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THE REAL GODFATHERS OF PUNK!

Thirty-four years ago, a musician taught his band not to play. It led to anarchy in the UK, says Dan Cairns

Those people who say that British punk was born during the Sex Pistols' debut gig at St Martin's School of Art in central London on a November night in 1975 may need to think again. For there is a serious case to be made for its birth having occurred five years earlier in Hampshire. In May 1970, the composer Gavin Bryars, then a lecturer at Portsmouth College of Art, entered a talent competition entitled Opportunity Rocks with a scratch band he'd assembled for the occasion. Purely as a joke, and planning it as a one-off, he called the group the Portsmouth Sinfonia.

According to Brian Eno, who later that same year became one of the Sinfonia's clarinetists, despite never having played the instrument before: "The philosophy of the orchestra was that anybody could join; there was no basis of skill required." The only rule was that you shouldn't be able to play the instrument you held in your hands. In that first performance, the raggle-taggle ensemble busked its way through the William Tell Overture under the wayward baton of John Farley, and the audience had tears of laughter streaming down their faces. The self-styled "world's worst orchestra" was in business.

Bryars's motley crew - which, in the course of the next decade, would include the composers Michael Nyman and Simon Fisher Turner, and the record producer Clive Langer - that day created a phenomenon that came to be seen as half-beauty, half-beast. The albums they released afterwards, and their audacious Albert Hall concert, which took place 30 years ago last Friday, won them a fan base that mostly saw them as a comic attraction, in the English-eccentric tradition of the Pythons and the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band. (Certainly, few exposed to the Sinfonia's massacre of Richard Strauss's Also Sprach Zarathustra will fail to get the joke.) Rolling Stone magazine even voted 1974's The Portsmouth Sinfonia Plays the Popular Classics its comedy record of the year. At the same time, they cocked an almighty snook at the classical-music establishment, causing Richard Baker to splutter on Start the Week and the critics to sniff.

Yet between comedy and controversy, a far more serious expedition was embarked on, one whose importance has, I think, been overlooked. Western music's traditional fear of dissonance, and its adherence to harmony and order, may partly explain why the Sinfonia tended to be seen as a bunch of amusing, if mildly irritating, schoolboys. Some of the laughter that greeted it at the time may have been nervous: far safer, after all, to view its butchering of Beethoven as a jape, and to ignore the feelings of chaos and uncertainty induced by the strangely beautiful, even sinister, noise the orchestra arrived at by happenstance.

Nyman, who attended a Portsmouth Sinfonia concert in London in the early 1970s, places the orchestra firmly in the avant-garde tradition. "I sat through the first half," he recalls, "and I was so moved and entertained and excited by the music that I went up to Gavin in the interval and said, 'Is there a spare instrument? I'd like to join.' They had a spare cello, so suddenly I was playing In the Hall of the Mountain King in the second half."

Nyman accepts the humour inherent in the Sinfonia's readings of the classics, but he argues that there was something profound and subversive occurring amid the guffaws. "We were all serious artists or experimental musicians," he says, "and none of us actually joined to make funny music. Because of the skill structure of the Sinfonia, you couldn't fail to come up with outlandish results. But we weren't deliberately incompetent. And the combination of everybody's individual errors built a musical structure that was incomparable." He recalls an episode in the childhood of the American composer Charles Ives. "His father would encourage him to listen to a stonemason singing really out of tune," says Nyman, "and he would say, 'Don't listen to the wrong notes, just listen to the passion, listen to the seriousness, listen to the performance.'" In other words, although he doesn't say so himself: punk.

Those of you who have sat through a school concert will know how hard it is to hear the passion or seriousness when you've suffered two hours of "individual errors" - and how tempting it is to seek comfort in the funny side of the aleatory pile-ups you're witnessing. But Ives Sr's point was a serious one, rooted in the notion that the wellspring of music-making should be a combination of expression and joy. The noise being made isn't the object of the exercise: coming together, from all backgrounds and with all proficiencies, and making the noise is, as this country's embattled head-teachers, forced to cut music in their schools, will bear witness to.

Eno, who produced the Sinfonia's early recordings, has described the orchestra's abilities as "a range of competence, from bona fide virtuosi to extremely incompetent"; the golden rule being, adds Nyman, that "this wasn't an opportunity for skilled musicians to piss around". Eno's verdict is that the Sinfonia "produced some beautiful music: what you heard was a number of approximations of how the piece should be played". He has likened it to folk music, where "variety is achieved not by people trying to do something different from one another, but by accidentally doing something different; this sense of a limitation being turned into a strength". In other words, again, although he doesn't say so himself: punk.

The British punk-rock fanzine Sniffin' Glue famously carried on its cover the words: "This is a chord, this is another, this is a third. Now form a band." Isn't that, in a sense, what Bryars did? Martin Lewis, the Sinfonia's manager since 1973 and not a man to shirk from a sweeping statement, certainly thinks so. "The Portsmouth Sinfonia pre-dated punk," he says. "We used to say that it embraces musicians of all ranges of competence, from those of symphony-orchestra standard to those who don't know which end of a violin to blow. Four years later, you had punk: the same notion of people picking up instruments they couldn't play but wanted to play. I think the Sinfonia anticipated the Sex Pistols - so blame us for Sid Vicious."

Lewis is currently engaged in a bid to have the Sinfonia's back catalogue issued on CD, as well as planning both a Worst Of compilation album and a reunion concert at the Albert Hall for next year. He's also hoping to interest a television company in the idea of a documentary about the orchestra, with excerpts from the original concert interleaved with new footage of old-timers such as Eno and Nyman gathering for a fresh take on the classics. Now that it's more than two decades on from their only world tour, which began and ended on the same night in Cardiff, and their ripostes to the slumming-it commercial antics of modern orchestras - the album 20 Classic Rock Classics and the single Classical Muddly - are buried under layers of dust, Lewis feels the world is once again ready for the Portsmouth Sinfonia. "We bookended the 1970s," he says affectionately. "From May 1970, when we were born, to September 1979, when we played the Rainbow. So, as a manager, it's been a fairly quiet 25 years."

On the more fantastical fringes of his imagination, Lewis dreams of a nightly reality-television show called Sinfonia! in which the better the contestants are, the quicker they get chucked off. This would, he says, culminate in the winning "musicians" playing at the Albert Hall. He even has the final line of the documentary worked out: "The Portsmouth Sinfonia: have they still got what it doesn't take?" The Sinfonia was once served with a cease-and-desist order by the publishers of Also Sprach Zarathustra. To Lewis's eternal regret, the case never came to court. "I wanted to bring the whole orchestra in as witnesses. They complained that we'd rearranged the piece, and we said, 'No, we haven't, we just haven't been able to play it very well.'" In other words, although he doesn't say so himself: punk.