

Virtual reality unleashes full power of top UK orchestra

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London's Royal Festival Hall is putting visitors centre-stage with one of the world's top orchestras, using cutting-edge technology amid claims it will transform the arts and entertainment industries.

Virtual-reality (VR) headsets and a cylindrical bank of speakers deliver the full force of the Philharmonia Orchestra's performance of Mahler's Third Symphony,

Visitors can turn their head and focus on any musician, or toe-tapping members of the audience, from their vantage point in-front of Finnish conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen.

A performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony moves in between each section of the [orchestra](#), giving close-up views of musicians as the conductor brings them in.

The orchestra hopes the project will help open new audiences to classical music.

"It allows you to step inside the orchestra," said Luke Ritchie, Head of Innovation at the Philharmonia.

"People who are new to orchestras, it totally changes their preconceptions.

"They are insanely loud and the dynamics are incredible," he added.

Although only temporary, the project serves up a taste of how the "transformational" technology could be used in the not-too-distant future.

The set-up can be recreated off-site, meaning live performances could be potentially beamed into cinemas, while schoolchildren could wander through world-class orchestras and watch maestros at work.

"We could pack it into a van, take it to a school and build it in a couple of hours, then a class of 30 kids have a group experience." explained Ritchie.

"It's all about getting the orchestra out of the usual places."

The immersive audio and visual technologies developed by the Philharmonia also have the potential to transform the creative process itself.

"It's about being inside music, and having agency and being able to travel around—a composition you can travel through, or that responds differently to how you are behaving," said Ritchie.

"You already see it in the evolution of video games."

The [technology](#) could eventually be combined with playing live instruments, promising wide-ranging consequences for education and the entertainment industry.

"Imagine, you could be part of the cellist section of the Philharmonia," said Ritchie.

"Or I could rock out with Dave Grohl, I could get John Paul Jones playing bass," he added.

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