

Should Simon Rattle get his hall?



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Does London really need a new concert hall? Simon Rattle, recently confirmed as the LSO's music director from 2017, certainly seems to think so – and in the run-up to a general election, he has a couple of heavyweight politicians on his side. Tenor Christopher Gillett reviews existing London halls and can't see the need for a new one.



Most musicians I know are wary of political promises about The Arts, especially with a general election around the corner. We're in the classical music business, after all – about as sexy, politically-speaking, as train-spotters. Who can remember the last time a political candidate said: 'I love classical music – vote for me to keep Brahms (</uk/learn/composers/johannes-brahms>) in safe hands'? No, it will be The Arctic Monkeys, or whomever their advisers think is politically expedient.

Classical musicians are used to being ignored, accustomed to being the bride who is forever jilted at the altar of political necessity. So I'm rather surprised that George Osborne and Boris Johnson have thrown their weight behind Simon Rattle (</uk/learn/artists/simon-rattle>)'s new concert hall. OK, so Osborne is supposedly a Wagner (</uk/learn/composers/richard-wagner>) fan, but he tends to keep that under his hat, knowing it sounds as politically appealing as supporting Bayern Munich in the Champions League. (That's the first and last time you'll ever hear a football reference from me.)

If audience numbers are falling, I don't think it's because of a growing dissatisfaction with acoustics

As a performer, I'm a bit baffled by the call for a new hall, as are a lot of the singers I've spoken to. Of course I like singing in a lovely acoustic – given the means, I'd transport Amsterdam's Concertgebouw and its generous acoustics to every corner of the earth. But I'm not the one paying to listen to the concerts. If audience numbers are falling, I don't think it's because of a growing dissatisfaction with

acoustics. Perhaps a spiffy new venue for the digital age *could* fix the numbers problem, but I honestly don't know. At the moment it all sounds so fanciful. I suspect that by next week Osborne and Johnson will be throwing their weight behind something else. Something related to sport, probably.

If my opinion about acoustics really did matter, then there'd be nothing to stop me pointing out (before, say, a performance at the Royal Opera House) that any shortcomings in my tone quality could only be the fault of the rather tricky acoustic, which can feel at times like singing into a sock; while in the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires (or in the shower), I sound shit-hot.

But because you might just be curious, here's what I think of London's current crop of halls. For a singer, the [Barbican](http://www.barbican.org.uk/) (<http://www.barbican.org.uk/>) feels quite friendly, but I do know that the sound tends to drop off in the auditorium. The first time I sang in the [Royal Festival Hall](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/venues/royal-festival-hall/) (<http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/venues/royal-festival-hall/>) it felt so dry that my heart sank, but in the grand scheme of things it's actually pretty good. There's something lean about the sound that is married to the time the RFH was built. It's like a vinyl record as opposed to a CD.

The Wigmore Hall is a marvel: so saucy, it's slutty

As for the other London halls, the [QEH](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/venues/queen-elizabeth-hall/) (<http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/venues/queen-elizabeth-hall/>) is great to sing in, as is [St John's Smith Square](http://www.sjss.org.uk/) (<http://www.sjss.org.uk/>), the [Cadogan Hall](http://www.cadoganhall.com/) (<http://www.cadoganhall.com/>) less so, and the [Wigmore](http://wigmore-hall.org.uk/) (<http://wigmore-hall.org.uk/>) is a marvel: so saucy, it's slutty. I've never sung in the [Purcell Room](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/venues/purcell-room/) (<http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/venues/purcell-room/>) or in [King's Place](http://www.kingsplace.co.uk/) (<http://www.kingsplace.co.uk/>) and almost certainly never will. Oh, and the [Royal Albert Hall](http://www.royalalberthall.com/) (<http://www.royalalberthall.com/>) is mildly ludicrous. You just have to go for it and hope for the best. My, what a lot of halls.

Anyway, good luck to Sir Simon – I'm not going to stand in his way. He, after all, is a rather important arts leader, and my opinion counts for nothing. If it will secure his return to Britain, I hope he gets his hall. If he doesn't, I hope he'll come anyway. London will, I suspect, be more impoverished by his absence than by the lack of another concert hall.

Read more of [Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs) ([/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs)). The tenor's own blog is christophergillett.co.uk ([http://christophergillett.co.uk/](http://christophergillett.co.uk)).

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