

KEYBOARD

July 1981

Extracts from interview with Brian Eno



Another intriguing project that you were involved in a few years ago was the Portsmouth Sinfonia. Could you talk a little about that?

The Portsmouth Sinfonia was founded by an English composer named Gavin Bryars. He started it at Portsmouth College of Art, hence its name. The philosophy of the orchestra was that anybody could join. There was no basis of skill required for joining. The only condition was that if you joined you should attend rehearsals and take it seriously. It wasn't intended as a joke - though it was sometimes extremely funny.

The orchestra only played the popular classics, and it played only the most popular parts of these popular classics, the bits that everyone knows: Da-da-da dum, da-da-da dum.

At its biggest it was about 78 people strong and it had a complete complement of orchestral instruments.

Most people when they talk about the Sinfonia talk about it as though everybody in the orchestra was incompetent. This wasn't true, exactly. There was a range of competence, from extremely competent - we had some bona fide virtuosi in there - to completely incompetent.

What was interesting about it was this mix. It wouldn't have been more interesting if it had been all incompetent or all competent. It was this particular mix so that in any piece what you heard was a number of approximations of how the piece should be played. You'd hear the melody of whatever it was, hidden somewhere among all those approximations of the melody. It was like a very blurry version, a soft-focus version, of classical music, and it produced some beautiful music. I really liked some of those results. There were some exquisite moments - the mixture of chance and choice, you know?

Anyway, the Sinfonia existed, let me see, from 1969 to about 1974 or '75. I joined in 1970, and I ceased to be active in 1974, mainly because I wasn't in England a lot of the time any more.

From that description, it sounds as though the Sinfonia might have had some impact on the way your records sound.

It certainly does. In some quite specific cases.

There's a song on Another Green World called "Golden Hours." I wanted the Portsmouth Sinfonia effect on the voices. I wanted a lot of voices that were a little bit off with one another, so I overdubbed the voices myself but I didn't use headphones. The engineer would just give me a cue when to start singing. He was listening to the track in the control room, and when he cued me I would start singing, so that my pitch is deliberately slightly off and my timing is slightly off, to reproduce that effect.

Also, on Taking Tiger Mountain I used the string section from the Portsmouth Sinfonia on one of those songs, a song called "Put A Straw Under Baby."