

Interview **Gerard McBurney**



Gerard McBurney © Todd Rosenberg

'Audience development' is a buzzword these days – nowhere more so than at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, where for ten years the composer, writer and broadcaster Gerard McBurney has directed the *Beyond The Score* series. This is no half-hearted affair but a full evening's entertainment involving the entire orchestra with top conductors, actors, singers and a full bag of technical wizardry, as Christopher Gillett discovers.

How did the *Beyond the Score* series come about?

The private business people who mostly pay for these art forms run businesses in which they try to get their message across, and they find it very frustrating that the arts organisations that they're helping to pay for sometimes make very little effort to get their message across.

In the days when [Solti \(/uk/learn/artists/georg-solti\)](#) was music director in Chicago, subscriptions used to sell out. It became a real problem: 'How do you get a ticket for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra?' Now it's very different, and the people in the classical music world tear their hair out: 'What is it we've failed to do? Why doesn't anyone love us anymore?' A big part of it depends on cultural forces that are way, way beyond the control of cultural organisations. The range of choices for what people do with their time and their money has increased vastly.

So, has it put bums on seats?

Yes, definitely. We are building new audiences and at the same time we're drawing in subscribers who have been listening to this music all their lives and would like to know more. We do three projects a year, two performances of each. We've moved the Friday afternoon slot to Friday evenings, which is a good time for the young crowd. The weekend is just beginning and they're not necessarily going out to get absolutely hammered on a Friday night. It's really changed the demographic of our audience.

And what about the more conservative subscribers and donors?

When I was first at the CSO, [Pierre Boulez \(/uk/learn/composers/pierre-boulez\)](#) did a concert that consisted of an orchestral piece by [Ravel \(/uk/learn/composers/maurice-ravel\)](#), a piano concerto by [Ligeti \(/uk/learn/composers/gyoergy-ligeti\)](#), and *The Miraculous Mandarin* by [Bartók \(/uk/learn/composers/bela-bartok\)](#). A letter came in complaining about modern music. The Ligeti can be described as the modern music, the Ravel and Bartók, hardly.

Nothing should be familiar, otherwise there's no point in being alive

It fell to me to answer, so I wrote and said: 'I'm very sorry you feel that way, I thought it was a magnificent concert, and here's a couple of reasons why...' – to which I received a much angrier letter back. 'You don't seem to understand the meaning of music. The meaning of music is to be uplifting and to be familiar.'

I think of the greatest artistic experiences of my life as being ones that completely shook the foundations of what I took for granted. Nothing should be familiar, otherwise there's no point in being alive. The task of the artist is to make the familiar strange. As it says in the Bible: to make it anew. I'm not an expert on Brecht, but I'm sure that's what he said too, to make something strange. To me it's really, really crucial.

Isn't that a paradox, given that the chalkboard version of what you're doing is to help people understand the unfamiliar?

There is a paradox. But it's rooted in the fact that that's what I believe we should all be doing.

I absolutely refuse to look on *Beyond The Score* as in any way explaining these pieces. I have no desire to explain any work of art. I have a desire that we should read the world around us. That means being aware of the texture, the smell, the taste, the culture out of which the work of art came. What did these people believe in? What did they have for breakfast? What were the spiritual and intellectual structures that they inherited?

How has the series developed over the last ten years?

When I look at the shows that I made when I first went there, they're unrecognisable compared to the shows I make now. The technology is so much better, I've taken greater risks with each show, they're more dramatic. From the very first show I had theatre elements in there. I realised it was the theatrical elements that work the audience up. The thing to do was to remove the elements of a lecture, to purify the form and to try and invent a new form in which the material, the imagery, the music, the space, the lighting, told its own story without having a guy there with a funny accent saying: 'This is the story.'

What are we doing in these art-forms? We're trying to make people cry

Some composers work better than others: with [Berlioz \(/uk/learn/composers/hector-berlioz\)](#), [Wagner \(/uk/learn/composers/richard-wagner\)](#) and [Schoenberg \(/uk/learn/composers/arnold-schoenberg\)](#) you have composers who led double lives as writers and journalists, so you have an astronomical amount of material, including a lot of attempts to explain what they were doing. For instance, Schoenberg lectured about the 'Tristan' chord to his pupils, and the language that he used to explain the power of Wagner is really fascinating. So I had a scene with a group of people talking about the significance of the 'Tristan' chord, and it's all taken from Schoenberg. And there's another scene where I spliced what [Richard Strauss \(/uk/learn/composers/richard-strauss\)](#) said about Wagner and what von Bülow said about Wagner to make a dialogue where these two men are arguing about the music. It's very vivid, because it's real material.

If you know what you're doing theatrically, interweaving narrative into the music can be extraordinarily dramatic – it's a question of how you tell the story. You have to make the examples work with enough power that once the music comes back in, people cry. That's the most important thing. My brother and I always agree: what are we doing in these art-forms? We're trying to make people cry.

Isn't the US way behind the UK on this sort of thing?

It's absolutely not true that the US is behind the UK with its outreach programmes. The CSO has an entire department headed up by Yo-Yo Ma. It's vast. It's just been given another huge donation. In a way, we're more advanced in America because it's possible to raise much larger sums of money through donations. Though of course the American situation certainly has its flip side. But I've had staggering support in Chicago.

The hundred-odd, sometimes very odd, musicians of the CSO were very suspicious of me when I started

America has a giant talent at creating communities out of nothing. The hundred-odd, sometimes very odd, musicians of the CSO were very suspicious of me when I started. As one musician said to me: 'What is it about what we do that isn't good enough?. For the last ten years it has been a real journey with those hundred musicians, getting to know them, discovering what they want to say about the music, what they want to say about the way they play music, so that *Beyond The Score* has become much more than being about these pieces; it's become about the art of playing together, the art of playing instruments. It's an incredible bunch of people. Perhaps my greatest experience in Chicago has been getting to know the musicians and learning how to make a show that isn't about me – it's about them and the music they play.

What's coming up this season?

Our show for [Boulez \(/uk/learn/composers/pierre-boulez\)](#) at 90 [the composer turns 90 in March 2015] is a kind of chamber drama following up on the one I made with him and for him, about *Pierrot Lunaire*. It's an homage to him and his life and the journey he's been on. I'm using all kinds of new projection techniques which my friend the projections artist Mike Tutaj has been showing me and I think it's going to be a very beautiful show.



A Pierre Dream: A Portrait of Pierre Boulez

from **Sinfini Music** PRO

01:14

Video courtesy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

I'm also doing [Brahms \(/uk/learn/composers/johannes-brahms\)](/uk/learn/composers/johannes-brahms)'s Third Symphony with Edo de Waart. That will be all about asking: 'How do we listen to music that works like that? How do we get right inside the structure of the piece?'

The last one is a sort of portrait of [Ravel \(/uk/learn/composers/maurice-ravel\)](/uk/learn/composers/maurice-ravel) based on his house outside Paris. Each of the shows has a very different approach, although they're each about men who didn't marry or have lovers... there's a certain something that they have in common. All three are very, very refined: men who liked organising their music very precisely. That's the sort of theme for this year.

If you had an unlimited budget, what would you do to change the way we experience classical music?

I would completely rebuild the spaces in which classical music takes place. I would make them much more porous, adaptable, beautiful to be in, accessible, able to accommodate any collection of musicians under any circumstances, and above all I would insist that the design of these spaces be not only incredibly alluring so that everyone wants to go there, but that they would bring everyone in the hall really close to the musicians. Because I think we have to get away from the bourgeois culture pattern of the 19th century. Everything to me is about bringing people close.

The next *Beyond the Score* project, 'A Pierre Dream: A Portrait of Pierre Boulez', pays tribute the life and work of the composer who celebrates his 90th birthday in early 2015. The concerts take place at Chicago's Symphony Center on 14 and 16 November (<http://cso.org/TicketsAndEvents/EventDetails.aspx?eid=6530>).

Christopher Gillett is a singer, a writer and regular columnist for Sinfini Music (</uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-who-lose-the-plot>).

Recommended





Pierre Boulez:
Oeuvres complètes

Pierre Boulez, Pierre-
Laurent Aimard, Sophie
Cherrier, BBC Symphony
Listen / Buy

(uk/store/products/00028948868299)