

Shoestring Orchestra

A community gathering in its truest sense, last night's concert by the Shoestring Orchestra of Capitol Hill was laced with gaiety and surprises. Players dutifully reassembled for each number, sometimes following the program and other times not. As a blaring Joplin march and a Strauss waltz (which limped more than it waltzed) crept into the air at the Market 5 Gallery, anxious listeners became prepared for anything.

Seemingly antithetical to a community orchestra, however, is the Shoestring's passion for contemporary music: It played three modern pieces, two of them premieres. Of these recent creations by local composers, the only one that contained any semblance of original vision was "The Wind of Dawn" for orchestra and tape by Ulf Grahm. The difficulty of using taped sounds in conjunction with live ones—that is, successfully melding the two forces—was overcome as taped sounds enhanced and swelled with those of the orchestra. The opening music was particularly effective, as the percussive recorded material established a staggering dialogue with waves of instrumental counterpoint.

Overtures by Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari and Wagner were shining examples of the theatrical side of music, the first sounding like a newly discovered Gilbert and Sullivan score, and the Wagner, as dramatically

charged as it possibly could have been.

—Ron Fein

Touchstone

American folk music has yet to accommodate electric guitars, let alone synthesizers. So it's a bit odd to find a synthesizer happily co-mingling with acoustic instruments generally associated with the more rigid Irish tradition: flutes, whistles, guitars and bouzoukis. Nevertheless, that's precisely the sound of Touchstone, the imaginative and talented quartet that played the Birchmere last night.

Triona Ni Dhomhnaill, the one member of the group who can truly claim Ireland as home, played the clavinet-synthesizer, producing the courtly melodies and cadences that gave the music its delicate yet sprightly flavor. Even better, though, was Dhomhnaill's gorgeous singing; her versions of "When I Was a Fair Maid" and "The Wee Laughs on the Brae" were especially lovely.

The rest of the music was evenly divided, flutist Mark Roberts excelled on the jigs, reels and hornpipes, easily negotiating their constantly twisting melodies; Claudine Langille proved to be a capable singer and a fine mandolinist and banjo player; and Zan McLeod provided both dancing rhythms (on guitar) and colorful embellishments (on bouzouki).

—Mike Joyce

Playing it safe with first flight

REVIEW

New Music Orchestra *Theatre Royal, Portsmouth*

Opening Gambit, the inaugural concert by the Portsmouth New Music Orchestra, took place before an enthusiastic audience in the Theatre Royal last night.

All credit to the musicians involved who, under John Webber's clear direction, achieved marvellously high standards which belied the limited rehearsal time available to them.

None of the composers was a household name, none has yet been featured on Classic FM, but all the same, the music was thoroughly approachable.

If anything it all seemed rather conservative; certainly some of the pieces were based on earlier music and most were harmonious. Schoenberg and Bartok were writing stronger stuff than this before the first world war.

I particularly enjoyed Philip Drew's atmospheric nature piece, *Paper Mill Lock*, with its updating of the English pastoral style, hints of which were found also in the *Sinfonietta* by Raymond Parfrey.

And also worth a mention is Paul Pilott, the secretary of Portsmouth Composers Alliance, who contributed a rather skilfully-written passacaglia.

TERRY BARFOOT

Tale of two concerts lost in the wind

FIRST NIGHT

Portsmouth New Music Orchestra

New Theatre Royal

At times it seemed two concerts were taking place at once – one on stage, the other in the auditorium.

The first consisted of assorted 20th century music played with great spirit and no little sensitivity by the PNMO.

The other ranged from coughing and chattering to sweet-unwrapping and (shall we say?) wind effects.

That's the price PNMO founder-director John Webber pays for writing a piece for a junior school choir, thus encouraging younger siblings into the audience.

As it happened, his *Music of the Spheres*, a fun though blatantly repetitious piece, misfired because no words were printed in the programme and few could be heard.

So I have no idea why the Stamshaw school choir were falling down and jumping up.

The most memorable music-making came from Rob Blanken, expertly moulding pastoral lyricism with echoes of the tremors of war as soloist in Finzi's fine 1949 clarinet concerto.

Pianist Karen Kingsley was a tender soloist in Webber's *Elegy* and the orchestra revelled in the fireworks of Holst's *St Paul's Suite*.

MIKE ALLEN

Portsmouth News 18 May 98

review

Cream of local musicians shine

New Music

New Theatre Royal

Portsmouth New Music Orchestra returned on Saturday with a typically enterprising concert played by the cream of local musicians.

Conductor John Webber stole the show with one of his own compositions.

His *Brazilian Dances* combined the orchestra with the Brazilian-style percussion ensemble Bar-Two-K. The central slow dance dominated by tangos, beautifully played by Karen Kingsley at the piano, had a percussion part which seemed superfluous.

The first half of the programme was enjoyable too.

Patric Standford's *Epigrams* were beautifully balanced, while *Dirtnie Possession* by Nicola Ellis was sincere.

If the playing seemed tentative at the beginning of Peter Copley's *Pæan*, the orchestra developed a satisfyingly-sonorous sound as the music developed.

TERRY BARFOOT

review

Music for all ages

**Portsmouth New
Music Orchestra**
New Theatre Royal

What John Webber teaches his PNMO audiences is that new music need not be difficult.

He himself, as founder-conductor and composer-in-chief, knows how to write pieces children can perform and even untutored adults can enjoy.

His *Four Shakespeare Songs*, premiered by the orchestra with 50 singers and instrumentalists from Mayville High School, Southsea, proved easy on the ear with sufficient piquancy of har-

mony and melody to make them interesting.

Dr Webber had also set 10-year-old Suyin Lim's well-written poem, *The Season Person*, for Saturday's concert, in which the junior Mayville pupils were involved throughout the second half.

The first half consisted of not-so-new 20th century music. Sophie O'Flynn's songful solo cello playing in Frank Bridge's *Scherzetto* was captivating, and the players seemed to relish the freedom of expression allowed them in Patric Stanford's night evocation, *Notte*.

MIKE ALLEN

music Director plans more work with schools

Links with young are to be extended

After the success of Portsmouth New Music Orchestra's partnership with city children this month, plans are in hand for further links with young musicians.

Stamshaw Junior School teacher Wendy Carpenter received 100 applications after she put up a notice asking for 75 volunteers for a choir to join in the orchestra's first birthday concert at the New Theatre Royal.

The choir sang in a new work composed by PNMO

founder-director John Webber, and the theatre was full for the concert, which also included other contemporary music.

Now Dr Webber hopes to do more work with schools and youth orchestras this autumn, to further his ambition of gently coaxing Portsmouth audiences to listen to contemporary music.

He also plans a concert on September 14 which might include music composed by him for Batu Kada, a group of local

drummers who perform Brazilian-style street percussion music.

Dr Webber is a former marine bandsman who studied in Germany and the United States, where he also founded an orchestra to perform new music, before returning to Portsmouth as an international composer.

Thanks for everyone's
help.





The News, Tuesday, April 30, 1996



Chris Buck sups his pint as Chris Smithies plays viola, at the Air Balloon

Classical soiree proves a real gas

■ *Pub's highbrow musical evenings pull in the punters.*

By **BERNARD COLE**

The News

There is now a Portsmouth pub where you can get Brahms and Liszt without touching a drop of the hard stuff.

For, once a month, having a pint at the Air Balloon, in Mile End Road, is more like taking tea at Ritz – musically at least.

Jukebox favourites such as *Space-man* by Babylon Zoo are relegated to the bottom of the hit parade . . . as a classical string quartet takes centre stage for the night.

Landlord Dave Beresford introduced the highbrow evenings shortly after taking over the pub – which had been a haunt of leather-clad bikers – seven months ago.

He said most of the regulars were more used to Motorhead and Hawkwind than Mozart and Haydn.

'When I first came here the jukebox was full of heavy metal and nothing else.

'So I thought I would be a bit different to get some culture in here for a change. And it definitely seems to have worked,' he said.

'Some of the old bikers sometimes poke their heads round the door and wonder what's going on.'

'But other people come in especially to hear the classical stuff.'

The ensemble is called the Granger String Quartet – after Havant instrument maker Colin Granger.

Violinist Gill Tolliday, a music teacher for Hampshire County Council who lives in Milton, said they mostly played well-known pieces such as Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* or tunes people would recognise from films or adverts.

'It has surprised me how much the regulars seem to like good classical music. The place has been packed for the last two concerts,' she said.

Drinker Chris Buck, a motor mec-

hanic from North End, said he wouldn't usually listen to classical music and knew virtually nothing about it.

'We normally have Radio One blaring out at work so this makes a change.

'But I am growing to like it. It's very relaxing and dreamy – just the thing to help you wind down after work,' he said.

Last night, composer John Webber, director of the Portsmouth New Music Orchestra, raised the cultural stakes with the premiere of a new work called *Ricciare* – which is Italian – for an experiment.

The piece was written for a string quintet with two flutes, a clarinet and, somewhat obscurely, a country music pedal steel guitar.

But, with its complex harmonic structure which veered between the avant garde and the cacophonous, it proved to be a little too much for some.

'I think they are still warming up,' said one bemused drinker halfway through the piece.

Performance delights Alun

Portsmouth New Music Orchestra

New Theatre Royal

Welsh composer Alun Hoddinott was delighted with Saturday's performance of the Viola Concertino he wrote in 1958.

It's a lovely, taut piece, darkly Celtic perhaps in the outer movements, but with a lively scherzo in which the orchestra seems determined to upset the soloist's rhythm.

Fiona James was not to be put off, managing the bravura playing with aplomb, and achieved the depth and melancholy of tone needed.

The orchestra's founder-conductor, John Webber, began with the premiere of his own Sinfonietta.

It's an often-lyrical work, with some hypnotic sonorities, a characterful scherzo and an ending that seems to want to lead into something more challenging.

MIKE ALLEN

Composer to attend performance of work

Welshman Alun Hoddinott, 67, who is among the foremost composers of his generation, will be in Portsmouth on Saturday to hear one of his own works played.

His *Viola Concertino* will be performed at the New Theatre Royal (7.45pm) by

Fiona James and the Portsmouth New Music Orchestra under its founder-conductor, John Webber.

Their concert also includes the *Adagio For Strings* by Samule Barber, *Sinfonietta No 2* by malcolm Arnold, and the world premiere of Webber's own *Sinfonietta*.

■ *Tickets: 01705 649000.*

■ Also on Saturday (7.30pm), some of the area's most talented young musicians give a concert organised by Portsmouth Music Festival in the Menuhin Room at the central library (01705 738147) - and Portsmouth Baroque Choir sings one of Handel's

masterpieces, *Israel in Egypt*, in the Anglican cathedral.

■ Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* and works by Mozart, Albinoni and Bach will be played by Julian Leaper and the Brandenburg Sinfonia on Sunday (7pm) in Chichester Festival Theatre.

■ *Tickets: 01243 781312.*

Orchestra in cash rethink

Failure to win lottery cash for one of Portsmouth's newest musical ventures was no disgrace, according to its founder.

The Portsmouth New Music Orchestra had applied for £95,000 to build up a regular audience in the city for the latest in recital and orchestral music.

But the absence of the right marketing plan and stiff competition for the £22m in lottery grants meant the PNMO will have to go back to the drawing board and re-think its application for cash.

The orchestra of professional and semi-professional musicians was set up two years ago by its founder and music director John Webber. He said: 'Unfortunately we didn't have a suitable marketing plan so we were unsuccessful.'

Not all new, but very interesting

Portsmouth New Music Orchestra

New Theatre Royal, Portsmouth

The opening items, Walton's *Siesta* and Raymond Parfrey's *Divertimento* did much to deny the term 'New', the first in point of fact, the second by virtue of its style.

Parfrey's attractive piece was brilliantly played by Robert Blanken. Danny Knott's *Sourond Suite* for clarinet and piano brought a welcome vitality to proceedings, though once again this 1994 composition might

have been composed decades before. Jo Treasure's *Vigil* was an imaginative sound from which distinctive solos emerged.

For the final items orchestra director John Webber was the composer. In *Netzach* for cello and orchestra, soloist Bryan Burdett led a disciplined performance of a piece whose vitality brought a purposeful conclusion to an interesting evening.

TERRY BARRETT

at Kings

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3 29 Jan '96

PREVIEW: Music

Public platform for new music

By STEVE PRATT

Entertainments editor

The telephone rings. The caller from Southern Arts advises composer John Webber of the deadline for funding applications.

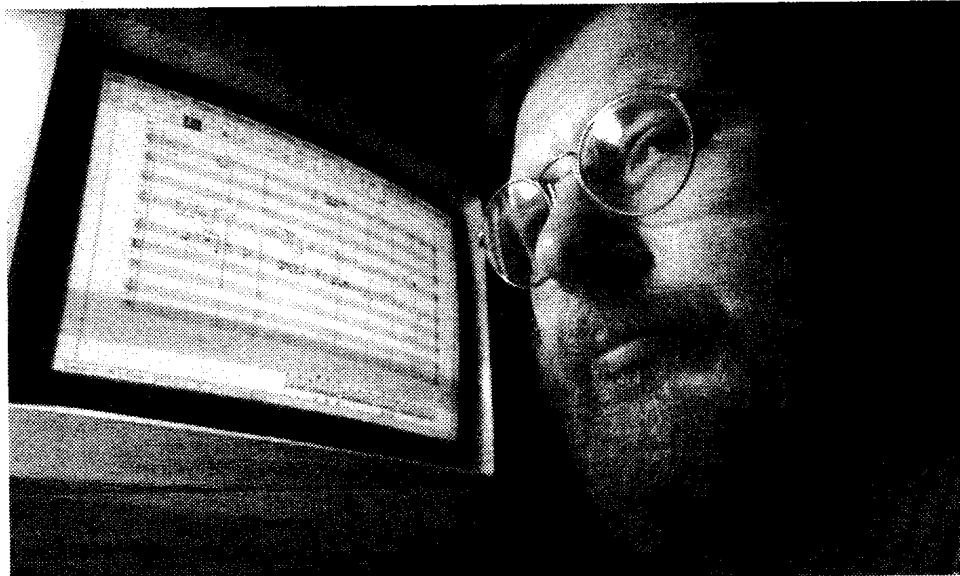
He'd like to get on with the business of running an orchestra but finance - or lack of it - is never far from his mind. Like everyone in the arts today, what he can do is governed by how much can be raised.

All the same, Portsmouth New Music Orchestra is shaping up well. Not yet a year old, it has two concerts to its credit with three more planned for 1996.

The first is at the city's New Theatre Royal on Sunday.

The aims of PNMO are similar to those of the new music orchestra John co-founded in Washington DC during his time in America.

The former Royal Marines bandsman is now back at the family home in Balfour Road, North End, and describes himself as a 'chronically unemployable composer'. The desire to hear his



John Webber, championing works that would be ignored

own work played was one of the reasons for setting up the US, and now the Portsmouth, orchestra.

'Getting new chamber music played is not too difficult but orchestras tend to be more conservative and are scared the audience won't like new music,' he explains.

The only way to air such music is to form an orchestra to play it.

He said: 'There is a definite need for this sort of thing in Portsmouth,' but added: 'The downside is that very few people perceive that and there's not much money to go round.'

On the upside PNMO has managed to obtain £2,500 funding (from Southern Arts plus county and city councils) and is backed by an energetic Friends committee and board. What's lacking so far are any substantial private contributions.

While John has three concerts lined-up this year, the content depends on what money becomes available.

The orchestra itself comprises a core of about 20 professionals, who have played for less than the going rate, plus volunteers, namely students or retired musicians of grade eight or above standard.

There is no shortage of new composers wanting their music performed.

John has piles of scores, including offerings from the Netherlands. The pieces he chooses are those that fit the size of the orchestra.

The main target for 1996 is to attract bigger audiences and a major marketing exercise is under way for this weekend's appearance.

'The main thing is to keep people interested,' says John.

Sunday's programme includes the premiere of works by Jo

Treasure and John himself. The concert begins at 7.30pm at the Theatre Royal.

Playing it safe with first flight

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TERRY BARFOOT

NEW MUSIC AMERICA / F. Warren O'Reilly

An evening of new music evangelism

Composer/conductor John Webber is an evangelist of sorts. His Shoestring Society produces a series of concerts by a volunteer ensemble that has been renamed the New Music Orchestra. Their second appearance in this new guise occurred at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation on Tuesday, and was another chapter in Webber's unremitting efforts to enlarge the audience for new music.

The evening began with a performance of Milhaud's rarely heard trifle, "The Household Muse." Dating from his

period in California in the '40s, it is an omnibus of various moods and impressions done with all his facility and inspiration. It was conducted ably by the group's associate music director, Nicholas Armstrong. He also led the strings and woodwinds in the premiere of Joseph Santo's *Mouvements Concertante*. Of course, a volunteer ensemble with comings and goings from season to season can scarcely produce polished performances. However,

this drawback was to some degree balanced by the evident commitment of all to the music of our time. Santo's orchestration was indeed spare, his rhythms often propulsive; the two-movement work is worth hearing again.

I regret that Webber's elaborate "The Song of Songs," for orchestra and chorus in six movements, was less impressive. Not only was the text a melange of biblical and secular poetry that defied rational analysis; all too frequently the

much larger orchestra drowned out the voices of the small chorus — Christ Episcopal Church Choir, Jack Jacobs, music director. The pleasant voices and commendable diction of soprano Pat Rogers and tenor Jacobs was seldom heard over the din of the orchestra, particularly since the winds and strings had been joined by a full complement of brass and percussion. During the frequent interjections of orchestral bass passages fortissimo the sing-

ers might as well not have been present. The 25-minute work was an experiment in mixed tonality, and turned out to be fairly bland modern music which came to an end on a quite traditional tonic chord. The composer conducted with considerable verve.

Webber's orchestra has grown to about 40 members, and is planning a season of several concerts with more new orchestral music; quite the most ambitious contemporary music organization around. Moreover, he invites the audience to dress informally and to participate in the performances in some way.



PORTSMOUTH New Music Orchestra has received a cash bursary from British Telecom. Nine BT Innovation Awards were presented to music societies from across the UK at the National Federation of Music Societies annual conference at Oxford last weekend.

Pictured (left) Dr John Webber of Portsmouth New Music Orchestra receiving a symbolic wooden tree engraved with the orchestra's name from Stephen Serpell (right) of British Telecom. Also pictured is Roderick Wylie (centre), Chairman of the National Federation of Music Societies.