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Stepping stone

A new orchestral academy is being launched this month to help bridge the gap between conservatoire and professional career. Nicola Lisle reports

It is a sad but indisputable fact that breaking into the music profession is becoming increasingly difficult, and for young musicians, fresh out of college, it can seem like an insurmountable challenge. But help is now at hand, in the shape of new orchestral academy Orchestra Europa, which aims to provide a stepping stone for some of Europe's most promising young musicians.

The pioneer is young Welsh conductor Scott Ellaway, who was inspired by working with the New World Symphony Orchestra in Miami. 'It's an incredible orchestra,' he says. 'They bring musicians from all over the US who've studied at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and they come and play in this orchestra for three years, giving concerts with world-class conductors, world-class soloists and world-class facilities. And I realised that there wasn't anything quite like it in Europe or the UK. So that's how Orchestra Europa came about.'

'There are other schemes out there which offer wonderful opportunities – there's the LPO Future First scheme, the Britten-Pears Programme, the European Youth Orchestra and the National Youth Orchestra. But they only operate two or three times a year. Europa is more concentrated, and focuses on the development from postgraduate study to professional career. There are six monthly programmes throughout the year, and that's how it's going to work for the next three years.'

The orchestra will give players the opportunity to perform with internationally-renowned conductors and musicians, as well as receiving training from members of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra as part of the Classical Futures Mentoring Scheme. Ellaway is keen to emphasise the training aspects of the orchestra. 'Orchestra Europa is the public face of the orchestral academy. It's the orchestral academy where all the work goes on; the training, the rehearsal, the artists giving their pearls of wisdom to the players. The concerts are just where you see the end result.'

Earlier this year Ellaway was able to put the orchestra to the test with a couple of pre-launch concerts in Oxford, for which he recruited counter-tenor James Bowman and pianist/composer David Owen Norris. 'It was a chance to check that this can work at a smaller level, to see the quality we would get, to see how to market it, and for players to see what it was like working with big artists,' Ellaway says. 'We were able to see what it was like to bring together musicians from different conservatoires, and put something together and perform a concert.'

'It was very interesting, because the first concert was very polished; the second one wasn't quite as polished, but there were more exciting moments in some of the pieces. It's about trying to combine those two together. So that's what those concerts did – they were an opportunity for me and my team to see what worked and what didn't.'

Bowman, whose own early career was given a helping hand by Benjamin Britten, was an enthusiastic participant in the pre-season programme. 'It's very important to encourage people when they're young,' he says. 'I'm a great believer in supporting young musicians. I know how difficult it is when you're starting, and it is so easy to be put off. It can make or break someone, depending how you treat them early in their careers. A wrongly-placed word can be very damaging.'

'Breaking in is much more difficult now that it used to be – I wouldn't like to be starting now. It's a very tough world, and very competitive.'

Now everything is set for the orchestra's official launch at St David's Hall, Cardiff, on 28 November – by which time the pre-season chamber orchestra will have expanded into a full-size orchestra of 72 musicians. 'I'm very excited – it should be amazing,' says Ellaway. 'Nobody else has been able to get anything like this off the ground, so for us to be actually launching this month is a great thrill for me.'

Wielding the baton will be Vasily Petrenko, conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra since 2004, and recently appointed conductor of the National Youth Orchestra. 'We see ourselves as the next step from the National Youth Orchestra, so it's fitting that we had a conductor with a good history of working with young people, and somebody attached to a professional orchestra – because at the end of the day we need to get our players jobs, so having that link with Vasily and the RLPO is very important.'

The orchestra will be performing Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, the *New World* symphony by Dvořák, and the overture *Le Corsaire* by Berlioz. 'It's a great programme,' says Ellaway. 'Europa's modelled on the New World Symphony Orchestra, so that's why we chose that piece. We've got a Japanese player, Ayako Uehara, playing the Paganini variations. She's been making quite a name for herself, and she's been doing this work with Vasily and the LSO, so we wanted to bring two artists together who have worked with a large orchestra, and bring that magic to Europa. So it's an exciting programme.'

'It's our chance to shine, and show the music industry that Orchestra Europa really is going to be a force to be reckoned with.'

Eventually, Ellaway hopes to see Europa expand into a full-time orchestra, which will tour increasingly widely and gradually take on more challenging repertoire. He also hopes to continue to attract world-class musicians to work with the players. 'The idea is that we're starting off in this country, performing all around the UK, and working with players from all the conservatoires in the country.'

'After the first six concerts, the second year will again be six to eight concerts, but we'll up the ante a bit with a European tour. The idea is that we're going to link up with architects who have

been involved with new concert halls, and the programme will be devised around performing music that fits the building, and taking Europa to these new venues. At the moment the repertoire is very traditional and conservative, and of course every orchestral musician has to be able to play Haydn, Brahms and Dvořák symphonies, but next year, although those pieces will still be in the repertoire, we hope to add new ones in.

'We also hope to up the ante with venues, and perform in places like Bridgewater Hall and the Symphony Hall, as well as working with artists who are leading some of the world's greatest orchestras – I would hope to invite Bernard Haitnik to come in and work with the orchestra. So it's going up another level artistically.'

For 2010, Ellaway has his sights set on an American or Asian tour, after which he hopes to establish a permanent base for the orchestra – and it will not necessarily be in the UK. 'It could be anywhere from Geneva to Spain. What we would like to happen is for people to have heard about our work

and then come to us and say "There's an opportunity for you here, with our concert hall, in this country, using this infrastructure". Our management team will also be based in that location, and I suspect the orchestra will then go full time.

'That doesn't mean we won't still tour because I like the idea of touring – if you look at the National Youth Orchestra and the European Youth Orchestra, they all tour. So we want to tour, but we want that prestige of being based somewhere.

'What we're basically doing at the moment is marketing the orchestra to the world and getting support. And as you gain support, the financial support you get in goes up, so it has a knock-on effect.'

It all sounds highly ambitious, but ambition and determination are what Ellaway is all about. This is the man who, at the tender age of 11, was already touring with a brass band, and who was not afraid to take charge when the band's conductor failed to turn up one day. At just 16, he was conducting the Bristol Cathedral choir, and at 21, while still an undergraduate at Oxford, he conducted the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and the orchestra of Welsh National Opera. He has since worked with the BBC Concert Orchestra, the London Mozart Players, the Philharmonia Orchestra of London and, of course, the New World Symphony Orchestra in Miami. Still only in his twenties, he is not much older than the musicians he will be helping through Orchestra Europa.

'A lot of my colleagues who were at conservatoires haven't had the chance to go forward,' he says. 'Because I did have that chance, I thought I should try and do something to help. And having the buzz when I was working at New World, creating something similar in this country is very exciting.'

'It's about giving young people opportunities. I hope Europa will become known as an institution of excellence, so people will respect what we're doing, take the players' applications seriously and give them a chance.'

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– Scott Ellaway

