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Classical Music Critic

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"The World's Worst: A Guide to the Portsmouth Sinfonia"

They filled the rows with eager listeners (with twice as many ears) at their Royal Albert Hall premiere. Their debut LP of “popular classics,” produced by Brian Eno, sold in the thousands. And accounts of their performances through the 1970s read like lists of superlatives — albeit more in the key of the title of this engrossing history of the Portsmouth Sinfonia. Conceived in 1970 by experimental composer Gavin Bryars and a gang of his students from the Portsmouth College of Art, the Sinfonia self-identified as “the orchestra that can’t play,” thanks to its open membership policy and strict emphasis on “passion rather than proficiency.”

Members — most amateurs, some not — had only to meet one requirement: complete unfamiliarity with their selected instrument. “We’re not against good orchestras, and we’re not a caricature of a straight orchestra either,” co-founder and spokesperson Robin Mortimore told *Rolling Stone* in 1975. “We’re playing it straight and as well as we can. We’re just not very good, that’s all.” Thus, the Sinfonia’s tortured-but-well-meaning accounts of “popular classics” such as Rossini’s [“William Tell Overture,”](#) [Beethoven’s Fifth,](#) [Tchaikovsky’s](#) first piano concerto land somewhere between high camp and high art.

This volume, edited by Christopher M. Reeves and Aaron Walker, collects photographs, posters, articles, correspondences, ephemera and essays from members of the orchestra, and is a lot easier to read than their music is to listen to. As Mortimore wrote, “You may find a freshness and excitement in its simplicity. Or you may not.”

Available via [SoberSCOPE Press](#).

www.PortsmouthSinfonia.com

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