

Why 1637?

How music functions as a language

Why study music?

For that matter, what is there to study about music?

These are questions that people do sometimes ask, and which seem particularly relevant at a time when we're busy revising and re-launching our Certificate in Music at Lancaster.

“After all”, they say, “surely music – listening to music, playing music or whatever – is just music, whereas studying its history, for instance, is nothing to do with the actual experience of music itself”.

So to start us off today, I'd like to talk about a little bit of music history. This lecture asks the question “Why 1637?” 1637 is just a historical date. Descartes wrote his *Discourse on method*, Ferdinand III became Holy Roman Emperor and the first public opera house was opened, in Venice. Three events that are of interest to historians, but is the opening of an opera house 370 years ago of any real interest to a musician?

We can start to answer this question by looking at what was changed by this event. To put it rather over-simply, if you had lived in, say, the 1500s, there were three situations in which you might have heard music:

- One was folk music – the music that ordinary people played themselves, or that was played by travelling entertainers
- Another was church music – at least if you were able to go to some big monastic church or cathedral
- And the third was ceremonial music, either heralding pageantry, war or great events, or if you happened to be attached to some princely court, being played for sophisticated entertainment.

If you look at music history books, by the way, they all miss out the folk music, even though it was the type of music that most people heard and the type of music which, in my opinion, drove all technical developments in music. It's just that it wasn't written down, nor was it described or written about because the people who could write were the clerics or the courtiers, who were all more interested in church music and courtly music. But we'll argue this point another time.

The music that does get talked about – the “composed” music was all heard, as I've just said, in church or at court; or, to put it another way, if you were a composer then you were paid by one or other of these and therefore wrote the sort of music they would want. What sort of music was that? If you composed music for the church, then it was church music – rather conservative, traditional vocal music – nothing too fancy or provocative (though a number of composers were pranksters in the spirit of that age and built in all kinds of jokes). If you wrote for the court then you wrote posh

music – either well-educated clever stuff or pompous and extravagant music for ceremonials. In either case, you were composing to an agenda, and that agenda did not require you to write catchy tunes that people would enjoy.

The opening of the first-ever public opera house in 1637 signalled a radical change to all this. For the first time, anyone with enough money (which incidentally ruled out most of the population – it wasn't actually that democratic) could buy a ticket to come and listen – or, to put it another way, it was only by writing music that ordinaryish people actually wanted to listen to that a composer earned his living. The result of this is that the development of music style followed not so much the traditions or the theory of what it ought to be, as what people could relate to and were excited by. 1637 was the year pop music was invented.

We chuckle a bit at that thought, but actually there are huge parallels between popular music of the end of the 1600s and at the end of the 1900s. Both captivated and excited a genuinely large proportion of the population (not just people who claimed an interest in traditional music), both were in a sense anti-traditional, rather rebellious, both were very heavily marketed (publishers rushing out new music by the favourite composers), frequently pirated, ephemeral in the sense that last year's music was old hat; and if truth be told even the musical structure – the way the music was actually put together – was the same.

Well, there's your bit of music history for today – and it's the sort of thing we might take up in more depth in our history of music course. But does it actually tell us anything we want to know about how to perform, write or listen to music?

At the very heart of the story we've just told about 1637 is music's power to connect with us, to communicate with us. It's enormously potent at doing that. It's why I can go and give concerts in places where I don't speak the language – Brazil, Greece, Glasgow. It's ridiculously trite but nevertheless true to say that although they've no idea what I'm talking about we can communicate because we speak the same musical language.

I think I have to tell you a story at this point. Twenty years ago this summer I went to do a very exotic concert tour on a group of small islands in the Arctic. I'd no idea what I was going to – and even less idea that it was such a captivating place that I would end up going back the following year to live there – but that's another story. At the time of those concerts I didn't speak the language and relied on Helge, an interpreter, to help me tell the audience about the music I was playing. One of the works on the programme was by the French composer Joseph Bonnet, and was called "Elves". So as I stood there in the middle of the concert trying to tell people about this, the interpreter suddenly looked at me blankly. "Elves?" "Yes, like ... little people who aren't really there". "Uh?". I hastily tried another tack. "Fairies?". "Ah yes", said Helge, "no problem – we have plenty of those here". And he turned to the audience and launched into an explanation, along with lots of puzzling hand-waving. "What did you just tell them, Helge?", I had to ask. "That this music is all about boats going from island to island". Now it was my turn to look bemused. "Ferries", he said, "we use them all the time".

In that particular instance a dictionary would have been handy, but communication is actually about a whole lot more than individual words. Today, for instance, is the 17th of May. If I were to ask what that means to you, unless it's your birthday or something you'd probably look fairly blank and say: "yes, it's the day after the sixteenth". If I say "17th of May" to someone in Norway, then we immediately have a shared understanding and image of a parade and church service, of sausages and party food, the year's first ice cream, brass bands, games in the village school. Seventeenth of May is Independence Day and it's celebrated in style. So language presupposes a common understanding: it assumes that those sounds or symbols appeal to a shared cultural and emotional experience – and boy, isn't that something that we lack in international relations at the moment. Not to push the point too much, a classic example of this is found right at the beginning of the Bible, where in Genesis 11 there's a strange little story that is probably the most profound turning point, in fact the springboard from which the whole Old Testament narrative starts – the Tower of Babel. Something happens as a result of which people just don't speak the same language any more, and that sets in motion the whole train of events of the Old Testament.

Back to music. Here's a little musical phrase.



That final chord was unexpected. Wrong, even. But what was wrong about it? How can we define something as right and something else as not right?

Here's a sentence in English. "A rolling stone gathers no bananas".

That's an identical problem, in its way. With people from the English department around, I hesitate to say that there's nothing grammatically wrong with the sentence, but as a statement it seems true enough. What was wrong is that we have a common set of expectations and experiences – that shared cultural understanding that we were just talking about – which makes us expect the word "moss" at the end of the sentence. We've heard the phrase many times, we've perhaps used it. Just the same with that musical phrase.



We've heard it lots of times in different contexts. It's a formula, and it works by telling us, "you know where you are – you know what's coming next". In manipulating that comfortable formula we're also manipulating emotions. By giving you that sense of expectation and then suddenly snatching it away, you're being set up to experience something. If I said a sentence like:

Stone-eared frogs fly bananas

– equally grammatical – that final “bananas” is no longer incongruous simply because the rest of it is so weird that we’re not setting you up for any particular expectation.

Similarly a musical phrase like:





But that comes right at the end of a piece throughout which he has conformed to all the conventions, and the only reason that this amazing set of chords shocks us rigid is that we've come to expect something entirely different. Had Scriabin written the same chords we'd have thought: "that was a bit ordinary".

Music's effect depends entirely on its rebellion against a shared cultural experience – in just the same way as poetry, literature or any other creative art.

There's a lot of talk today that music has "lost its way". "This modern classical music", people say, "sounds like just a cacophony of random noises". There's a vast gulf between "classical music" and "pop music", between Radio 3 and Radio 1. I don't of hand know of anyone who regularly listens to both.

Just as a by-the-way, I have to throw in a little quote, written by a writer belonging to what we might term the "Radio 1 group", in which he describes people who like older classical music as:

"Gropers into Antique Musick, and Hummers of Madrigals, they swoon at the Sight of any Piece modern"

That description was written in 1734 by the unknown author of a book entitled *Harmony in an Uproar*.

Personally, for what it's worth, I think that classical music is now heading towards re-discovering its own level. One of the fundamental problems that modern classical music has experienced is the imperative to become constantly original and innovative. Every piece has to break new ground and establish its own grammar and conventions. But as we've seen, music is about communicating – it's a language – and as such it depends on some level of shared experience and prior expectation precisely so that it can challenge those

expectations. If the composer abandons that platform of experience and expectation in the name of innovation, then the music fails to communicate adequately. This is why “modern classical music” has increasingly become a minority interest appealing to a special group, a particular intelligentsia – like that very small group in a position to appreciate the special cultured music before 1637. In recent years, though, there’s been a great revival in older “classical” music and I dare to suggest that whilst Radio 1 and Radio 3 listeners remain distinct, there’s a certain overlap of people who listen to Classic FM. We’ve not got time today to analyse what that means, but I want to leave you with two thoughts.

Firstly, in our post-1637 world of the public concert, the composers whose music has survived the test of time and is still regarded as “great” were not those who were reactionary and conservative, nor those who were deliberately, mind-blowingly revolutionary, but were those who understood how to get on a level with their audience and then pull them into new experiences. And these were all craftsmen composers who wrote a lot of music to deadlines – whether because they were employees like Bach, or because they had to meet commercial deadlines like Mozart and Beethoven – they were kept rooted in reality by a sense of functionality. Where do you find this category of composer today? I would argue that the closest we’ve got to that model is composers of film music. This is the group of composers who write functional music with an absolute requirement to meet with and expand the listeners’ emotions in a powerful but unselfconscious way. We can’t ever know, but I have a feeling that in the music histories 300 years hence, “Hedwig’s Song” will be analysed as part of that process of the re-definition of classical music at the beginning of the 21st century, just as Vivaldi’s concertos are seen as part of the re-definition process 300 years earlier.

Secondly, I believe that the definition between “new” music and “old” music is a false one, and that it is being steadily eroded. When I played you that passage earlier that ended in a “wrong” note, you felt that that final chord was wrong on the basis of your prior experience. If I played it another 10 times now, it would cease to be unexpected and therefore you wouldn’t be regarding it as “wrong” in quite the same way, even though the notes would remain the same. If then we argue that music is that perpetual conflict between expectation and actual experience, then the “act” of music, as it were, is not in the composing but in the hearing. Every time you hear a piece of music it is a new experience, and an experience that is assessed on the basis of the sum of your experiences up to that moment. When you put on a CD of Gregorian Chant in the car to wash away your frustrations at being stuck in a traffic jam on the M6, this is a thoroughly contemporary experience. The monks who heard it 800 years ago were not sitting in traffic jams on the M6 and their experience of the music was radically different to our own. All music is concerned its effect on the listener; music, you can argue doesn’t exist except when it’s being listened to. Music – even the study of music history – is all about now.