vested interest in Adams's and Saariaho's new works as he commissioned them in his role as artistic director of *New Crowned Hope*, a festival of new music, dance and film (named after Mozart's Masonic lodge which, according to Sellars, was a hotbed of revolutionary activism). First seen in Vienna last November, it arrives at the Barbican Centre in London in July.

The director is too old (nearly 50) to be called an enfant terrible any more, but since performing a puppet version of Wagner's Ring cycle as a student at Harvard, he has always pushed the boundaries. In the Eighties, he directed a series of Mozart's operas - *Così fan tutte* was set in a diner in Cape Cod, *Don Giovanni* was portrayed as a cocaine-snorting slum thug and *Figaro's* marriage took place in Trump Tower. The Pittsburgh-born dynamo has also been increasingly politically minded (his critics call him strident and hectoring): *New Crowned Hope* features a series of films championing the world's oppressed peoples, including a stunning Indonesian modern opera film called *Opera Java*.

Sellars is brilliant, charismatic and intense - and also very Californian. In 2002 he was sacked as artistic director of the Adelaide Festival in Australia - for trying to programme too much Aboriginal culture, he says; at the time, those working with him

complained to me of his 'infernally hugging' and 'psychobabble', while others merely objected to his peculiar haircut.

The composer he has built up the closest relationship with is John Adams. Both of them believe, as Adams puts it, that 'if opera is going to have any future at all as a living art form, it has to take hold of the psychological themes and undercurrents of our present lives'. They also believe music should be more than just entertainment. Sellars talks about providing 'muscle tone' for the culture, while Adams told me when I first met him in his house in Berkeley, California, that 'art should do more than merely comfort and provide solace. It should help us examine our deepest selves'.

Adams, now 60, is a genial, rather modest figure who says: 'I'm a craftsman. I'm not going to save the world but I'm not going to slit my wrists, either.' Sellars directed Adams's first opera, *Nixon in China*, first seen in 1987, since when it has been acknowledged as the most successful of all contemporary operas. He followed it with *The Death of Klinghoffer*, which told the story of the hijacking of a cruise ship by Palestinian terrorists, his masterpiece *El Niño*, a thrilling Nativity oratorio set among poor Chicanos of East Los Angeles, and *Dr Atomic*, which deals with the Manhattan Project (yet to be seen in Europe).

The centrepiece of the Sellars-curated season at the Barbican is Adams's latest, which is based on a South Indian folk tale and loosely related to Mozart's *Magic Flute*. When I witnessed its premiere in Vienna, it was nothing like the white-tie and tails image of a classical opening. The audience was youngish, hip-intelligent. The orchestra, chorus and Adams, who was conducting, were all dressed in Bollywood-style floral gear.

For the first half an hour we were in familiar Adams territory: chugging rhythms, minimal melodies. Then the Venezuelan Schola Cantorum choir entered with a cascade of voices and we were off on a musical tour that took in Indian ragas and Balinese monkey chants, and if there was a sense not all the sources had been fully digested (perhaps because it was written so fast - in nine months), it contained some of the most ravishing music Adams has yet composed. 'It was as if my musical unconscious was poured directly onto the page,' he said to me.

The notices were mixed - 'a bouillabaisse of New Age globe-trotting', according to one reviewer. But as Adams lives in California, with its Pacific Rim influences and strong Hispanic culture, why shouldn't his music reflect that? His contemporaries - but not their critics - are as likely to drop Bollywood composer RD Burman, film composer Ennio Morricone or tango composer Astor Piazzolla into the conversation as Sibelius or Debussy. (Even early music director William Christie, who has made some of the best recent versions of Monteverdi and Purcell, once told me his favourite singers were Aretha Franklin and the great Arabic singer Om Kalthoum.)

A lack of fear of the past seems key for this new generation of composers. As Thomas Ades, whom *The Observer* recently called 'the world's most exciting and hippest composer', said to me: 'It took me a while to recover from the effects of reading music at Cambridge, to break through the idea of the past as a burden. That you could cut one of the tentacles of the octopus off and use it as a weapon.'

These days, he says: 'I've stopped believing in the past. I don't think of Beethoven as in a frock coat in Vienna in a coach, but as alive and around you. You have to think of the great composers as your friends. They might be frightening friends, but still friends anyway.' One of his pieces is called 'Brahms', which uses the idiosyncrasies of that composer as an 'anti-homage'. So does he think of Brahms as an annoying friend? 'As a friend who is just like you - someone you completely understand - but they drive you mad. You keep thinking, don't do it like that. But they are people that make you

examine yourself the most. It can be like an amazing sparring partner.'

Since he was 18 (he's now 36), Ades has been feted as the great hope for English music, the next Benjamin Britten, to his discomfort. 'It used to annoy me a lot. I am English but I spend so much time in other places. I was aware that I had this name that was difficult to pronounce and didn't quite fit in.' His ancestors were Sephardic Jews, 'although I didn't know that until I was 25.'

These days, Ades is everywhere: two seasons of his work have just finished in Paris and at the Barbican in London, another will run in Stockholm, his opera of *The Tempest* was recently staged at the Royal Opera House ('a masterpiece of airy beauty and eerie power', according to the *New Yorker*) and his new work *Tevot* received its premiere with the Berlin Philharmonic in Berlin in February. He somehow also manages to find time to be artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival founded by Britten. 'You're in the eye of the storm,' he told me in Berlin. 'I can see it coming across the landscape of my diary for years.'

'*Tevot*,' he says, is 'an incredible word', meaning both the Ark and bar of music in Hebrew. 'I imagined a vessel that carries people or a family through hostile waters to safety.' He says he sees the orchestra in the piece as a kind of organic, living being 'like coral', and the work does have an underwater quality, ending in a semi-mystical finale of bells.

Ades's pieces have often been wildly different - as if he was trying on a series of masks - but *Tevot* felt like a deeply personal piece with an unexpected but welcome emotional warmth. 'It's the first time I haven't been conscious of obvious influences,' he told me. 'I really let this one go where it wanted to, and it went in a very surprising direction. I was shocked by the resolution, how wide open it is. In my twenties I would have botched the end, hidden it a bit, made it more ironic.'

His friend, the novelist Alan Hollinghurst, author of *The Line of Beauty*, was at the premiere and pronounced it 'astounding, the best thing he's ever done'.

In one of Ades's pieces, *Asyla*, there is the thump of house music in the arrangements. Does he still go clubbing? 'Yes I do. Clubs are a great place to feel musical space. You can feel the edges of your musical mind expanding.' When I ask about his favourite bands, I'm half-expecting him to say someone like Radiohead or Sigur Ros. 'I do like them when they do pop music,' he answers, 'but when they start to get more serious ... It's just that I know other composers who do that sort of thing better.' Pressed as to who he means, he mentions Irishman Gerald Barry - 'the only composer I hang out with'.

Instead, he says his favourite band are Brazilian electro-pop sensation CSS, who are, indeed, hard not to like and are generally delicious. As this magazine has a history with CSS (see OMM24), and as the group is in town, we arranged to get them together in Soho, which is where the composer lives and where the band were playing that night at the Astoria.

Ades told the band he discovered them after a friend picked their music for his MySpace page, and he saw the new year in listening to 'Let's Make Love and Listen to Death From Above'. While Lovefoxxx and the rest of the band confess to a limited knowledge of the Ades oeuvre, guitarist Luiza had just been to the opera and loved it, and pleasantries were exchanged as Ades and the band disported themselves for the OMM photographer.

Someone who does love Sigur Ros and is part of the New Crowned Hope Festival is David Harrington, leader of the Kronos Quartet, who have arranged versions of the

Icelandic band's songs. But then the Californian string quartet have performed music written by every member of this new generation of composers and over 450 others in their 30-year career, and sold more than a million records in the process. They have collaborated with everyone from poet Allen Ginsberg to Tuvan throat singers and the wonderful gypsy band Taraf de Haidouks.

Harrington spends at least an hour a day listening to music he hasn't heard before. You could hear him talk all day - in fact, when I met him in New York I did just that. A 45-minute interview had been arranged; six hours later we ended up in a Chinese restaurant, where he opened a fortune cookie which read: 'Your efforts will be rewarded.'

When the Kronos Quartet first made their name, sporting punky haircuts and playing an arrangement of 'Purple Haze', some dismissed them as a gimmicky fad, but it's impossible to doubt their total commitment to contemporary music. They also try to find different ways to present new music - in New Crowned Hope, their concert takes the form of a radio show called 'Another World is Possible', where a liberal host discusses countries like Iran or China and then the Kronos play music from relevant composers.

Clearly part of the project of re-inventing classical music for our times is finding the right performers - and singers like Dawn Upshaw and Lorraine Hunt Lieberson have been essential muses of the new music. The 46-year-old Upshaw has thrown herself into collaborations with composers such as Adams, Osvaldo Golijov and Kaija Saariaho - seeing her perform Saariaho's opera *L'amour de loin* in 2000, you had the sense she was as much a soul singer as a classical singer.

Lorraine Hunt Lieberson was discovered by Sellars - he found her when she auditioned for his version of *Julius Caesar* in Boston in 1985. 'She started singing and you were in the middle of this raging forest fire,' says Sellars. 'Certain things were a little out of control, but what you got was sheer power, sheer concentrated energy.' The director cast her as an Uzi-toting terrorist and set the opera in the Cairo Hilton.

Lieberson died last year of breast cancer at the age of 52. Her swansong was an extraordinary album released at the beginning of this year - settings of the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda composed by her husband Peter Lieberson. It was that rare thing, a critical and commercial success, which the *Washington Post* called 'one of the most extraordinarily affecting artistic gifts ever created by one lover to another'. It has featured in the *Billboard* Classical charts all year. Lieberson had been a thorny modernist but this last album was lushly romantic, containing echoes of the work of John Adams.

A composer whom I got to hear of initially as the arranger of the Kronos Quartet's criminally overlooked *Nuevo* album is Osvaldo Golijov, now 46, who Sellars did commission for *New Crowned Hope* before he had to pull out. More than most, the Argentina-born but Massachusetts-based composer is totally in demand: current projects include writing the music for a new Francis Ford Coppola film, *World Without Youth* (the film director has called him a 'consummate musician').

In the past few years Golijov has gone from being a complete unknown to become America's hottest new composer. His Sellars-directed *Ainadamar* about the poet Lorca picked up critical raves in the States - I saw it at the amazing outdoor Opera House in Santa Fé - and there have been retrospectives of his work at the Lincoln Centre in New York as well as at the Barbican. The *New York Times* called him 'a major energising force in a classical world desperately in need of a new vision'.

His most powerful piece to date is his extraordinary take on St Mark's Passion, which features sacred Cuban bata drums, the Venezuelan Schola Cantorum (who also appear in the new Adams opera) and a Brazilian soul singer as well as Upshaw.

Many critics here have generally been cool or dismissive of Golijov and it is true that some similar cross-cultural experiments don't really come off - like last year's Gaddafi opera involving Asian Dub Foundation at the Coliseum in London. When I spoke to curator Alex Poots, who commissioned that piece while at ENO, he pointed out that the original team for it included Peter Sellars, but he and the director both subsequently dropped out.

Poots is now artistic director of the Manchester International Festival, which will stage two new operas next month: a version of Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, directed by Mike Figgis with music from a young Russian composer Victoria Borisova-Olias; and *Monkey*, by Damon Albarn. 'I think it's difficult to stay in both camps once you've entered the world of themes and development,' Albarn said recently when asked how he might straddle the pop and classical worlds. 'I'm not sure how I'm going to do it!' Perhaps he is bright enough to pull it off, but the track record of pop stars moving into classical music has not been good, even if Paul McCartney did just win a Classical Brit for his insipid, if tuneful *Ecce Cor Meum*.

Golijov said at his studio in Boston that many composers have been influenced by Indian and African music, such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich. 'But they were able to distil the structure from those musics to make it Western. Perhaps I'm more superficial - I also want the surface and the texture.'

'Maybe that means I'm a minor composer,' he added, modestly.

Certainly Golijov makes no claims to be a great composer, and the backlash against him is partly as a result of others talking of him as 'the saviour of classical music', which is hardly his fault. It is true that *Ainadamar* contains a kitsch element, almost as if it were a B-movie soundtrack: one melody seemed to borrow from the theme tune of the Sixties puppet TV show *Stingray*. 'But then Mozart was silly at times,' he says. 'I want everything that pertains to the human condition in my music, and that includes kitsch and silliness. Modernism has been overly intellectual.'

A more rigorous and even severe composer is Kaija Saariaho, 55, whose music is not at all silly - her Sellars-directed *L'amour de loin* was full of shimmering tonalities, like a pointillist painting. A diffident Finn, she once dreamed of being an organist in a remote town, she told me when I visited her Paris apartment a couple of months ago. 'Us Finns tend to be shy - maybe that is why we have such a need to express ourselves.'

It's still unusual to find successful female composers. 'When I was at college, I read a scientific paper explaining why women make bad composers. Of course, it spurred me on.' From a fairly austere avant-garde background, the Sellars effect has helped turn her into a high-profile composer (a new opera opened in Paris last year called *Adriana Mater*), but she is not likely to cash in by writing fun film scores like Golijov. Her latest piece involves the Jewish writer Simone Weil and her suffering in the Second World War. As in her contained music, less is more. 'I usually ask for eight or 10 years to write a new piece.'

Composers that Saariaho rates highly include the French nonogenerian Henri Dutilleux and the Swede Marcus Lindberg, who combine 'both seriousness and humanity'.

One can even dream of how classical music used to be, when there was a riot at the opening of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* because it was a central part of the culture, when people in markets hummed Mozart tunes, and thousands turned up to Handel's

funeral.

I asked Golijov why he didn't just do pop music. 'Transcendence is the most important thing. The best of classical music has the journey, the architecture, the scope. Folk and pop just don't have it.'

When the Kronos Quartet started, David Harrington says he really thought it was possible for music to change the world. 'I thought you could do music that could stop bullets and tanks.' And now? 'I still think it's possible to create music that really resonates and has so much humanity it can create large changes in the listener. We need such music more than ever.'

A 30-second guide to contemporary music

Things began to get lively at the start of the 20th century when Stravinsky had them ripping up the seats to his Rite of Spring. Schoenberg shook the music world even further by redefining melody and harmony and - with his disciples Berg and Webern - developed serialism, in which all 12 tones of the octave are regarded as equal. All very democratic, but tough on the ears. Meanwhile, in Russia, Shostakovich was using more traditional forms to make striking music which got him into trouble with the Comrades, unlike Prokofiev and Stravinsky who fled after the Revolution. The focus shifted to the States after the Second World War with the emergence of John Cage, a pioneer of electronic music, 'chance' compositions and total silence. You can play his 4'33" at home: its three movements are performed without a single note. In England, Benjamin Britten was breathing new life into opera, leading the way for international innovators such as the minimalist Philip Glass, repetitive Steve Reich, and sparse Arvo Part. Today's audiences are excited about Argentinian Osvaldo Golijov, but the real golden boy is Britain's Thomas Ades whom super-cool Simon Rattle says 'gleefully plunders a weird, wonderful and eccentric selection of the past and transmutes it into an unmistakably new voice'.

Stephen Pritchard

10 contemporary classics

1. El Nino - John Adams (2000)
2. Tevot - Thomas Ades (2007)
3. St Mark Passion - Osvaldo Golijov (2003)
4. L'Amour de Loin - Kaija Saariaho (2000)
5. 3rd String Quartet - Gorecki (2007)
6. Neruda Songs - Peter Lieberson (2007)
7. You Are (Variations) - Steve Reich (2006)
8. A Flowering Tree- John Adams (2006)
9. Nuevo - Kronos Quartet (2001)
10. The Tempest - Thomas Ades (2003)

• New Crowned Hope, the Barbican, London EC2, 4 July until 12 August; the Aldeburgh Festival , 1-30 June, Aldeburgh, Suffolk

Ads by Google

Free Life Coach Training

2 Day Life Coach Training Course *Was £500*: Now *Free* - Book Today

www.The-Coaching-Academy.com

Find a Great Classical CD

Want a Recommendation You Can Trust With a Quick Search? Try us out Now

www.BachTrack.com

Classical Music Concerts

Locate concerts to go to Offer a concert for inclusion

www.concertstogoto.info

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2010