

Various ways of breaking the sound barrier

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Recently I listened with pleasure to a recording of Joby Talbot's trumpet concerto. Joby who? If, like me, your taste tends towards classical music rather than pop or crossover, you may not be familiar with the name. Talbot's music is little known outside the UK, and he has yet to establish a niche in concert programmes up and down the country. That is not surprising. Talbot earns a living by composing for film and advertising – more lucrative, and reaching a much larger public, than his classical counterparts, most of whom have to eke out a living by teaching. And yet, to judge by his trumpet concerto, Talbot can legitimately call himself a classical composer. The three-movement work pushes all the right buttons in terms of formal design, expressiveness, seriousness and sustainability. The more I listened to it, the more I liked it.

That sets him apart from other composers who try to straddle the worlds of classical music and media music. Most composers from pop and film write in a style that is too slick or superficial for classical performers. It is true that John Williams, king of Hollywood composers, has written some excellent music, but his classical compositions are caught in a time warp. Michael Nyman would love to be taken seriously in the classical world, but his music does not bear repeated listening outside its visual context. There are other good film composers, but few are interested in writing a classical three-movement concerto like Talbot's. Most have a mindset that responds only to visual media. It is much the same with jazz composers: fine in their own field, but getting their music to walk on a classical concert platform is something else.

It has always been easier the other way. Ravel fell in love with jazz; Walton and Britten wrote successfully for film. They profited from the techniques they learned. But over the past 40 years, a barrier has grown up between classical and popular, impeding the free flow of ideas from one genre to the other. Unlike distinguished predecessors such as Verdi and Shostakovich, most of today's classical composers turn up their noses at writing in a popular style, and when they do try it, it sounds cheesy. It is simply not done for a classical composer to write music for television adverts or pop groups. That would be bowing to the marketplace, where the film director or the ratings chart calls the tune, not the composer's creative conscience.

Talbot, a 35-year-old Londoner, is no stranger to the marketplace. He was part of the UK pop phenomenon The Divine Comedy in the early 1990s before he had even finished his studies. As an arranger, he has worked with Travis, Tom Jones and Paul McCartney. He wrote the score for *The League of Gentlemen*. He also made arrangements of music by The White Stripes pop group that choreographer Wayne MacGregor used for a Royal Ballet commission.

But Talbot has a traditional conservatoire training. His teachers were reputable figures in the classical world. As a performer (he still plays oboe in a four-piece band), he knows how to write slick music. But he can also write serious, in a way that is neither jarring nor esoteric. His trumpet concerto – as Alison Balsom demonstrated at its Liverpool premiere last year – is anything but anodyne.

Being anodyne is the curse of music that aims to appeal as quickly as possible to as many as possible. There is a lot of anodyne film music because many film composers rehash other music. Even Joby Talbot confesses to writing his share of inconsequential music and you cannot blame him: in most films there are stretches of "underscore" that get buried beneath dialogue and sound effects. If you are under pressure to write three minutes of music a day for three weeks – most film composers' lot – it is no surprise if you fall back on clichés.

But music need not be bland just because it comes from a mind that thinks in a multi-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary way. *Smear*, an orchestral work by Jonny Greenwood of the pop group Radiohead, is the work of an original mind. Listen to the music of Thomas Newman, Mark Mothersbaugh and Alexandre Desplat, all successful in Hollywood, and you may recognise that, unlike 30 or 40 years ago, the best of today's film music does not lag far behind the classical mainstream.

In any field there will be rubbish and quality, not always determined by what sells most. Some of Joby Talbot's music – such as the month-by-month calendar of pieces he wrote while resident composer at the Classic FM commercial radio station – does strike me as, well, ephemeral. He would doubtless argue that there was no point trying to reach all those listeners with music that might put them off at the start. And I would agree.

Classical music in the US has never had a problem about creating new music from disparate elements: think of Steve Reich, Philip Glass and John Adams. But as Geoffrey Burgon, composer of a *Nunc Dimittis* that got into the 1979 pop charts, says, "you have to be careful [in the UK]. If you have a popular success, the classical music establishment will not acknowledge that you are able to write serious stuff as well."

His success is evidence that the climate is changing. In 2004 he wrote a piece for the Proms that went down well with those who played and heard it. His next commission is a 70-minute dance piece for the Orchestre National de Lille, to be choreographed by Carolyn Carlson.

As a classical music critic, I admire him for voicing the old elitist dictum that "if 15 people go to a concert and listen intently, that's got to be better than thousands of people hearing it [in a cinema, on iPod or on air] and ignoring it." At the same time I accept his argument that writing music for modern media has made him a better composer.

"You can learn a lot," he says, "from doing a disco version of *My Way* [the Frank Sinatra song that Talbot arranged

for a television advert]. I wish my elders and betters [in the classical world] could loosen up and do the occasional piece for the cinema. They might have to write faster, but they'd find that all the people who are frightened away by their music in the concert hall would be compelled by it with the right visual stimulus."

The difference between Talbot and his peers is that he is musically ambidextrous – as gifted in classical as he is at pop. As an adolescent he had an intense relationship with both, writing pieces for his band while learning the classical craft. If he had stuck to a contemporary classical vein he would have consigned himself to the periphery of 21st-century musical culture. That's why he seized the alternative opportunities that came his way. But by composing only for a mass market, he would have missed out on something he enjoys and values. "I relish the prospect of trying to reunite those worlds," he says.

And since you ask what Mozart or Purcell would be doing if they were alive now, my answer is: following Talbot's example, of course.

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