

Chi-chi Nwanoku MBE

Chi-chi is a world-renowned musician and BBC broadcaster. Her extensive career has led to her working with some of the world's leading orchestras and ensembles. She is currently Principal Double Bassist and Founder Member of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Endymion Ensemble. Chi-chi is also a Professor of Double Bass Historical Studies at the Royal Academy of Music.

As a broadcaster Chi-chi presents Radio 3 'Requests on Sundays' for the BBC, and was a member of the jury for BBC 2 Television's 'Classical Star'.

In addition to supporting many charities, Chi-chi is a governor on the board of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, on the board of directors of the Association of British Orchestras, a member of the council of the Royal Philharmonic Society, a Patron of Music Preserved and on the board of Sphinx UK.

She was made a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music in 1998. And in 2001, Chi-chi was awarded an MBE for services to music in the Queen's Birthday honours.



Innovation, Technology and the Future of Orchestral Music

My brief for this essay was to describe how I imagine my section of the arts ten years from now. As an orchestral musician, broadcaster and advocate of the power of live classical music, I'm excited by what the future could hold for our industry, although what I would love to see and what I think I will see are not always the same thing. Over the past decade or so, orchestras have made great advances in demonstrating their impact and value on audiences and communities both in the UK and beyond. They are an important part of the British cultural landscape as well as being one of our biggest cultural exports. In 2009 alone, British orchestras visited over 25 countries, stretching from South America to the Far East, playing a total of 300 concerts outside the UK. They are renowned for excellence and innovation, attracting some of the world's leading conductors, including Rattle, Barenboim, and Gergiev at the London Symphony Orchestra and Esa-Pekka Salonen at the Philharmonia. Even in the midst of the economic downturn, the public recognises the intrinsic value of the arts. In 2009 an ICM poll conducted on behalf of the Association of British Orchestras revealed 74% of the public agreed that UK orchestras provide high quality live music, and at least two-thirds felt they were an important part of our cultural life – even in the recession.

With this strong base to work from, the next ten years are set to be an exciting time – yet also potentially daunting. As public spending cuts come, the arts will need to continue to argue its relevance and worth more than ever. New technology in particular will mean orchestras must be nimble and open to experimenting with what new opportunities it presents.

The need for orchestras to remain relevant and excellent starts and ends with innovation.

New technology: threats and opportunities

Over the past 10 years, technology has revolutionised the way we live- from self service machines at supermarkets to oyster cards on London Transport, from the internet creating global communities at a click of a button to iBooks and iPods. Yes, in many ways technology has significantly improved our everyday lives... but at a price. It also poses obvious dangers. Technology can threaten our basic day-to-day interactions with other human beings; if it enables us to do things without the need for real people then surely our various roles in society will become redundant? Gone will be the need for shop workers, librarians or London Transport workers. People

end up feeling disposable or disposed of, with little or no self-esteem, the result of which is already evident in many attitudes and behaviours across society.

This balance between the opportunity and threat of technology is no more apparent than in the field of classical music – for performers and audiences alike.

The impact of technology on orchestral concerts and how they are performed, listened to and broadcast is going to be huge. So how can orchestras grasp the opportunities that new technology presents, continue to innovate to build new audiences and take classical music to people wherever and whoever they are?

Not too long ago, the introduction of synthesizers and development of electronic music posed a potential threat to orchestras. It could have meant fewer live performances and a decline in concert-goers. Thankfully it didn't. Time has proven that the uniquely intimate experience of a live orchestral concert cannot be replaced – and that excellence in musicianship and high quality music cannot be imitated by technology.

A few years ago we saw one of the first examples of developing digital technology with the CD. Inside the BBC Proms programme was a CD Prom, in which celebrities talked about their favourite pieces of music in that particular season.

The impacts of digitisation, with the creation of podcasts and iPlayer, have provided more tools enabling us to remain in touch with anything we may have missed live.

Technology in the concert hall

In the next decade, technology is set to enhance the concert experience beyond recognition – for orchestral musicians and their audiences.

I can foresee concerts where it is increasingly likely for audiences to be more actively engaged during the performances. I can also foresee the traditional paper programme being replaced by a hand-held electronic device installed with interactive software, enabling audiences to select information on a much deeper, more detailed and informative level as and when desired.

The iPhone and iPod with their army of apps have already stormed their way onto the scene in what seems like the blink of an eye. Perhaps there will be an iPhone-type application available to purchase in the seating area of the concert hall. This service would host a range of information, including the music, the performers, the composers and, of course, advertising from sponsors (which would help fund the facility). The device could even provide access to the musical score, in addition to real-time video content of the concert, so that at any given moment you could zoom in to see what a particular section of the orchestra is playing. I also imagine the device having a mini Twitter facility, allowing the audience to tweet one another at intervals and maybe even during the performance. I do hope, however, that we don't end up with the conductor having to tweet one of the orchestral players in the middle of a performance to play a little louder! In essence, the device would merely be building on what is already taking place in the concert hall, but with the aid of technology. For example, a form of 'tweeting' already exists in operas – surtitles that appear above the stage summarising onstage narrative. But ultimately, the new device would be designed to really engage the audience in what is happening on stage. Perhaps the concert could remain on personal devices for up to seven days, similar to iPlayer, making it possible to share with friends and encouraging them to attend future concerts.

And then there's Apple's new device, the iPad, which signifies the start of a revolution in publishing, changing the way we can access and consume literature, books and other types of content. Why not take this idea into the concert hall? BT is not to be left out either, poised to introduce an as yet unnamed rival to the iPad that will also have email, web browsing and text messaging capabilities.

Technology could enhance the performance experience for the orchestral musician as well as the audience. As a Principal Double Bassist myself, I would love to see the introduction of a gadget that would enable musicians to read the music score from a digital autocue/computerised screen (at whatever font size and brightness needed) making it easier for musicians to 'turn the page', activated possibly via a small foot pedal facility or a nod of the head as opposed to manually turning the page, so the performer is free to play without missing any notes!

Building new audiences

Embracing new technology is one of the key ways of attracting a new generation of concert-goers. But ‘demystifying’ the orchestra and classical music by breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions without dumbing down is an ongoing challenge. A great recent example of how orchestras are challenging public perceptions of orchestral music was the Philharmonia’s award-winning RE-RITE digital installation – a groundbreaking audio-visual experience, allowing the audience to step inside the orchestra and access classical music in an innovative way. The installation was so successful that it received over 6,000 visitors in its two-week duration.

Technological innovation must be coupled with other innovative ideas from orchestras to broaden their reach. For example, orchestras already play outside the traditional concert hall in unexpected settings – such as airports, schools and shopping centres. Performers are already beginning to wear different (perhaps less formal) clothing, also performing different genres of music – all without compromising on excellence.

A great example of this is the ‘Night Shift’, a programme created by William Norris at the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE) and Marshall Marcus, formerly Chief Executive of the OAE, now Head of Music at the Southbank Centre, that does just this, attracting a fresh range of concert-goers with its unique approach and relaxed, informal environment. It’s not just a concert; it includes opportunities for real discussion between the audience and performers between pieces, and less formal protocol where audience can bring drinks into the auditorium and go in and out to refill as necessary (although they rarely do). There’s a DJ-type presenter who facilitates the discussions and encourages audience and orchestra to convene in the bar area afterwards to continue them. It’s a more interactive and holistic experience, helping to bring the audience closer to the orchestra, and vice versa, minimising misconceptions – but the excellence of the music still remains.

In the future, I would love to see this type of approach evolving, where orchestral music has a more ‘inviting’ feel to a wider audience.

Innovation in the arts broadcasting

The way orchestral music is broadcast and delivered digitally to audiences is also a key part in the future of our industry. And I think much more needs to be done to make the arts an accessible and attractive option on mainstream TV and radio, reaching the maximum possible viewers.

Despite the success of reality TV shows like ‘The Choir’ there is still work to be done. The BBC Proms is the largest classical music festival in the world, and a perfect example of high quality arts programming on mainstream TV. It attracted over 12 million television viewers during its 2009 season – but even this is only once a year.

The future of arts programming lies in adopting a format similar to how sport is broadcast. Indeed, there is a striking number of similarities between sport and the arts; they are both universal ‘languages’ understood worldwide irrespective of language or background, for example. Just look at football. Given the chance, music has the capacity to reach massive audiences worldwide, just as football does. Equally profound, both professions are among the few in the world where the public pay to see the workers at work, which I find fascinating. We know there’s a public appetite for orchestral music, and it’s up to presenters and broadcasters, myself included, to build on that appetite and to be inventive with how the arts are presented on screen and on the airwaves.

It would be great if concerts on TV were broadcast with interval commentary, including insight into what’s going on behind the scenes. There could be coverage of how the musicians felt beforehand and backstage interviews – and I don’t just mean with the soloists and conductors. The commentary, similar to football, would be a panel of ‘expert voices’ drawn from the classical world and beyond, offering a variety of views. This would work particularly well for TV, where there is an interest in the ‘how to’ of doing something as well as the thing itself. There could be explanation of how an orchestra works, including behind the scenes rehearsals, discussions, and backstage bickering captured in addition to the concert itself. This would humanise the concert process. The BBC Proms coverage is already paving the way into this approach, but there’s a whole lot more that can be done.

What I find tragic is how some of our visual broadcasting reduces what we see to minimal soundbites of someone’s performance, almost as though we’re terrified of losing the viewers if more than two minutes of a piece is shown concurrently. If cricket, golf, snooker, darts and football can hold viewers for hours and sometimes days on end, surely equally highly skilled musicians’ performances deserve as much of a look-in?

I would also like to see the best in arts coverage from specialist channels such as Sky Arts given a chance on mainstream TV as a part of terrestrial programming. We need to ensure people have the opportunity to see and experience orchestral music in the comfort of their own home.

The future

The arts are an intrinsically valuable part of any society and it will be exciting to see how arts performance and broadcasting evolve over the next ten years. As I've outlined, technology will obviously play an important role in how the sector develops and innovates. However, it's only part of the story. Whether it is through collaboration and exchanging knowledge and ideas from across the arts sector and beyond, or radically re-thinking how the arts can be made more accessible, or taking advantage of world-class events like the Olympics on our doorstep – the arts have a great opportunity to make an even greater impact.