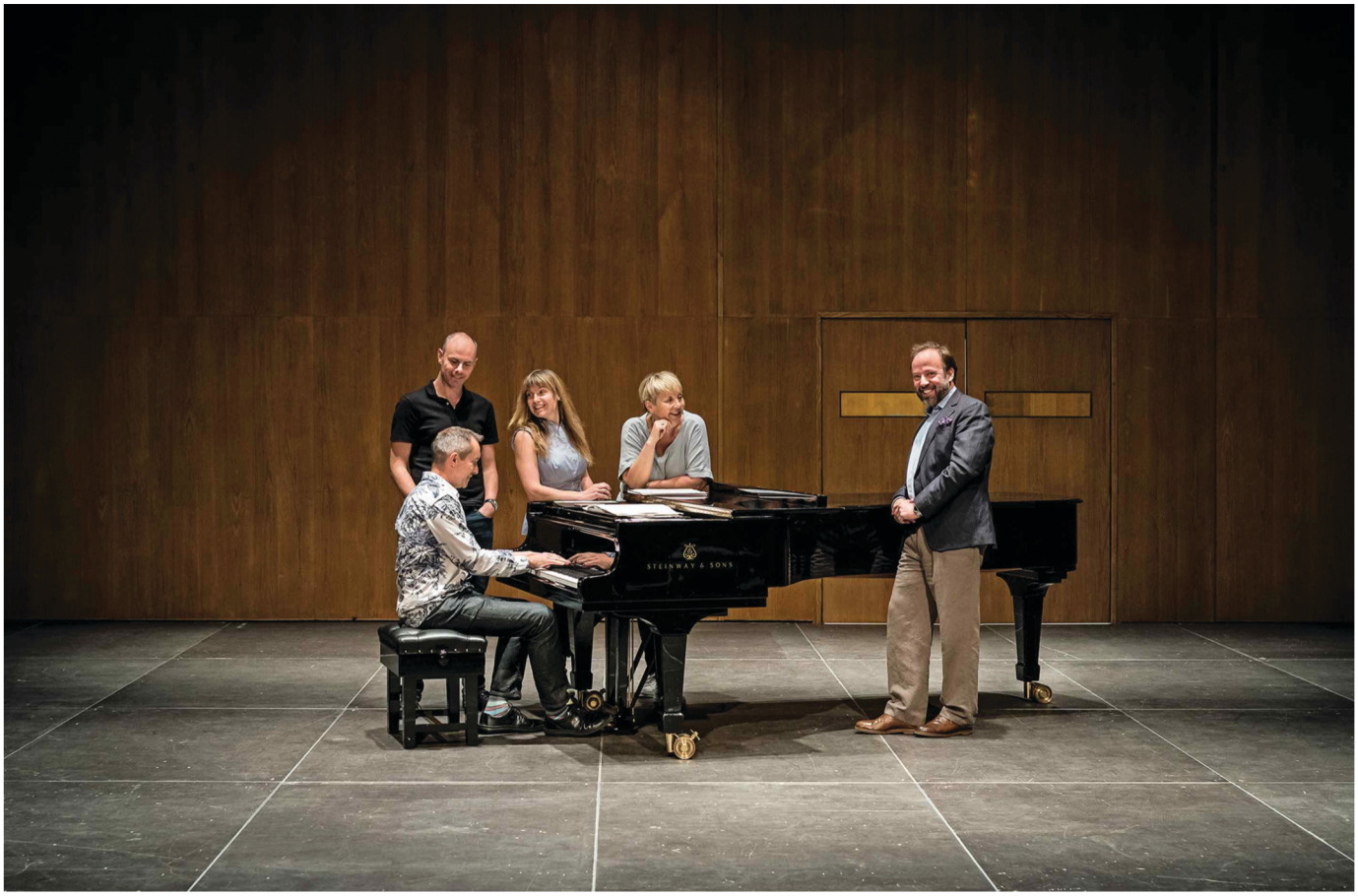
The 21st century patrons commissioning classical music masterpieces

Patrons of classical music are upping the tempo by commissioning ambitious works to be performed live, recorded or broadcast for all to enjoy. Alex Marshall reports. Portrait by Sebastian Boettcher



From far left: composer Jonathan Dove (seated), pianist Andrew Matthews-Owen, soprano Claire Booth, mezzo-soprano Susan Bickley and classical music philanthropist Richard Thomas prepare for a world premiere of a composition by Dove for the recital Remembering Debussy in the Southbank Centre's Purcell Room | Image: Sebastian Boettcher

WHERE TO FIND

Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, bcmg.org.uk. New Music USA, newmusicusa.org. Richard Thomas Foundation, rtfn.eu. Third Ear, thirdear.co.uk.

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For his 40th birthday, Richard Thomas, chief executive of pensions firm XPS Administration, was given an unexpected present: a season ticket to Wigmore Hall, the ornate Victorian concert hall in London's Marylebone. He had been to classical concerts before – his grandfather took him to his first, a performance of Mahler's Symphony No 5 at the Royal Festival Hall, when he was just eight ("We sat in a box and they brought us champagne in the interval," he says). But he had long left that musical world behind for punk and reggae. Thomas couldn't ignore the gift, though – it was from his wife – so he forced himself to go once a week.

"I hated it to begin with," he says, sitting in a café near the Festival Hall. "I'd sit in the concerts thinking, 'What the hell am I doing here? I can't cope with these noises. They're horrible.' Then after about six months, I suddenly got it." Now he admits to being something of a classical music "obsessive", adding, "Whatever I become interested in, I tend to pursue it to its logical conclusion. So, for classical music, since becoming a concert pianist was never realistic, I began commissioning instead. And it's been so much fun."

Thomas (right) and Dove in the Purcell Room | Image: Sebastian Boettcher

Thomas is now arguably the UK's foremost private individual who commissions classical music, akin to the patrons of old who supported composers from Mozart to Tchaikovsky. In 2009, he set up the Richard Thomas Foundation to commission works, currently totalling 15, ranging from preludes to an operatic duet, both from celebrated up-and-comers, such as British millennials Hannah Kendall and Charlotte Bray, to more established names, including Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson (who sadly died in February) and British composer Jonathan Dove. The Foundation was also one of the main co-commissioning parties of the 2012 Radiohead-inspired *Radio Rewrite* by American minimalist Steve Reich for the London Sinfonietta. Thomas often premieres works in the Southbank Centre's Purcell Room – when we meet, he's translating some French poetry for his next concert's programme. He has also created record labels Junk IBU and RTF Classical to ensure pieces are widely heard.

Unlike many classical music philanthropists, Thomas is intimately involved in each composer's creative process. Others may donate to orchestras or concert halls – André Hoffmann, vice-chairman of pharmaceutical group Roche, for instance, funds Wigmore Hall's new music programme – but Thomas invites composers he loves to tea at Soho House to talk ideas and new directions. "I once said to André, 'You're missing the fun bit!' The fun bit isn't writing the cheque; it's sitting with the composer and being part of the creation."

Thomas's commissioning journey began with another milestone birthday. When he was nearing 50, he thought it would be fun to commission a piece for the party. "I used to buy a lot of art," he says – his flat in Little Venice includes abstract works by German contemporary artist Thilo Heinzmann – "and if I liked somebody's painting, I'd commission something. So why couldn't I do that for music?" He had just fallen for some piano pieces by the minimalist composer Laurence Crane – "The most beautiful things I'd ever heard" – so asked his children's piano teacher if he could arrange an introduction. Fortunately, the teacher was the acclaimed pianist Andrew Matthews-Owen, so soon Thomas and Crane were meeting in Soho House and discussing the project.

Crane ended up writing a 26-minute work for piano and string quartet, a piece that starts off as a waltz and quickly becomes, in Crane's words, "a demented and rather leaden-footed folk dance". It's a stunning piece – if slightly unusual for a birthday – and it's unsurprising to learn it's been performed multiple times. It cost Thomas under £10,000 (a relative bargain, as top-rate composers like Crane normally charge around £1,000 per minute of music composed). "I suppose in the months leading up to the party, I was thinking, 'This is all about me. Look how grand I am!'" Thomas says, with a smile. "But the more it went on, the more I ended up finding pleasure in being able to help Laurence create something he otherwise wouldn't have done. I just wanted to do it again."

British composer Charlotte Bray

Back in the 1700s, private commissions were classical music's lifeblood. But such patronage dropped away in the 1900s with the rise of professional orchestras, who commissioned music themselves, and music publishers, who tried to control the process. Some individuals still came to the fore, such as Sergei Diaghilev, founder of Paris's Ballets Russes, who commissioned Igor Stravinsky's great works, including *The Rite of Spring* (the premiere of which was underwritten by Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel). More recently, Betty Freeman – "a modern-day Medici" according to *The New York Times* – used her inheritance to support every composer who took her fancy, until her death in 2009. She saved avant-garde composer Harry Partch from a life on the streets and gave experimental pioneer John Cage an annual grant to do with as he pleased. Minimalist John Adams dedicated his acclaimed opera *Nixon in China* to her.

Today, Freeman's role in the US has arguably been taken by Justus Schlichting and his wife Elizabeth. Schlichting, a childhood trombonist and more recent cellist ("Professional cellists look at me with wonderment and horror," he says) sold his healthcare financial services company, S&S Datalink, in 2011. He expected to spend his retirement in Laguna Beach doing "costly sports" – sailing, flying – but had a change of heart after a performance of Beethoven's "Razumovsky" string quartets. "I was sitting there having an incredibly emotional response to the music and realised someone back then had made it all possible – this Razumovsky. And I suddenly thought, 'I don't know who he was.' It turned out he was just fascinating."

The late Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson

American minimalist Steve Reich

Andrey Razumovsky, born in Ukraine in 1752, had no particularly special standing as a young man, but managed to talk himself into the Tsar's good graces – "The Tsarina's at least," says Schlichting – and rose to become Russia's diplomatic representative to Vienna. There, he employed a house string quartet, for whom he commissioned Beethoven to write three pieces in 1806. His story inspired Schlichting to begin commissioning himself, with the aim of financing at least one piece that might be enjoyed by music lovers for as many centuries as a Razumovsky quartet. "I just had this realisation, 'I want to be Razumovsky!'" says Schlichting. Since 2012, the Schlichtings have commissioned about 30 pieces a year, at an average of $9,000 per work – the most costing $65,000 for a work performed by the LA Philharmonic.

The Schlichtings' scale of involvement is wide. Often they give a composer free rein to write their dream piece and don't even set a deadline. Once the couple gave violinist Jennifer Koh funds to help repay the loan she had taken out to buy her Stradivarius, in return for a set of capriccios written by her friends, who are significant composers. Sometimes they seek composers out, other times composers call them, and Schlichting adds that donating to arts organisation New Music USA has helped facilitate the process. He is a member of its New Music Connect group, which gives him access to artists' grant requests. "If I see something that excites me, I claim it." Schlichting's advice to anyone who wants to follow his lead is simple: "Remember that every new piece requires three things: somebody to write the music, somebody to play it and somebody to present it. If you don't have all three, it's not going to happen. A composer doesn't want to spend time and energy writing a piece, no matter what they are paid, unless they know it's going to be performed."

Schlichting admits commissioning can be rocky at times – slipped deadlines are common and people can have unfathomable propositions (he once underwrote an opera, Hopscotch, that was set in 24 limousines driving around Los Angeles; it somehow ended up being a success) – but when he shares all his stories, it's obvious he enjoys the challenges as much as the end result. "We tried for children, and alas…" he says at one point. "But in reality we consider all the young composers our kids."

A more financially accessible way to commission a symphony is to join an orchestra's commissioning club. Birmingham Contemporary Music Group's Sound Investment scheme, for instance, invites music lovers to contribute towards specific pieces from as little as £150, for which they are thanked with the opportunity to attend rehearsals or an introduction to the composer. But more active involvement can come from privately formed clubs, such as the Minnesota Commissioning Club, set up by new music enthusiasts Linda and Jack Hoeschler. In 1990, the Hoeschlers (who attended John Cage "happenings" in the 1960s) had commissioned a few works themselves and wanted others to "join in the fun". So they invited four couples to each contribute $2,000 a year for five years to commission new works and arrange multiple performances. The collective has inspired other clubs and is still going strong; its major works include a carol performed during the celebrated Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at King's College, Cambridge, which is broadcast in the UK on BBC TV and radio, and in the US on over 300 local radio stations.

Classical music lovers Elizabeth and Justus Schlichting, who fund some commissions through New Music USA

Linda Hoeschler says key to the collective's success was finding people who not only love classical music, but have opinions about it and can debate ideas. It also helps that club members accept the risks involved – for example, not getting a masterwork every time. "Once, I was having a dinner party at our summer house; I had the radio on in the background and a piece of music was playing. I said to the table, 'That is exactly why people hate new music.' Of course, the presenter then said, 'Commissioned by Jack and Linda Hoeschler.'"

Linda has few mementoes of commissions aside from signed copies of the scores, but musicians who have worked with her and her husband regularly ask if they can rehearse at their house, and such performances have turned their home into a true musical sanctuary. "That's been one of the greatest gifts of my life," says Linda.

A further way to begin commissioning is to use a broker. Ed McKeon of London's Third Ear has arranged pieces for clients, including the financier Anthony Bolton (a major donor to a host of classical music institutions and a composer himself) and Esther Cavett, a former partner at Clifford Chance. McKeon is an evangelist for private commissioning, whether it's someone looking for a birthday gift for their flute-playing daughter or a celebration for their wedding anniversary. Expect to pay a minimum of £1,500, he says, with a full-scale opera upwards of six figures. "Commissioning gives you an experience, a narrative," he says. "When you commission a piece of classical music it can be intimate or it can be vast and public. If you can embrace that range of possibilities, then the rewards are extraordinary."

Back outside the Royal Festival Hall, I ask Richard Thomas about all the extraordinary experiences he must have had commissioning, but it's hard to get him to talk about the past. Instead, he starts talking excitedly about Joseph Phibbs, a British composer he wants to write a *lied* (one problem: Phibbs doesn't speak German). There's also a work he's planning with the much hyped cellist and composer Oliver Coates. "And I really want to commission Dobrinka Tabakova," he says. "Her music is amazing. It's informed by folk music from eastern Europe, but it couldn't have existed before now. I keep telling her, 'Just write a little cello solo or something for me.'"

He pauses for a moment. "Obviously, by talking to you about my passion, I'd like to inspire more people to begin commissioning works," he says. "There's so much incredible music that needs to be written. But could you also maybe make the piece a plea to Dobrinka? I'd love her to accept that commission…"