

Virtual reality that's worth trumpeting

Orchestra hopes to win younger fans with app that puts them on stage alongside musicians, writes **Mark Sellman**

If you have ever wanted to experience a classical music concert as the orchestra does, a new virtual reality app can take you on stage among the musicians.

Virtual Hall has been developed by the Geneva-based Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (OSR) to create an immersive classical experience aimed at younger audiences. When wearing a headset, the user can choose from six locations on stage with a 360-degree view. A digital music score hovers in front of you, controlled using your hands.

The app will be available in March with two performances by OSR: Beethoven's Symphony No 3 *Eroica* and Rossini's *William Tell* overture. They take place at Victoria Hall in Geneva, a venue given by a British diplomat to the city in the name of Queen Victoria in 1901.

Virtual Hall is not the first immersive classical concert experience, but OSR claims it is the most advanced because of its camera positions and digital score.

Users can switch from a close-up view of the conductor from the string section to a wide-angle from the back row, among the percussionists.

Steve Roger, director of the OSR, said the project "embodies our commitment to democratising classical music". He said the format appealed to the young. "A lot of young people, when they have contact with classical music, hear two or three minutes. With that [headset] they spend at least 30 minutes, because this is interactive."

The OSR spent between €250,000 to €300,000 developing the app with Cybel'Art, a Swiss company, and 50,000 Swiss francs (£44,200) to record performances; finance was from private sources.

The OSR also believes the experience will appeal to people who cannot go to concert halls. Roger said that 12 headsets had been bought for car homes in Geneva.

Roger has grander ambitions than simply having OSR con-

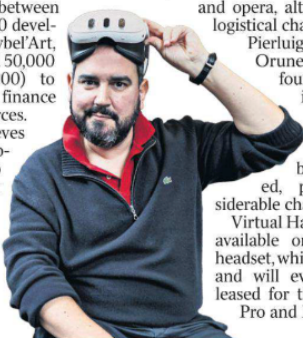


Steve Roger of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande wearing a headset. The OSR developed the app with Cybel'Art, founded by Pierluigi Christophe Orunesu, below

certs on the app, with visions of creating a "Netflix for high culture". He is talking to other orchestras about filming them, giving the user a wider choice for about €5 per performance. He hopes the format will work for ballet and opera, although there are logistical challenges.

Pierluigi Christophe Orunesu, Cybel'Art's founder, said: "This is the first time a system, involving multiple cameras, has been implemented, presenting considerable challenge."

Virtual Hall will initially be available on Meta's Quest headset, which retails at £290, and will eventually be released for the Apple Vision Pro and Pico headsets.



Now you too can feel the conductor's glare

Review

You've heard of getting lost in a score? It happened to me in the Virtual Hall, quite literally, when I tried to open up the orchestral parts of the *Eroica* symphony using my "virtual" hands (Neil Fisher writes).

The pages got wider and wider until somehow they'd swallowed up the entire hall and my face was plunged into

Beethoven's sea of quavers. Unfortunately this was a mishap unforeseen by the techies and so we had to (briefly) pull the plug on my teleportation to Geneva's sumptuous Victoria Hall. Mishaps aside, the app represents a tantalising leap forwards in a genre — classical orchestral music — that in many respects hasn't changed for more than a century.

The Orchestre de la Suisse Romande is right to stress the educational

benefits. The Virtual Hall is not intended to replace attending a concert; the experience is totally different. But having the chance to sit next to a trumpeter or a violinist — and become the target of the conductor's imploring gestures (or barely suppressed rage) rather than staring at the back of his head — is more than a diverting gimmick. It puts you inside the show.

While I don't want to put a headset on instead

of going to the concert hall, the probable future for orchestras will be a blend of the virtual and the real. When you want to jump into the brass section, you can do so. Or you could watch an orchestra while your headset generates live, user-activated images: commentary, text or specially devised video.

And your friend sitting next to you, who hates Beethoven anyway? They can watch a movie in peace.

Vexatious world first: pianist to play piece 840 times in a row

Lucy Bannerman

It is said to be almost unplayable but the entire piece fits on a single sheet of music and features just a few notes. It sounds simple enough — but the most vexatious part of performing *Vexations* is the composer's mischievous instructions to play it 840 times in a row.

The perfect challenge, then, for the Russian-German superstar pianist Igor Levit, who will be attempting a world-first performance of Erik Satie's piece at the Southbank Centre in London this spring. The feat of endurance is expected to last between 16 and 22 hours and will be directed by the performance artist Marina Abramovic.

Levit, 37, would be the first person to play the whole of *Vexations* from beginning to end in front of an audience. He will begin the piece at 10am on April 24 on top of a black-lacquered platform, which will be dismantled over the course of the day to "give a sense of frag-

mentation, of collapse, of decay that's in tune with the music", according to Mark Ball, the artistic director of the Southbank Centre. Levit, he said, will "never leave the stage".

The pianist will, however, have access to food, drink and "discreet" facilities, on stage but out of sight, for toilet breaks. "It isn't just a feat for Igor, it is a feat for the audience as well," Ball said.

Tickets will cost £100 for the whole performance. There are also £30 hourly slots; these ticketholders may stay once the hour is up, but will not be re-admitted if they dare pop out.

The piece is, unsurprisingly, rarely performed. It had its world premiere in New York in 1963, 70 years after it was written, when the American composer John Cage led a relay team of pianists. They included John Cale, who would later co-found the Velvet Underground, in front of an audience that included Andy Warhol. Legend has it that when they finally finished after 18 hours and



40 minutes, one wag in the crowd called out: "Encore!"

Abramovic, 78, will bring the experience of her own baffling feats of endurance. The Serbian controversialist has cut her flesh with knives, suffered near-fatal suffocation, starved for 12

Igor Levit is expected to play *Vexations* for between 16 and 22 hours. Tickets for the entire performance at the Southbank Centre will cost £100; hourly slots for £30 will be available

you must experience. Marina is one of the greatest creators of such realms and I feel blessed to work with her."

Satie wrote *Vexations* in 1893 after being dumped by his first and only girlfriend, Suzanne Valadon, who was a painter and a model to the artists Toulouse-Lautrec and Renoir.

The programme for his 1917 ballet, *Parade*, which was scored for typewriters, sirens and aeroplane propellers, contains what is thought to be the first use of the word "surrealism".

Vexations is considered by some to be the first example of conceptual art. Its instructions are typical of the French composer, who liked to write notes for performers telling them to play "with much illness" or "as light as an egg".

The spectacle will be part of Multi-tudes, an "electrifying" new festival at the Southbank Centre in London, which will use new formats and immersive experiences to lure young audiences into the world of classical music.