

ON THE RISE

As another long summer of music draws to a close, **GILLIAN WILLS** discovers why audiences, musicians and sponsors are in love with classical music festivals like never before

The recent festivals season has seen a proliferation of events, with new events springing up in the UK and Europe, in America, Canada and Australia. National statistics paint a picture of a boom-time: visitors to Norway (population 4.7 million) can choose from more than 200 music festivals; in Britain, the 300 or so members of the British and International Federation of Festivals featured one million performers in 2008 and reached an audience of more than five million. International festivals are playing their part in the rise in cultural tourism, which according to the World Tourism Organization is growing at a rate of 15 per cent a year, and accounts for around 37 per cent of world travel.

Festivals are hardly a modern concept: the National Eisteddfod in Wales, for example, has its competitive roots in medieval times, and way back in the sixth century BC the Pythian Games at Delphi featured musical competitions.

But the abundance of festivals today is a phenomenon that can't be explained without considering a range of factors, including changes in the music industry, a re-emerging interest in live performance, a drift away from formal concert halls, economics, civic ambitions, world tourism trends, and a yearning for aesthetic autonomy.

Ever since jazz, rock 'n' roll, pop and world music burst on to the commercial scene, and the recording and performance worlds started to jostle for commercial supremacy, entrepreneurs have been forced to scrutinise more closely the live music they offer audiences. As CD-buying music lovers began to stay at home to listen to multiple versions of their favourite works, freshening up live delivery became imperative, and a frantic chase to broaden audiences began.

Classical recordings by the big companies may be in decline but classical music is widely available via many other distribution streams, from iTunes to

mobile phones and internet radio. And in spite of the capacity to listen to concerts online, habitual computer users are now yearning for the human element. The magical voyeurism of witnessing music as it is made, note by note, phrase after phrase, is back in vogue. This reborn love of 'seeing it live' might in part explain the lure of such events as the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition and the Banff International String Quartet Competition, which put a gladiatorial spin on the festival experience.

The drift towards performance is not necessarily benefiting traditional venues. Younger audiences and those with more eclectic tastes tend to stay away from imposing, formal concert halls, with their attitudinal and spatial separation between performer and audience and their more predictable programming. And it's not just the audience who find the formal venues austere. Richard Tognetti, artistic director of the Australian Chamber Orchestra, and of this year's inaugural Maribor Festival in Slovenia, says: 'Concert halls can be a nightmare. Musicians often arrive in the late afternoon. It's stressful. We unpack, play and there are no opportunities for interaction; the next morning we're on the road again. Festivals are popular for practical reasons: there's no daily travelling involved; musicians can settle and explore the environment, walking from one venue to another and getting to know the town. It's also a release from the ultra-perfectionism associated with touring just one programme. At a festival, there are multiple opportunities to play. Not all the performances will be of a polished, flawless CD standard, but there can be an emptiness in that. What festival performances can do



COURTESY CHAMBER MUSIC AUSTRALIA

The Ardeo Quartet performing at the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition



Wales's National Eisteddfod can trace its roots to medieval times

is communicate spontaneity and emotion because there's risk involved.'

For musicians the attractions of festivals are many. There's a chance to step out of mainstream professional activities: orchestral instrumentalists enjoy playing chamber music and soloists enjoy performing collaboratively. Swayed by an attractive location in the summer months, musicians will accept lower fees with the mindset that performing in exotic contexts is a working holiday. This is very much the case for the Australian Festival of Chamber Music in Townsville, Queensland, where European players are seduced by the proximity of the Great Barrier Reef.

Festivals are an opportunity to survey comparative approaches to interpretation, and they're an ideal networking forum, a place to broker more engagements. For example, while the artistic director in Townsville, London-based pianist Piers Lane, performed at this year's inaugural Oxford May Music festival, the latter's director, violinist Jack Liebeck, returned the compliment by joining a line-up of distinguished international instrumentalists in Queensland in July.

The academy director at the Verbier Festival, Christian Thompson, stresses the networking potential for the festival's talented young performers: 'All the highly

gifted students are encouraged to network with artists, agents, entrepreneurs and representatives from record companies, as important professional contacts can be made.'

There are social advantages, too. 'Being a musician is often lonely and at a festival you get to mix with colleagues and friends. There's the chance to step off the treadmill,' says Liebeck, who speculates that artistic freedom is another attraction. 'Musicians can control content and put their own stamp on things. There's also an openness towards the music, in that the audience is coming to the event as a whole rather than because a particular piece entices them.'

Thompson notes: 'A festival can build up trust with audiences, and then there is generally more acceptance of the repertoire, even if it is contemporary music.'

This has certainly proved true in the case of the Aldeburgh Festival. If Benjamin Britten were alive today he might be amazed at what he started. After all, Aldeburgh was just a modest, wind-blasted coastal town in eastern England before the first Aldeburgh Festival in 1948. Now it's a chic cultural centre, forever associated with the latest incarnations of contemporary classical music. Tanglewood's Contemporary Music Festival is a similar success story. ▶



Florian Leonhard lecturing on violin making at Oxford May Music

JACK LIEBECK

The Ébène Quartet at the Verbier Festival

ALINE PALEY



Professional orchestras and opera companies can be limited by their dependency on good returns at the box office, with the expectations of primarily conservative subscription holders leading to unimaginative but crowd-pleasing selections of the classical pantheon's palatable evergreens. On the other hand, those who attend festivals find ticket costs relatively inexpensive compared to overall travel and accommodation expenses, and, within the festive frame, it's relatively painless to veer into new territory and be challenged by the unfamiliar.

Festivals certainly have some financial charms. Businesses are more inclined to sponsor festivals than isolated programmes in city-bound venues because they attract media attention and politicians and celebrities are usually involved. Sponsors are keen on sharply defined, personality-strong events aimed at specific audiences. And festival directors accommodate by creating 'brands' that appeal to niche markets. Sponsors can also feel that they

are assisting a particular endeavour such as chamber music, supporting emerging talent, or enabling a young composer to focus exclusively on creating music.

Civic bodies favour festivals because they boost economies and imprint small cities with a particular cultural identity. Think of Nashville, for example, and country music springs to mind; with Montreux, it's jazz; and Salzburg, Mozart. Piers Lane says that chamber music has become so integrated with Townsville that a taxi driver told him, 'Folks can't even get married around here without hiring a string quartet.'

In Europe and America, festivals tend to occur during summer months, and visitors from out of town and abroad play a key role in the health and growth of such events. Combining opportunities to sightsee with arts activities is a popular way to holiday for these cultural tourists, who can be defined as those who want multi-dimensional holidays: sightseeing, shopping and dining no longer suffice. Usually these

sophisticated travellers have time on their hands, disposable income and a particular love for music, literature or art. Such people may crave a musical adventure as much as they do the chance to explore special places. One such company exploiting this market is Chamber Music Holidays, which organises concerts in luxurious destinations such as Greece. Its 'Divertimenti in Corfu' holiday, for instance, boasts recitals in a selection of the Greek island's private villas.

Reaching audiences is more easily achieved in a festival setting, where the venues are varied and more relaxed, and more conducive to informative talks, discussions and workshops. Lane cites the importance of audiences mixing with artists. This year he trialled Concert Conversations, in which he drew on his BBC experience to interview festival musicians. Similarly, Tognetti is scheduling more esoteric programmes in smaller spaces with time built in for question-and-answer sessions. Paul Dean, artistic director of the Bangalow Music Festival in New South Wales, has observed that when festival punters are able to socialise with composers they can become very supportive of their music. He was amazed at how popular Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe's music became after patrons chatted with the composer post-recital.

In the festival context, musicians are taking control, initiating performance opportunities and choosing how, where, what and to whom they present programmes. They are experimenting, commissioning new music, cultivating younger audiences, engineering productive dialogue between players and listeners, creating a market for the CDs they are producing with smaller labels (according to the likes of Tognetti and Lane), and in creating a platform for the work of contemporary composers are demonstrating the classical industry's age-old ability to adapt, renew and reinvent itself.

Festivals, in turn, have their own cycle of renewal, and with the long winter months ahead, the work once again begins of booking artists, arranging venues, and planning themes and programmes, all in the hope that regular punters will be kept happy and that, despite the temptations of the competition, a healthy slice of first-timers will want to join the party. ■

A new music-electronica crossover event at this year's Aldeburgh Festival

MALCOLM WATSON

