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Music's beauty is in the ear of the beholder - not in the sex appeal of the musician

The selling point for classical music performers should be their talent, not their looks or youthfulness

By Tasmin Little

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The fabulous Dame Jenni Murray of Woman's Hour has been lamenting the fact that female classical musicians are under pressure to look glamorous and to "go along with the idea that sex sells". In my experience, there is, sadly, much truth in what she says. During my 25-year career in the profession, I have noticed an increasing emphasis on appearance, as the "twin-set and pearls" style of evening wear has been replaced by designer couture gowns, and youth and beauty are perceived as almost equal to talent.

If music is about communication and expression, why does the appearance of a performer matter at all? The answer is that it used not to. When you look at old record covers, some of the photographs of female artists are distinctly unflattering by today's standards. And yet it made no difference to their popularity at the time, as the most important consideration was their interpretation.

Nowadays, things are very different. So why has the classical music industry begun to feel the need to compensate for something, as though the product is no longer good enough or special enough in itself?

One reason why the emphasis gradually changed is the repeated criticism levelled at the classical music industry that it is "fusty" and that performers are "out of touch". The implication is that classical

musicians are playing old music by dead composers who have little relevance to today's society, that we ourselves are rooted firmly in the past, and that this is reflected in the outdated way that we dress. So, in an effort to get more "with it", traditional gowns have been replaced by modish outfits and hair gel.

Another reason for the pressure to make the packaging sexy is that performers are competing in an ever more crowded market. The industry is more international than ever, and the internet has allowed great choice and freedom in the way that the consumer buys and enjoys music. So a performer feels more of a need to stand out from the crowd, to find his or her "unique selling point".

But music is not a cosmetic. The emphasis should be on the aural, not the visual, and, if we place it on the latter, we are in danger of losing the essence of what music really is.

Dame Jenni is right to imply that there is more pressure on women than men. But the pressure is increasing on them, also. Smouldering expressions in publicity shots, machismo and even gyrations on stage are becoming more common.

Only one aspect of the profession has remained firmly immune to the lure of promoting a youthful image, and that is the role of conductor.

Actually, the older you are as a conductor, the more you are perceived to have attained great musicianship and gravitas. Your work is thought to be more "meaningful". Thus far, this has been a very male-dominated area of the profession, with very few young or female maestri. However, things are changing, and time will tell whether future female conductors will feel the need to market themselves as glamorous.

The show-business pressure on performers is something that clearly worries Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, too: the soprano spoke recently of the dangers of singers imagining that there was an X Factor route to overnight success.

Similarly, learning a musical instrument to a high standard takes years: there are no shortcuts. I began the violin at the age of seven, and it wasn't until I was in my late teens that I was good enough to perform in public. It also takes time to learn the art of expression in performance. To bring meaning to music, you have to have lived with that music, know it inside out, even to have lived enough life yourself, otherwise it is as unsatisfying as turning over the exciting front cover of a new book only to find there is no content.

The fact is that there is no universal marketing package for music, nor a magic formula to achieve success. Each piece and performance is unique — neither can be summed up by a vision in a dress or a smouldering hunk on the cover of a disc. To try to do so diminishes us all.

The “unique selling point” of a true musician, skinny or fat, tall or short, glamorous or less so, is the ability to connect, to inspire and to move an individual beyond the realms of their ordinary life.

I have a very optimistic view of the future of classical music. I believe there will always be a discerning audience who wish to hear quality music. And if a gifted performer happens to look wonderful too, there is nothing wrong with that. My only fear is that if glossy packaging is increasingly emphasised over content, there is a real danger that some extraordinary talents who do not conform to this image will fall by the wayside.

Tasmin Little OBE is a solo concert violinist