

## Michael White



# A chic way to get cheque-books open for new music

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The idea of private patronage in music has an 18th century ring to it: commissions these days tend to come from funding bodies rather than from individuals, obtained by bureaucratic processes of forms to fill and boxes to be checked, not gentlemen's agreements over supper.

But behind closed doors it does still happen; and last night I was behind the doors of a house in Chelsea where it was happening with a vengeance. The house was a discreet contemporary palace once owned by the sculptor [Anish Kapoor](#) and still bearing his imprint (the odd smooth, white lump emerging tumour-like from smooth, white walls). And along with thirty-odd other guests I was given a showcase concert of music by a composer I'd never come across before called Tom Smail.

Involving various chamber groups, assorted voices and a glass harmonica, it laid on a conveyor belt of artists, some of them well-established names like soprano Sophie Daneman or harpist Lucy Wakeford. And one thing that sat on my mind as I watched them troop in and out was the commercial unreality of it all. Beyond the well-heeled walls of so exquisite an event, it would make no sense to hire in a dozen or more solo-status musicians to learn (as I assume from scratch) a programme of unknown works by an unknown composer. You wouldn't find it at the Wigmore Hall. Or even at King's Place.

Who was footing the bill last night I've no idea, but Tom Smail obviously knows the right people. And as the room seemed to be packed with potential patrons, I guess he now knows a few more. In fact I hope he does – because his music struck me as worthwhile, with an oblique, evasive elegance that wouldn't win it much attention out there in the jostling market-place of sonic novelties but was something that you'd definitely call a voice. A quiet voice maybe, but stylish, confident, complete.

If it prompted a few cheque-books into action for the wish-list of commissions Smail was touting, good for him. Needless to say, he has a website: [www.tomsmail.net](http://www.tomsmail.net)