

Talking about his generation

Pete Townshend wrote a rock opera about the not-30 years ago. Only now is it getting its premiere. On Radio 3. By MARK EDWARDS

Nearly 30 years ago, at a press conference to announce *Lifehouse*, the Who's follow-up to the highly successful rock opera *Tommy*, Pete Townshend seemed things weren't going well. "It was terrible," he recalls. "I suddenly realised that all these great journalists thought I was completely mad. I was terrified that the press from the band weren't there. They were very supportive about *Lifehouse*, but they didn't quite understand what I was going on about and what it was a bit of a shock."

Lifehouse was written in the future — the future we're currently living in — in the last days of the millennium. Townshend had written about a world in which people would stand up in their houses to protest themselves from pollution and experienced the world through a vast

communication network that he called *The Grid*. At the end of the piece, Townshend envisaged a scenario in which a band played music that was somehow "programmed" to affect the people in the audience, so each individual's music was layered out of all the others, the sound would evolve until it finally became "our own" — a tone that would connect spiritually with everyone.

Let's not over-estimate pollution, a company network that connects everybody and music that is programmed rather than composed in the traditional way. Townshend appears to have got it all about right, if we allow him a certain exaggeration for dramatic effect. But in 1971, the press and the public felt otherwise. Nobody believed in the premise of the plot, and an attempt to stage a version of the "our-own" concert at the Young Vic proved disastrous.

