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THE WORLD'S WORST ORCHESTRA!



No inhibitions: The Portsmouth Sinfonia on the Thames in 1979

Thirty years ago a scratch orchestra – Brian Eno and Michael Nyman among its amateur players – sold out the Albert Hall. Tony Saint explains

Cultural anniversaries come and go with bewildering frequency, but this Friday marks exactly 30 years since a unique musical event. On the May 28, 1974, the cognoscenti were out in force at London's Royal Albert Hall as the Portsmouth Sinfonia, proudly billed as the World's Worst Orchestra, took to the stage before a sell-out crowd.

The concert marked the peak of a meteoric rise. Amazingly, the Sinfonia had come into existence just four years earlier. Loosely inspired by the avant-garde composer Cornelius Cardew and his anarchic "Scratch" Orchestra, a group of students at Portsmouth College of Art decided to form their own radical ensemble, encouraged by the music lecturer and composer Gavin Bryars.

The idea was to create an orchestra of people with little or no experience on the instrument they were playing. Art student James Lampard was one of a dozen founder members. "I went out in the morning, bought a saxophone and tried to play it at the first rehearsal that afternoon."

Despite the obvious comic potential, there was a more studied side to the venture. "There was an artistic statement in it, a pre-punk philosophy. If you want to start an orchestra, then just go ahead and do it. It didn't matter if we could play or not. We were interpreting these classical pieces in a different way."

Attendance at rehearsals was mandatory. "We took it very seriously. It needed a lot of hard work to be quite that bad. We had to learn an uninhibited way of playing. As the size of the orchestra gradually grew, we had a complete mix of members, including some very fine musicians."

Even so, the Sinfonia, and particularly its erratic regular conductor John Farley, could throw the most experienced player. "He looked great but knew nothing about music. I remember when he started the Blue Danube Waltz with a count of 1-2-3-4. It was chaos."

The orchestra became a regular feature of the burgeoning arts centre circuit in the early 1970s, garnering new members as they went, but their popularity grew markedly from 1973, the year they signed with Transatlantic Records to cut an LP. Martin Lewis was the young publicity executive given unwitting responsibility for the new act. "At first I couldn't understand why we'd signed an orchestra doing classical favourites," he recalls. "But after I listened to them playing for a few minutes I stood with tears streaming down my face, thinking, 'This is my baby.' I've been their manager ever since."

In creating the resulting album, *The Portsmouth Sinfonia Plays the Popular Classics*, the ensemble brought their own philosophy to the recording studio. "There were no second takes," Lewis explains. "If you hit a wrong note, it was down for perpetuity." Such joyous errors litter the record.

Listening to it again, one might be forgiven for thinking that Richard Strauss wrote *Also Sprach Zarathustra* with the Portsmouth Sinfonia in mind. Their interpretation of the *William Tell* overture is reputed to have changed Leonard Bernstein's attitude to the piece for ever. By the time of the Albert Hall event, the orchestra's ranks had swelled to 82 with a number of luminaries among them; Gavin Bryars was in the cellos, along with Michael Nyman (euphonium) and Brian Eno (clarinet). Lampard remembers the atmosphere as electric.

"It was amazing. The press coverage had been incredible. Here we were, about to play one of the greatest music venues in the world. There was a feeling of walking on air. Then we got on stage and thought, 'What the hell are we doing here?' " A thought probably echoed by a group of unprepared American tourists who left after five minutes.

For the concert, the Sinfonia broke new ground by taking on a piano concerto (Tchaikovsky No 1) and a soloist to play it. Sally Binding was an accomplished pianist whose disciplined playing beautifully complemented the orchestral fireworks going on around her. Her affinity with the band led to a further collaboration being planned when the Sinfonia was subsequently booked to perform for the inmates at Wandsworth Prison. Miss Binding, alas, mistakenly turned up at Wormwood Scrubs, pleading to be let in.

The Wandsworth concert proceeded without her, despite concerns from the Howard League for Penal Reform that it may have constituted cruel and unusual punishment. For the Albert Hall itself, Miss Binding agreed to transpose the concerto down from the original key of B flat minor to a more manageable A minor. "Sharps and flats tended to unnerve the orchestra," Lewis explains.

Even so, the performance was littered with moments of insight into Tchaikovsky's personal pain. Other highlights of the concert, thankfully recorded and subsequently released on LP, include the *Hallelujah Chorus*, complete with 300-strong choir and an interpretation of the *1812 Overture* that conveys the full horror of war.

From then on, the Sinfonia became a cornerstone of mid-'70s cool and was much sought-after, not only on these shores - Lewis fondly recalls a TV appearance in Germany to play on the same bill as 10cc. Maybe as a result of its irreverent marketing strategy, the Sinfonia touched a raw nerve with the classical music establishment and continues to do so to this day.

Lewis still remembers Richard Baker cocking a snook on *Start The Week*. Plans for a Portsmouth Sinfonia Promenade Concert sadly came to nothing. In 1994, the broadcast of a short film celebrating the orchestra was cancelled at the last minute by the BBC after pressure from the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, who feared the public might confuse the two orchestras. "They should be so lucky," Lewis comments.

"No matter how hard they try, they've never quite managed to recreate our sound." The film remains unseen. The Albert Hall concert may have been the orchestra's apotheosis but more success was to follow. A further album, *20 Classic Rock Classics*, emerged, largely in response to the London Symphony Orchestra's interpretations on K-Tel of the rock repertoire. With their uncompromising approach now brought to the world of contemporary music, the players emulated the Albert Hall experience five years later with a one-off concert at the legendary rock venue the Rainbow.

This concert, in September 1979, would prove to be their last public hurrah, although a top 30 single would follow a couple of years later, provoked by the RPO's controversial "Hooked on Classics" project.

"We'd done the Albert Hall, we'd done the Rainbow. Where else was there to go?" asks Lampard. But in the protracted hiatus since the baton was last rested, it has not been forgotten. Interest in Japan, where Brian Eno has a huge following, is great. On the rare occasions that they appear, the LPs sell for upwards of £60 at internet auction.

With interest increasing, Lewis is masterminding a campaign to have the albums, unavailable for 25 years, re-released on CD for a new generation of fans. Twenty-five years since a note was cracked in anger, he's also eyeing up the mouth-watering prospect of a Sinfonia reunion, with even the promise of a return to the site of their greatest triumph. "It would be the Albert Hall again or nothing," he insists.

Lewis wants any original members and especially veterans of the Albert Hall who wish to join the reunion to contact him via the orchestra's website. But he is under no illusions as to the scale of the task. "We've got 80 members to track down and most of them probably lost or sold their instruments years ago. But they'll do it," he adds, dreamily. "For the music."

The orchestra's website is www.PortsmouthSinfonia.com