

# Getting the correct tunes with the Graduate Orchestra



It's a Sunday afternoon at graduate college Hughes Hall. The Cambridge Graduate Orchestra is rehearsing Schnittke's *(Not) A Midsummer Night's Dream* and something sounds terribly wrong.

Conductor Peter Tregear stops the orchestra for a talking-to which ends with the words: "One of the things this will do is make the Rachmaninov sound good."

The Schnittke is the opening piece in a programme which will feature Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* for piano and orchestra followed by Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherezade*. The Schnittke is also a musical joke. It is intended to sound as if something is awry.

"It has to be played with conviction," says principal horn player Deborah Hayden. "You have to be in on the joke"

Fast forward several weeks to the evening of 7 March and the orchestra is making its debut at the West Road concert hall. The Schnittke is received with a mixture of pleasure and puzzlement by the 230 concert-goers in the audience.

"It certainly got people talking," says pianist Alex Reid afterwards. "It's not normal Cambridge repertoire. It's flashy and experimental."

Beginning with a satirical piece was a daring choice for an orchestra that only came into being in the autumn following conversations between Reid

and graduate musicians at the university. Reid had realised there was a demand for a place where they could meet and play with people of their own age who had similar schedules.

"Graduate life is not like the boom and bust of the

undergraduate terms where you are on the go for eight weeks and then once everyone goes home there's nothing," says Reid.

His idea for an orchestra for graduates appealed to conductor Tregear who was once, in his own words, a particularly "bolshie" graduate student at King's College. At that time he felt that graduate community life compared poorly with the undergraduate experience. Since becoming a lecturer and director of music at Fitzwilliam and Churchill colleges he has not changed his view.

In contrast to undergraduate orchestras which have to fit everything in during term time, this orchestra rehearsed for its first concert once every fortnight from late October until March. It held its rehearsals on Sundays, attracting members who were busy on weekdays working in laboratories, hospitals, schools, and even at the university's Board of Graduate Studies.

This longer-term approach appealed to a range of musicians including past members of the Cambridge University Chamber Orchestra, the Cambridge University Symphony Orchestra and the Cambridge University Music Society's first and second orchestras. Some members of the orchestra have even got together outside of rehearsals to form their own chamber groups, with principal violinist Sarah Benedict starting a string quartet and other members making up a woodwind ensemble to play Poulenc's *Sextet for Piano and Wind*.

The programme that the orchestra came together to play had a Russian theme. Coming next after Schnittke, Rachmaninov's rhapsody is neo-classical in style and was inspired by the 24th Caprice of the violin virtuoso and composer Paganini. This may be better known to the less musical among us as the theme tune for Melvyn Bragg's *South Bank Show* (composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber). In writing this piece, Rachmaninov was inspired by the myth that Paganini owed his technical proficiency to a deal struck with an evil spirit. The keyboard part in the final variation of this piece is so devilishly difficult that Rachmaninov was said to down a glass of *crème de menthe* before playing it himself.

"The difficult 15th variation was executed flawlessly and was extremely stylish too," says Reid's piano coach David Earl.

Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherezade*, played next, is based on the story from the *Arabian Nights* of a sultan who was in the habit of executing his wives after just one night to stop them from nagging him. One day he wed Scheherezade who enchanted him on her wedding night with a story that didn't finish. Longing to know what happened after each cliff-hanger, he spared her night after night and never did execute her.

"The best thing about *Scheherezade* is that it's got parts for everyone to shine in. There are a lot of solos for the principal woodwind and brass and it kept everyone interested in the rehearsals," says Reid.

The orchestra is already planning two more concerts. The first will be held on July 10 at Trinity Chapel. It will have a Spanish theme and will feature the *Gypsy Airs* of Pablo de Sarasate. The second will take place on the 23 September for Cambridge's Alumni Weekend.

"We've had the first concert and it was successful. It proves the concept of a Graduate orchestra works," says Reid. "We are looking forward to plenty more concerts."

**For information about future concerts or joining the orchestra visit**  
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