

The News

The Portsmouth News – Friday 28th May 2004

THE PORTSMOUTH SINFONIA - THIRTY YEARS ON

by Abigail Wilsher

LIVERPOOL had The Beatles, Manchester had Oasis - and Portsmouth had a scruffy band of classical musicians who couldn't play in time or in tune. But that slight disadvantage - and the tag of the World's Worst Orchestra - didn't put the Portsmouth Sinfonia off. And now its members are remembering the day, exactly 30 years ago today, when they hit the big time and sold out a concert at London's prestigious Royal Albert Hall.

The Sinfonia was formed in 1970 by a group of students at the Portsmouth College of Art, who wanted to take classical music out of the hands of the 'tuxedo-Nazis' and return it to the people. Although many thought the less-than-competent ensemble was a joke, it was never intended to be a spoof. Everyone turned up to rehearsals and everyone put their heart and soul into the project. It's just that if some of them played a few wrong notes - live or on their recordings - it wasn't the end of the world.

Martin Lewis, long-time manager of the Sinfonia, got involved in 1973 while working for their record company, Transatlantic. He said: 'I just fell in love with them. They had something rare and beautiful. They were uninhibited by the stuffy rules and all the things I hated about classical music.'

The famous Albert Hall date came after the Sinfonia wrote to the BBC in 1973 asking if it could perform in one of its promenade concerts, billed as making classical music accessible to the masses. But all they got back was a standard letter saying thanks, but no thanks. Mr Lewis remembered: 'I said: "Right, well then we'll just have to book the Royal Albert Hall - and we did".

The gig was the Sinfonia's finest hour. An aspiring pianist called Sally Binding performed Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto number one written in the tricky key of B flat minor. The orchestra was having a few problems with the sharps and flats, so Miss Binding completely re-learned the piece in a more manageable key.

A 350-strong choir was recruited to sing the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah and the Royal Albert Hall's canons were wheeled out for a dramatic rendition of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture.

Mr Lewis explained: 'I was 21 years-old at the time and when you're 21, you know everything and there's nothing you can't do. I might have a few more reservations if I was trying it now!' 'It was beyond exhilarating. The lunatics had well and truly taken over the asylum and it was great.'

THE PORTSMOUTH Sinfonia was founded by Portsmouth College of Art's music lecturer Gavin Bryars and students, including Robin Mortimore, James Lampard and conductor John Farley. It soon blossomed into an 82-strong band, including prolific members such as composer Michael Nyman, who went on to write dozens of well-known film scores, including the haunting music for *The Piano*. Also among the ranks was one Brian Eno on clarinet. He went on to produce albums for many well-known groups and artists, including David Bowie and U2 to name but two.

THE PORTSMOUTH Sinfonia played its last concert at the University of Paris in 1980, but its cult status around the world never waned. And now 30 years on, Manager Martin Lewis feels it's now high time there was a reunion. 'I think we should do the Albert Hall again,' he said. 'I mean, where else is there? The burning question is: will they still have what it doesn't take?'

Mr Lewis also masterminding a campaign to have the orchestra's albums, unavailable for 25 years, re-released on CD for a new generation of fans. Rare copies of the orchestra's masterpieces make the odd appearance on internet auction site eBay from time to time and can fetch anything from £60 to £100.

Their first recording, released in March 1974, was *The Portsmouth Sinfonia Plays the Popular Classics*. It was a melee of not-quite-spot-on renditions of popular and not so well-known pieces, including Bach's *Air on a G String* and *Jupiter* from Holst's *the Planets Suite*.

The second album, released in October 1974, was *Hallelujah! - Portsmouth Sinfonia Live at the Albert Hall*.

Around that time, the London Symphony Orchestra was churning out orchestral versions of well-known rock songs, such as *Classic Rock* and *Classic Rock II*.

Next came *20 Classic Rock Classics* in the summer of 1979. The Who's Pete Townshend contacted the orchestra and said its version of *Pinball Wizard* on the album was second only to his band's own version.

When the Royal Philharmonic released its cheesy *Hooked on Classics* album, which featured medleys of popular greats, the Sinfonia retaliated with its own version, *Classical Muddly*, which made it into the top 30 and became a cult classic.

It would have made a bigger impact on the charts, but its release was delayed by a legal wrangle with the people who owned the copyright of Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. 'They said we had made alterations to the piece, but we said that it wasn't intentional, but happened more as a result of incompetence,' said manager Martin Lewis. 'You can't really argue with that.'