




*Classical music: the music of kings, the creation of illuminated composers, the preserve of the upper echelons; an exclusive and elitist world that renders most people mere observers, disengaged and detached from its intimidating soundscape. But scrape beneath this veneer and there is an aesthetic in a sphere of its own: the alt-classical scene, a sound vision realised where listeners are radicals and performers are revolutionary artists in a brand-new musical age. By Claire Jackson* 

In the popular consciousness, classical music is reserved for dusty concert halls usually peppered with greying heads. Concerts are recitals, not gigs, and are brimming with arbitrary rules and regulations. Attendance becomes a ritualistic trial, littered with hurdles that the unassuming listener must vault at their peril. The membrane to acceptance is only semi-permeable; few will make it, and those that do still have grave tasks to bear.

Once inside the inner ring, a passing interest will threaten to become just that. Critics and fans discuss the music with a baffling array of jargon that makes the offside rule seem like a piece of cake. Newbies must persevere, wade through this nonsense – only to come out the other side still wondering whether the emperor does have his clothes on.

Alex Ross, *New Yorker* music critic and author of *The Rest Is Noise*, aptly remarks: “When people hear ‘classical’, they think ‘dead’. The music is described in terms of its distance from the present, its resistance to the mass – what it is not. You see magazines with listings for Popular Music in one section and for Classical Music in another, so that the latter becomes, by

implication, Unpopular Music. No wonder that stories of its imminent demise are so commonplace.”

Clearly, there is good reason why we do not allow such sound forms to penetrate our lives. We might be passionate advocates of culture high and low, but this welcome mat does not always extend to classical music.

But, deep in our cities, an underground movement is gathering momentum. Its current is picking up speed, its strength increasing in numbers, shattering all preconceptions of the classical world. In clubs and cafés, we see violins wired up to microphones, piano strings plucked from the inside and laptops, whistles and vibrators conspiring to create intoxicatingly experimental sounds.

Call it what you like. Contemporary classical, electro-classical or non-classical. In reality, this defies categorisation. This is *music*. In the following pages, we meet some of the individuals responsible for nurturing this noise: the composer, the soloist, the curator and the orchestra. And they’ve all got the following message: eradicate prejudice, challenge your soundtrack and change your life.

# The Composer

## GABRIEL PROKOFIEV

The foreign dialling tone gave him away. Gabriel Prokofiev is *en vacances* in France, except, for him, a holiday means time away to clear his head, to create. The composer, DJ, musician and promoter is heading up a *coup d'état* against the constraints of the classical music world, overthrowing the traditional forms of its consumption with his club nights and independent record label, Nonclassical. His acquiescence of the populace almost complete, he seeks solace in making contemporary music accessible, bringing sonic art to wider audiences and championing fresh new sounds. We battle voicemails, but when the duel is over, Prokofiev talks freely, thoughtfully, as though dealing with the press is a privilege.

I enquire how he perceives the common understanding of classical music today. "It's an unfortunate situation. Especially in the UK, people just think it is stiff, inaccessible and old-fashioned, or for old people," says Prokofiev. "Obviously the viewpoint can easily change but it is down to the people doing the music – we can't just think, 'Oh, poor us, no one understands us.'"

Prokofiev's label is a playground for a cacophony of sound. It's a place where artists such as the Elysian Quartet and Hot Chip plot to create and challenge. "There's a lot of exciting contemporary classical music out there. The problem is that it's not reaching its potential audience," Prokofiev explains, pausing to consider the predicament. "The music itself can start to communicate better and better once it creates a rapport and stops being in its own little world. Then it will self-perpetuate: the music itself will become more accessible to people, [it will become] a continuing dialogue."

So what is Nonclassical doing about it? "We release contemporary classical music in a non-classical way. We focus on newly composed classical music. Generally we get stuff that really feels like it has been composed now and sounds like it has. There are a lot of composers out there who think that they are writing in a contemporary style – a sort of post-1950s/60s/70s, grey, serialist music. Somehow that's being encouraged in the music colleges. Or there are composers that are writing music that sounds like film music and going the other direction to sound too populist. We want contemporary music that has an edge and really feels like it is doing something new and fresh.


"So far on each CD, we've had an original composition that fills half the disc and then the second part is remixes. For that we get producers from all sorts of musical backgrounds, people that might make dubstep, electro or noise music, and that's an experiment in a way. But we always use producers who understand where we're coming from and who take it

seriously – we're not doing some cheesy thing to sell more units. It's interesting to push classical music against other genres, but in an intelligent way."

There seems to be a real trend at the moment for contemporary composers to collaborate with musicians from the electronica/dance/indie scene. Eventually, Prokofiev hopes that this can move from being considered a crossbreed to standing up as its own genre: "I'm from the school of classical composers that want to take influence from the folk music around them – and for me, folk music is dance, electronica and hip hop... music of the people, from the cities... Most people are getting tired of the same type of music in bars and clubs – people deserve to have more interesting stuff going on. It's positive to have music that has classical and slightly more challenging sounds in informal settings."

For Prokofiev, these settings include Hoxton pub The Macbeth, where Nonclassical holds its monthly club night. Typically, audiences rock up around 8pm, enjoy some drinks and DJing – leftfield electronic beats layered over Stockhausen, generally mixed by Prokofiev himself – interspersed with live contemporary classical acts. The beauty of this format is the fluidity. As Prokofiev himself notes: "People don't have to think, 'Shit, I've paid all this money to get in and I'm stuck here, this is awful.' Maybe they'll step back to the bar, have a drink and think, 'Actually, this is all right.'"

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'Grandson of the great Sergei', as many newspapers declare, Prokofiev is in a fair position to make big assertions. Sergei Prokofiev, in case you don't know, was a prolific 20th century Russian composer who created a sensation as an *enfant terrible* and went on to write lavish, mechanistic and, at the time, über-modern scores. *Romeo and Juliet* is one of his most famous ballets (trotted out regularly on the opening credits of BBC series







*The Apprentice*). “My grandfather’s music is a huge inspiration,” he admits. “I can be daunted; he was so precocious and talented when he was so young. That can be intimidating, of course.”

Though Prokofiev’s label has achieved a lot, there’s more work to be done still. “Classical music has worked itself into a trap. It has to be taken very seriously and everything has got to be technically or theoretically sound... Put it somewhere really informal and it instantly makes it more natural and the performers enjoy it more. They’re playing for the real world, and the music suddenly has a new vibrancy. Music that might seem cold and quite foreign and difficult feels more accessible,” muses Prokofiev, adding, “Brahms supposedly played the piano in brothels, musicians performed in salons and chamber music always used to be in people’s houses. People would be relaxing, drinking, probably walking in and out – and now people think they have to be still and if you move you get all these dirty looks. I’m a composer, I don’t want people to be like that in my concert... and I don’t think composers that are dead would want that to happen.”

## The Curator

LUCY RAILTON

“See you at 8:30 then,” calls a guy on a bike as Lucy Railton and I perch gingerly on chairs outside a café in east London, the early autumnal wind catching us by surprise. I ask whether she knew the friendly passer-by. “Oh no,” she smiles, “but he heard the soundcheck earlier and said he’d come back.”

The cyclist had had a sneak preview of *Kammer Klang*, a contemporary classical showcase night run by Railton and her close-knit group of musician friends. The stranger’s experience epitomises the purpose of the evening: to make new music available to all.


Hidden behind a smattering of run-down buildings, past a parade of shops with fronts that have seen better days and the usual glut of heavily franchised food outlets, lies Café Oto, the home of Railton’s monthly shindig. It is cosy, but not in an obvious way; its open brick work, unfinished floors and sprawling pot plants lend a natural abrasion, almost a disdain for anything or anyone that dares hark back to another age. This is it, screams the space, this is now.

“Over the last year this place has become a real hothouse for creative music. A lot of improvised and electronic stuff happens here,” says Railton. *Kammer Klang* features a range of new and rarely played classical works, often coupled with Nonclassical artists. On the evening we met, the line-up included a headline set from avant-garde experimenter

Simon Bookish, as well as music by John Cage, Christian Wolff, Luciano Berio and Tristan Brooke.

“I try to have something classic like Schoenberg, Webern and Berg and then music from our time,” Railton explains. “I don’t want to sum up the history of modern music in one night – that would be impossible – but it’s important to represent all types of contemporary music.”

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**“I THINK THE BEST WAY OF THINKING ABOUT CLASSICAL MUSIC IS THAT THERE’S AN AMAZING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT: SOMETHING CLASSIC IS SOMETHING FROM THE PAST THAT IS WORTH DOING AGAIN, WHETHER THAT’S A REPEAT OF A TV SHOW, A MOTOWN HIT OR ALBUM BY NIRVANA. THEY’RE CLASSICS BECAUSE THEY CAN STAND THE TEST OF TIME AND HAVE AN ENDURING QUALITY.”** 

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“I don’t want to say [I’m doing this] to reach the masses or make anything monumental out of it. The ticket price is always five pounds; it means that anyone can come. We’ve done nine gigs with minimal income and there are four more planned.”

Inside, more wires are being laid and arresting arrays of sound filter through the air. A flautist practises her flutter tonguing, and as the note ricochets off every surface, she stops to exclaim how good the acoustics are. A pianist plucks the strings deep in the heart of the instrument, beating its core for an unknown punishment.

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It is Railton’s turn. She performs at every event she holds, which makes us wonder what word we should use to describe her in the title for this portrait. Eventually we settle on ‘curator’. She makes her cello sing and weep; we feel its pain, its desire, its climax. She plucks the strings with such vigour I fear for their survival, and then she puts a fluorescent pink whistle to her lips and blows. This isn’t something to fear, this is the sound of our generation.



## The Soloist

### OLIVER COATES

In a quaint market town in picturesque West Sussex, a cellist draws his bow over heavy strings, duelling innocently with a tape part. His instrument is plugged in, the mic hungrily processing the sound, spurting out haunting timbres. The venue is a café with high ceilings. The musician, Oliver Coates, surveys the 50-strong throng happily cramming itself with classical music and cake, a frequent scene during the Arundel music festival.

Coates believes that the fact that audiences can enjoy Mozart with their mozzarella toastie or Cage with their cappuccino is paramount to the event's success: "Detailed, intricate, entrancing music doesn't need to be heard in a fusty, rule-bound

place," he tells me during a rehearsal break. "There's a perception that classical music is like a history lesson, but that actually has nothing to do with the experience of the music, which is colourful and wonderful. Music takes you out of yourself and makes you think about your own life – knowing that Bach came before Beethoven is nonsense, it's more about your relationship with music and your own private journey."

An advocate of experimental programming and new music, Coates is an artist in residence at London's Southbank Centre, guest principal in the London Sinfonietta, and has collaborated with electronic/instrumental/spoken word ensemble House of Bedlam, 'core' classical artists like Angela Hewitt and trip hop merchants Massive Attack, among others.

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"All good music is about being aspirational and about looking for something beyond everyday life," muses Coates. "I think the best way of thinking about classical music is that there's an amazing relationship between past and present: something classic is something from the past that is worth doing again, whether that's a repeat of a TV show, a motown hit or album by Nirvana. They're classics because they can stand the test of time and have an enduring quality."

"The problem with classical – and contemporary music – is that people see it as an exclusive club: composers writing for other composers, with a hidden language, something that has evolved out of the 20th century scene. People try to outdo each other with the complexity of ideas or in the conceptualisation of their music."

While concept art music will always be around, it shouldn't get in the way of genuinely exciting sonic experimentation. Part of a recent shift towards opening club membership is innovative programming by curators at festivals like Glastonbury, Latitude and the Big Chill, who are increasingly opening up programming to embrace acts like contemporary composer Michael Nyman, the Britten Sinfonia and soloists such as Coates.

## The Orchestra

### CHRIS WHEELER, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE HERITAGE ORCHESTRA

"First and foremost it is *not* a classical orchestra," explains Chris Wheeler, firmly, referring to a group of instrumentalists known as The Heritage Orchestra, over which he presides as artistic director.

The term 'orchestra' is now synonymous with the classical symphonic formation: double woodwind, string and brass sections, possibly with a smattering of timpani, harp, saxophone and/or similar where required. Although parts of the establishment embrace contemporary sounds – the odd Stockhausen festival here, a Philip Glass prom there – Wheeler et al are determined to go a step further, a jump beyond modern music. And where the stalwarts of the industry are starting to cotton on to fusion-melding collaborations (this year sees indie princes Grizzly Bear work with the London Symphony Orchestra, for example), The Heritage Orchestra decided five years ago that this would be their niche, recreating the *Blade Runner* score with Massive Attack and working with electronica outfit UNKLE, to name a few.

This October at King's Place, London, Heritage will once again collaborate with freewheeling creatives The Bays and break any crumbling boundaries they might have missed the last time round. "All the performers will have LCD screens and on-stage composers will compose in real time. Everything is fully improvised. Essentially a 20-piece orchestra is getting music written then and there," says Wheeler. "There's no remit about style: we'll play absolutely anything – we're the iPod generation, we absorb it all and react to it all. We're not going to confine ourselves."

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"A lot of orchestras are prudish or elitist about music," he adds. "Even if something doesn't work it is important to try stuff out and dare to succeed. There's not enough room in the orchestral landscape for another orchestra playing Beethoven and Brahms. But there *is* room for an orchestra that will take modern cultural references, rip them apart and then present them in a traditional format turned on its head."



So you're just as likely to see Heritage performing Gabriel Prokofiev's *Concerto for Turntables and Orchestra* with DJ Yoda as you are to catch them gigging with Dizzee Rascal at the BBC Electric Proms. Heritage, like all our nonclassical portraits, inspire nothing but admiration, delight and conviction that in a century filled with so much meaningless consumption, what they are creating is something to cling on to, to drink with thirst, to nourish ourselves with. But the orchestra's name... isn't it a little, well, retrospective for a modern-day soundclash?

"We are an orchestra because we're that size ensemble," explains Wheeler, matter-of-factly, and I immediately appreciate his refusal to dumb down, to fall foul to the temptation of the label 'band'. "Heritage' is subversive... we believe that you don't need to play and listen to the great canon of classical music to acknowledge heritage. Absorbing influences from modern culture creates something totally different. It's about reinventing heritage; having your own take on it and finding your identity."

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