

BBC Concert ORCHESTRA

There are orchestras who will tell you that they were born to play Beethoven. And there are ensembles that mix it with modern music. But there's nothing quite like the BBC Concert Orchestra. All the Bs are in its repertoire, from Bach to Bernstein and Basseby – Shirley, that is, whom the orchestra recently partnered for BBC Two and Radio 2 at the BBC Electric Proms. (Soul legend Smokey Robinson was the other guest during the series.) If light music from G&S to Eric Coates shines brightly in this orchestra's firmament, then graver ancients and moderns glitter in its programs too, and in its recordings – which embrace Haydn, Mozart, Rossini and Elgar alongside Ives, Stravinsky, John Adams and Colin Matthews.

'Versatility' and 'flexibility' are the BBC Concert Orchestra's bywords. Its standard 56-strong membership can expand or contract according to what's on the program. Bring in a saxophone section and it's an up-front big band, perfect for accompanying top-drawer West End artists for Radio 2. Increase the strings and they're ready to play Elgar's Violin Concerto with Nigel Kennedy at the Proms. And if melody is the orchestra's 'magnetic north', who's complaining? It may be stretching a metaphor a bar too far, but melody can be a welcoming port in the midst of many modern musical storms.

Not that these musicians aren't seasoned artistic travelers, happy to take on some unexpected crew-members. Sailing with Radio 3, they have played Elgar's *The Starlight Express* and worked with the South African pianist, bandleader and composer Abdullah Ibrahim. Then there was *Sigh* at the White Cube Gallery, a collaboration between the photographer and film-maker Sam Taylor-Wood and composer Anne Dudley. Each section of the orchestra was filmed in everyday clothes in a dilapidated studio, miming without instruments to its own pre-recorded soundtrack. The images were projected onto multiple screens, giving the gallery-goer an impression of a 'surround-sound' orchestra playing on the platform. 'Compelling, uplifting and, yes, perhaps a tiny bit daft' was one critical response.

The BBC Concert Orchestra has been described as a band of 'serious musicians with a sense of humor'. But one look at its hectic schedule and burgeoning repertoire, and most of us would curl up and die before we found our sense of humor. *Friday Night is Music Night*, the orchestra's best-known radio showcase, which catches the ears of over 750,000 listeners every week, is usually polished for broadcasting in just one three-and-a-half hour session on the day itself. Off-air there's a fine catalogue of CDs with award-winning soundtracks for TV and the movies. Most recently there's the continuing series of British music recordings on the Dutton Epoch label, as well as scores for Stephen Poliakoff's *Glorious 39* and the BBC's *Nature's Great Events*.

The orchestra is also central to Radio 3's *Discovering Music* series. Here, new commissions from Tansy Davies, Fung Lam and Graham Fitkin rub shoulders with classical favourites by Schumann, Liszt and Richard Strauss. And it's Charles Hazlewood's enthusiasm for reaching out to new audiences that keeps the program on the boil.

You could argue that this is something that the BBC Concert Orchestra has always done. Who else would take Malcolm Arnold's Concerto for Flute and Strings on the road with *The Lord of the Dance* and samba dancing in the aisles? That was the 2009 MusicMix tour, which one Northamptonshire school reported as having an "amazing" atmosphere. The orchestra always keeps an eye on its younger audiences. As well as MusicMix there are the Family Music Days – and look out for *ZingZillas*, a new CBeebies series of 20-minute music programmes for under-6s. (Since you ask, a ZingZilla is 'a musical sound produced by infusing music with a primate twist'.)

New composers have been zinging for their supper with the BBC Concert Orchestra for a while now. Jonny Greenwood, from the band Radiohead, is the group's most recent Composer-in-Residence. The orchestra gave the premiere of his *Popcorn Superhet Receiver* in 2005, and more recently *Doghouse*. In 2007 Will Gregory, one half of the electronica duo Goldfrapp, wrote a score for Victor Sjöström's 1924 silent-movie classic *He Who Gets Slapped*, starring Lon Chaney and Norma Shearer, which the orchestra performed live in London and Bristol and broadcast on Radio 3. Now there's the promise of a new music-theatre piece from Gregory.

Watford Colosseum has been the BBC Concert Orchestra's temporary home venue, but from April 2010 it closed for a year to undergo a major facelift. So, the players will be on the road more than ever. There are tours to Abu Dhabi and North America, another year of residency at Chichester Festival Theatre, and lots of one-off concerts around the UK. In December 2011 you can also hear the BBC CO in the pit at the Royal Opera House playing Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* with Barry Wordsworth – its former Principal Conductor, reborn as Conductor Laureate and now also Music Director for the Royal Ballet. Is there any other orchestra in these islands that can dance a samba as stylishly as a classical pas de deux? And who else, pray, is rehearsing their ZingZillas!

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