

BBC, Royaume-Uni

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Entretien avec Peter Maniura

Head of Classical Music and Performance, BBC (1998-2012)

Head of Digital Development, BBC Arts (2015-2018)

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Marie-Odile Demay >

Peter Maniura, you have twenty five years of experience in music and arts broadcasting at the BBC, where you have produced and directed numerous performing arts programs as head of the classical music and performance unit. You were the driving force behind the digital development of the BBC Arts platform and launched the BBC/Arts Council England digital online arts service The Space in 2012, where you served as creative director and curator. You were also the Project Director of the Classical Archives and Orchestras Digital Strategy (2018-2019) for BBC Music and are, since 2015, the director of the IMZ, a master class series for professionals in audiovisual performing arts production.

Could you give us a quick overview of your background and experience at BBC Television with music programming? Let's start by talking about your time at the BBC and how you got into music programming.

Peter Maniura >

My personal background has played a big part in my professional experience in music programming. My professional experience has always been shaped by a combination of artistic, musical and historical interests. My dad's Polish heritage and the fact that he still had family in Eastern Europe meant I got to visit Poland and East Germany regularly during my childhood in the 1960s and 1970s. After that, I went on a business trip to the USSR. During my travels in Poland, I noticed that music was a big part of the Polish people's lives. In socialist countries, music, arts, history and politics were all connected. Contemporary classical music was really important and highly innovative, and it wasn't just about Shostakovich. During my formative years, I was lucky enough to get to know the work of some of Poland's most famous composers, like Witold Lutosławski and Krzysztof Penderecki. I had a lot of respect for them. In the 1960s and 1970s, they came up with new pieces that were performed and recorded at the Warsaw Autumn Festival. During my visits to Poland, I bought these scores. It's a bit ironic that while you couldn't buy a sausage in Poland, you could get Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* (1961) recording for about five pence.

On top of that, music was a big part of my local community in Nottingham. It's a former mining area with a strong working-class heritage and links to the renowned author D.H. Lawrence. There's also the tradition of the brass band community in the United Kingdom, which has historically been linked to the coal mining industry. There's a strong tradition of amateur music-

making in this area. I was lucky enough to get involved with music from a young age, as our community offered free music lessons on Saturdays.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you go into more detail about the role of film and television in this context?

Peter Maniura >

The media also played a big part in my upbringing. In particular, the music programs on the BBC in the 1960s and 1970s had a huge impact on me, as well as composers' profiles and music documentaries by Barrie Gavin. From the launch of BBC Two in 1964 until the turn of the century, Gavin led the way with a series of documentaries on twentieth-century composers, including Béla Bartók, Arnold Schoenberg, Olivier Messiaen and, most notably, Pierre Boulez, with whom he had a long-standing personal and professional relationship. His analytical approach, combined with a dedication to reaching a wide audience, had a big impact on me.

I'd also like to mention the BBC arts and music programs presented by the British producer and presenter Humphrey Burton, who was a key figure in BBC arts programming during the 1960s and well into the 2000s. He started out at *Monitor*, the legendary BBC One cultural magazine, from 1958 to 1965. During this time, he also produced and directed his first music documentaries, as well as lots of programs and film documentaries for the magazine. He later moved to ITV in the 1970s, where he worked on the arts magazine *Aquarius* from 1970 to 1975. I remember him producing a show with the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by André Previn, which was broadcast in prime time on TV. Maestro Previn was dressed in a stylish 1960s outfit that, with the benefit of hindsight, seems a bit out of place. However, it was in line with the spirit of the times, when TV was playing a big part in making high culture more accessible. Burton worked with Leonard Bernstein for twenty years, directing over 170 documentaries and film concerts featuring the American conductor and composer. Back then, there was a lot of music on TV. It was my first experience of creating music for the TV screen.

During my teenage years, I kept up with my musical interests. However, when I started university, I decided to study history, as I'd always been fascinated by historical films and series. I got a first job with the BBC in 1980, but not in the way you might think. I started out in radio, but later moved over to video. I played a big part in getting the BBC Home Video brand off the ground, even though there were only three video retailers in the whole of the UK at the time. So, even at that early stage, I was already involved in pioneering new technology and expanding the reach of television media. I'm still doing that in the digital domain. What's the best way to package BBC programs for the commercial market? Those questions were already on my radar.

At the BBC, trainees in production have to get experience in all the different departments so they can understand the different roles and genres. My first role gave me the chance to work on a history series, as I was an assistant producer on the long-running BBC Two history documentary series *Timewatch* (1982-2011) in 1984. It's worth mentioning that this history program was actually produced by the music and art department. After about two years, the department head

and executive producer, Alan Yentob, asked me to join his team in music programming and work on the Proms annual series. The Proms is an eight-week annual classical music festival held at the Royal Albert Hall in central London. The BBC covers and broadcasts it, with a particular focus on *The Last Night of the Proms*, which celebrates popular music and patriotic pieces.

This was the start of my career in music broadcasting. By that time, I'd also directed my first music documentary, *Shostakovich: A Career* (1987). The sixty-minute TV film kicks off with a montage of the battlefield in Berlin, accompanied by Shostakovich's scherzo from his *Eighth Symphony*. My childhood visits to Poland definitely influenced my work, even in factual films. I then took on a number of different roles, including filmmaker and producer. I started out in documentary filmmaking. In just a couple of years, I added multi-camera direction to my skill set to gain fluency across all forms of expression. My first experience was at the Proms, and then I worked in opera, music and ballet.

Marie-Odile Demay >

It's clear that there's a unique style to BBC and other British TV shows, from the language and colour palette to the ambience. Do you think this also applies to British arts and music programming?

Peter Maniura >

Yes, definitely. British TV has a long tradition of arts programming, with some of the first contributions coming from pioneering figures. I'd also like to acknowledge the contribution of Barrie Gavin and Humphrey Burton, as I mentioned earlier. On top of that, Huw Wheldon, who initiated and produced the cultural magazine *Monitor*, was a big part of helping new talent in the film industry, including Ken Russell and Burton, to get started.

I think there are two ways to answer your question. In the 1960s, the UK, Germany and the USA set the gold standard for filmed concerts and operas. One way was for musicians who had been trained in music to prepare the scripts. This approach gave the storyboards or scripts a rhythm and depth, and it started in Germany during the early 1960s.

Secondly, the UK has a unique documentary tradition that started between the two World Wars with John Grierson. British documentaries also have a number of key features, one of them being clarity – which I mentioned before but is still really important. We use a strategy that's less common in the industry: we have presenters. Often, the author is also the presenter, guiding the audience through the film and offering not only a personal perspective but also insights and commentary. This isn't a common practice elsewhere. If you do it right, this approach gives you a clarity and precision that makes a direct and engaging connection with the audience, which I think is a valuable asset.

Marie-Odile Demay >

What makes filming music, opera and dance different from other art forms and TV genres? Is there a particular way of filming performing arts?

Peter Maniura >

First, we need to define what we mean by a “performing arts program.” There are lots of different types of music, each with their own techniques and skills. Some events will be broadcast, while others, such as news reports, documentaries or profiles, will take more time and resources. On top of that, there’s a secondary, rather than primary, aspect of creativity involved in making these music programs. This is because the content is taken from one artistic medium, such as music, opera or dance, and is translated into another, namely television.

In my role as a director or producer of music programming, I see myself as a craftsman, not just a technician. I use my technical know-how and musical skills to help turn content into a different format. There’s another part of the process where you get to engage with a more artistic side of things, like when you’re working on a film production or realization of a new work. In this case, the director has complete freedom to create from scratch, for example, in a studio. Another important genre is the documentary. This is where the narrative and visual style are set from the start, giving the director a chance to create their own unique canvas.

I think these are two very different concepts. It’s unlikely that a documentary filmmaker working in the arts or factual programming would take the same approach I do when broadcasting live from the Royal Opera House. In this case, I use a set of cameras to capture and broadcast a third-party production. It’s worth mentioning that some directors do engage in this practice. I don’t think you can call them filmmakers. I’m currently doing both roles. This is a quick answer to a tricky question. Some might say that storytelling is the most important thing. That’s what I find most intriguing. This is something I’ve come to understand from working in all kinds of different media.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you please explain what you mean by “storytelling”?

Peter Maniura >

It’s about a story with a clear beginning and end. As a documentary filmmaker, you can create the narrative from start to finish. In other forms of narrative, like performance broadcasting, the rhythm of the music or the libretto, as in the case of opera, is used to select shots and determine the cutting rhythm. It’s trickier to come up with a new narrative based on something that’s already out there, like a pre-existing stage production. However, the choice of shots, rhythm and editing should create a storytelling structure that is right for the genre and medium. This is what Sergei Eisenstein would have called “montage.” You can use this approach in all types of filmmaking, no matter how long the final product is. How much freedom you have to create your own narrative will depend on the project.

Marie-Odile Demay >

You’re saying that even when you’re filming a stage show with multiple cameras, you can still work on the storytelling?

Peter Maniura >

Yes, definitely. When we broadcast a stage performance in multi-camera, we work with the original opera or ballet score and the stage director's vision. In a theatre setting, the audience can see the opera or ballet from a wide angle. In practice, though, the choreographer or stage director is still focused on the action and the elements of the narrative. They told us which elements to focus on and which were less important. As a TV director, it's my job to work in these circumstances and think like the stage director would. You can get a feel for this by going to rehearsals, where you can see how the drama of the show is developing. On top of that, you can pick up some useful tips by chatting with the choreographer or stage director. However, the TV director will then present this dramaturgy through techniques like close-ups, fast editing, focusing on key characters and so on. Television directors have the freedom to choose which of these techniques to use. So, capturing the performance could be seen as an interpretative art form, rather than a form of primary creativity as it might be for an art film set in a studio, for example.

Marie-Odile Demay >

You said it's up to the director to decide. Is this the final decision, or could things like the chosen medium affect your choice? The choice of whether to film *La Traviata* for television or for cinema might affect the way we approach it, the mode and form.

Peter Maniura >

Indeed, nothing is ever completely pure in this world. When you're filming a stage show for television or cinema, there are always going to be limits on how you can position the cameras and move around. So, there's no complete freedom of choice. When you're putting together a production, whether it's for the camera or in a studio, the director gets to decide exactly where the cameras go.

When it comes to the media, each one has its own set of requirements. Television shows have to be shorter than films, with a maximum runtime of either twenty six or fifty six minutes. This brings in a constraint and a formal rule that has to be followed, which will affect how the story is told and what the end result is. To put it another way, it's crucial to stick to the principle of fitness for purpose, which basically means that the program you create for a specific medium has to fit its intended purpose. When it comes to TV, the goal is to fit into a time schedule and reach a certain audience.

This means you can influence the content and style of a narrative. For example, if I'm creating content for BBC One, a prime-time channel, I'd probably edit sequences differently and aim for a more immediate impact. I'm aiming to reach a broad mainstream audience, rather than an arthouse moviegoer who is paying for the ticket. It's unlikely that a member of the audience will leave the movie theatre immediately if they're not satisfied with the content within thirty seconds. That's something to think about.

Another thing to think about is length. I don't agree that online and digital content should be shorter. There's actually lots of evidence that people spend as long or longer online as they do watching TV. What's more, there's strong evidence that people spend more time on digital platforms than they do watching TV. It's also worth mentioning that other limits might apply, depending on the type of digital production we're talking about. Online productions usually have fewer resources than those made for cinema or prime-time TV, including fewer cameras and less production time. This could affect the quality of the program and introduce other constraints. To sum up, the choice of medium can affect your resources and may influence your artistic approach.

Marie-Odile Demay >

That's an interesting point you make, especially about people staying engaged with streaming content for longer. Is this connected to the event itself? I think you've also done some live events for the BBC online player. Could you go into this a bit more?

Peter Maniura >

This is another key topic for discussion. With so many different media and viewing platforms out there, consumers now have a lot more choice. The main challenge for online broadcasters is to keep their audience engaged. It's worth mentioning that keeping viewers engaged has always been a big challenge in TV broadcasting. With more and more channels out there, it's become even trickier to hold people's attention. Even back in the 1980s, with just five or six channels in the UK, I was taught that the first minute of a program was crucial. This was the key moment at the start of the broadcast, as it would decide whether the audience would tune in or not. This applied to both BBC Two programs and prime time on BBC One. This was previously known as the "shift click trust factor." The remote control was a big factor in this too, as it meant viewers didn't have to physically change channels. However, the remote control changed everything. Just picture this: you're at home with a remote control. After about twenty five seconds, you decide that the current program isn't engaging and switch to another channel. I first noticed this happening back in the 1980s, when I started my career. Nowadays, there are so many more viewing options that this issue is much more complex. Today's viewers are used to surfing through hundreds of channels on their TVs. On top of that, you can also access content on a laptop or other mobile device. It's thought that around 90 % of mobile device users don't turn up the volume when they're watching content, so a lot of viewing is done in silence. This makes me wonder how we can get people to stop hitting the mute button. Given all this, it's clear there are a few hurdles to overcome.

It's worth mentioning that my analogy about storytelling still holds true. What's the best way to start a presentation? What's the best way to get this information across? It's still a key part of the process. There's another thing to think about, though. It's also important to show what happened in a way that engages the audience. This is why lots of TV professionals think live events are going to be really important for the future of the industry. People still want to know what's going on right now, as they're watching it. On top of that, the way you promote and communicate is also really important. You've got to choose the right channels for the target

audience. It's important to use a range of media channels, including social media, trailers and ads, to get people excited about the event and encourage them to attend. The latest thing in social media is engaging with users in a conversational way. The audience can now leave comments, so we can't control them as much as we used to. I think it's important to tackle this short-lived phenomenon head on. So, the second screen is an important part of the overall experience. These are big issues for TV production right now.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you go into a bit more detail about what you've achieved with this open media approach?

Peter Maniura >

Absolutely. When it's done right, it can be really successful. In today's fast-paced and competitive environment, it's tough to engage with audiences effectively. The BBC calls this "conversational choreography." This means taking a series of steps across different media platforms to get the audience engaged with the main broadcast.

Marie-Odile Demay >

These days, a TV producer has to create not just one broadcast, but an entire ecosystem of communication and audiovisual elements.

Peter Maniura >

I agree. On top of that, it calls for a creative approach. However, as a director, you might not be involved in this communication process, as it's down to other professionals to manage the communication and marketing. It's also important to keep an eye on the ongoing dialogue. It's been really interesting for me and many of my colleagues to see how this industry has changed. While some people might say there wasn't enough engagement in the past, there's a great chance for success in this current environment if you have the right approach.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you give us some examples of the most notable programs or films in the television or cinema industry that have made a big impact on arts programming?

Peter Maniura >

One great example is the 1969 BBC Two series *Civilisation*, hosted by Kenneth Clark. This series had a big impact on how we see art, even though some people have criticised Clark's personal style and views on art. In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger used a narrative style that really changed how we see art history and the discipline itself.

However, the film that had the biggest impact on me was Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, even though it was released in 1938. It's worth mentioning that the concept of montage isn't just a cinematic technique. It can also be used as a design element within the frame, in close conjunction with the rhythm of music. The film has one of the best soundtracks in cinematic history. The way the project was set up inspired my approach to my next projects at the BBC

and later with the Arts Council, as well as my production of the *Sound on Film* series for the BBC in the late 1990s.

Marie-Odile Demay >

It's worth mentioning that Prokofiev's music features heavily in Eisenstein's film.

Peter Maniura >

The two were influenced by each other. The two artists worked very closely together, with the music and the visuals influencing each other. What's more, there are lots of examples of great creativity between the two art forms. For instance, there's a scene in the school where we can hear four bassoons in the foreground. As multi-track recording wasn't available in 1938, Eisenstein told the bassoonist to play closer to the microphone. He moved the musicians around to get different effects. As early as 1938, there were some pretty radical ideas about how sound and moving images could work together and create an artwork.

Humphrey Burton was another big influence on my work. He was a pioneer in the world of music TV at the BBC in the 1960s. His 1965 film, *The Golden Ring*, was a kind of quasi-live production that combined studio recording and live performance. He recorded Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* cycle as performed by the Vienna Philharmonic and conducted by Georg Solti in a studio setting. John Culshaw, the producer, recreated the Vienna orchestra stage in the studio and led his BBC engineering and camera teams through some pretty challenging technical procedures that were a lot more difficult than the relative ease of modern digital editing. It used a mix of film, multiple video cameras and broadcast tech. They basically created a fake live recording to show how the concert and film were made so the audience could see how the recording was put together in the studio. This showcased the production process in a way that gave the impression of a live performance. This was a real game changer. Before this, you couldn't see the recording studio on TV or in a film. This approach really made an impact on me and on many directors of music films.

Marie-Odile Demay >

You mentioned Barrie Gavin earlier. Could you give me some more info on his work at the BBC?

Peter Maniura >

He made a big impact on music programming and music education. He recorded the musical compositions, lyrics and visuals of the most influential figures in contemporary music during the twentieth century. He always made sure that the subjects were presented in a way that was accessible to a wide audience. He also introduced graphics into his films, creating an entire alphabet of images and sounds through colour coding and the strategic placement of instruments. This was a pretty pioneering approach at the time. For example, in his film on Bartók and Stravinsky (*The New Rhythm of Music*), he used graphics to divide the orchestra. In other cases, he used on-screen animation to show the different lines in the score and how they blend together. To be honest, I haven't kept up with the use of graphics in this way. It's a bit outdated now and it's a costly process.

I have to say, though, that I've been influenced by his approach to framing and lighting in terms of its effect on the overall structure. His films always had a simple, accessible framework that gave viewers a sense of security and guidance, even when the journey might be challenging. For example, he directed a whole series with the French composer Pierre Boulez and some pretty complex music that was shown during prime time on the main channel. It's not really feasible in the current context.

Barrie Gavin was a real pioneer in music programming, successfully integrating complex musical compositions into mainstream broadcasts. He was a great influence on my professional development. I was lucky enough to work with him as a commissioner on a portrait of British composer Harrison Birtwistle. He is a very challenging composer. Some people have said his music is harsh and aggressive, but he's an important figure in Britain's modern music scene. Gavin was great at showing the different sides of the composer's music. At the start of the film, Barrie Gavin included a simple, clear statement that summed up Harrison's vision and engaged the audience. I was really impressed by how effective his approach was, even though I had some initial reservations when I first read the proposal. It gave me a good insight into his approach as a director. I think of it as a kind of contract with the audience, particularly in the context of television. What's the point of such a contract? It's important to remember that the audience can switch channels at any moment.

One of the most interesting things about being a filmmaker and working with other professionals in the industry is the chance to learn from and work with people with different backgrounds and ideas. Many of them, especially those with a background in European filmmaking, are reluctant to embrace this concept of clarity. They think it limits their freedom. I actually think the opposite is true. I think that if you do a project well, there are lots of ways to make it clear to the audience what you want them to understand. This helps them to trust you.

Marie-Odile Demay >

To some extent, a TV program can be seen as a conversation between the director and the audience. Could you go into a bit more detail about the kind of relationship you think should be cultivated with the audience in the context of arts and music programming?

Peter Maniura >

Absolutely. In *Ways of Seeing*, for example, Berger shows how viewers can engage with art through experimentation and provocation. This program is a great resource for any director interested in making a film about the visual arts. What makes music special is that it can move people emotionally. It would be wrong to say that the visual arts don't make people feel things. It's also important to understand that they require a specific mindset and a particular setting in which to be appreciated, as Berger would say. The effect of music on our senses is immediate and often involuntary, and it can be overwhelming. The listener might feel like they're being overwhelmed by the sensations and feelings that the music evokes. Adding the right visuals to these sensations can make for a really powerful program of music. Even if an audience member doesn't know a particular piece of music, they'll still have an emotional reaction to it. This

could be curiosity, relaxation, or even rejection, but it will always be a response. Over time, this response may change from one person to the next, but it will consistently create an emotional bond between the director and the audience. This is one of the most valuable aspects of using music in film.