

The dilemma of the orchestra

Despite the virtual collapse of the classical recording industry during the 1990s, real orchestras have never been more popular as the icing on the cake for films and a new generation of computer games employ sweeping scores to dramatic effect. Are the UK's famous orchestral players benefiting from this, or is the work going to the bargain-basement ensembles of Eastern Europe? **NIGEL JOPSON**

ACHILL WIND BLEW through the classical music world during the last decade of the 20th century. Not only were concert audiences getting older, greyer and less abundant, but also the major record labels — themselves under threat from falling sales — decided to downsize their classical divisions dramatically. The concept of churning out new recordings of the same old symphonies on CD had never looked a sustainable business model, but many musicians were shocked at the brutal cull as traditionally supportive labels such as EMI axed deals and reduced their output to a trickle of populist crossover acts. Of the world's top-class orchestral players, those from the UK's underfunded orchestras looked most vulnerable.

The LSO, one of the UK's premier orchestras, has a combined Arts Council and City of London grant of £3.5 million — considerably more subsidy than most British orchestras — but less than half that of the Berlin Philharmonic. European state-owned TV broadcasters frequently feature classical concerts, whereas these have virtually disappeared from the small screen in the UK. US symphony orchestras may run operating deficits, but the figures are largely illusory owing to their very generous endowments: the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra is cushioned by an endowment of US\$175 million. Boston and Los Angeles orchestral musicians expect to earn about \$122,000 a year, New Yorkers are on only a few thousand less, and musicians in Chicago and San Francisco make around \$113,000. By comparison, a rank-and-file player in London's LSO earns up to £40,000, while equivalent desks in the London Philharmonic and Philharmonia are unlikely to make much more than £30,000 — in the provinces it's nearer £25,000. Research conducted in 2004 by the MU (Musicians Union) discovered there was long term commitment — an average of 21 years — to the orchestral musician's profession, but measly average earnings of £22,500 per annum. 42% of the survey respondents were between 36 and 45 years old — an age range when salaries should be at their highest.

British orchestras have a uniquely competitive system for appointing new members: after auditions, prospective appointees are taken in on trial, with the process taking a year or more. 'If I thought of it as a job, I would never do it in a million years,' said French violinist Philippe Honoré, a member of the Philharmonia. 'Working under such pressure gives the concerts an edge; but the downside is that there isn't time to explore the music in more depth.'

The American model, where the same programme may be played four times a week, has often been fiercely debated in the UK as regards artistic or commercial merit. Conductor Colin Davis puts the opposing view to Honoré: 'The American system traps musicians on a treadmill ... the same pattern of



rehearsals, concerts and repeats each week through the whole season — it's numbing. Nor do I think it's true that a performance gets deeper when it is repeated three or four times.' For an orchestra management with tight finances there are a whole raft of issues to take into account, including the costs of rehearsing a concert programme, which can be up to £20,000. 'One huge reason why orchestras struggle is because conductor's fees are so high,' complains Fiona Higham, a second violin with the LPO (London Philharmonic Orchestra), 'a conductor can earn up to £15,000 for one concert, while we're paid around £100.' Conductors are sometimes seen as too cerebral and out of touch with working musicians. Trombonist Denis Wick tells a story of Claudio Abbado being horrified to learn the LSO had been working hard all day on a recording date with John Williams for Star Wars, before coming to rehearsals with him '... he had absolutely no idea what his orchestra did when they weren't with him!'

Just as the classical music industry entered its leanest period ever, a new rival appeared for the film and TV soundtrack sessions many British musicians depended on for extra income. In the early 1990s I can recall Michael Kamen commenting on the quality of an Eastern European orchestra I was recording with him — he subsequently went on to work with several orchestras (in particular the Czech Philharmonic) from the former 'Soviet Bloc', as did other top composers faced with budget constraints. Allan Wilson, a British orchestrator who frequently works with the London Philharmonia (he conducted

them for three Harry Potter game scores) expressed a familiar view to me recently: 'Music is the last link in the chain before the film is dubbed, and sometimes it seems as if whatever money is left over at the end of production is all that's given to the music. Many composers are given a pathetic budget with the brief of "making it sound like Independence Day"! I'm an advocate of recording in London, but of course I also want to ply my own trade. I've recorded in Prague, Munich, Budapest, Berlin and Bratislava. It might possibly take a little longer in Eastern Europe, but the percentage difference in price does not correspond to the difference in work rate and playing standards, it's more than acceptable.'

The cost of living, and a pool of still-active musicians trained in the days of state funding, gives Eastern Europeans an undeniable advantage. In Slovakia it is possible to engage orchestral players for the equivalent of £7 per hour, an unthinkable rate in the UK, where Scale 1 (2-36 hours) is £104 and Scale 2 (37-350 hours) is £77. Prague is slightly more expensive than Bratislava, and rates in Berlin are around £70 per hour.

Hollywood is the undenied capital of the motion picture industry, and initially travel, logistic and language problems dissuaded the lower budget productions from heading to the east of Europe, with Seattle and Salt Lake City popular alternative destinations. But now it's possible to add an orchestral flourish from the East to a made-for-TV movie without leaving Los Angeles. Steve Salani has a unique operation at www.orchestra.net that allows



Jonathan Williams

composers to send scores by email to Prague, and then monitor the recording in real time with an audio and visual link direct to the session. Clients can either go to Steve's studio in Santa Monica and watch proceedings on a big screen, or install a special application called Session on their own computers and link to the system remotely via a DSL connection. This remote control application delivers a 26-track monitor mixer, a live video window with camera control, and a conductor talkback system.

'Our system is designed to fully support pre-recorded tracks and click, nowadays composers are using MIDI tracks all the time — especially with percussion — often we won't have a live percussionist because the composers use samples for that. The working system is very simple for the client, we simply open an FTP account for each project, the client can then upload all their click tracks, MIDI files and PDF files of the score. We take care of all the score printing and we set up all the audio files,' he says.

Recent clients include ABC with a mini-series called Empire, ESPN with Code Breaker and the composer Mark Isham, who recorded string parts for his score on the movie Running Scared by remote control. Rates can be as low as \$1695 per session hour (for a 50 piece orchestra) — a union orchestra in LA or a session in London would be four or five times as expensive. Salt Lake or Seattle would be at least double the price.

With economics like this, the outlook seemed grim

for London. But in 2003 the MU negotiated a new PACT (Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television) agreement that changed the landscape considerably, making London a more competitive environment for certain types of production. Producers working on films with a low budget (under £10 million) can provide documentary evidence of this to the MU, and then engage players on the lowest pay rate of Scale 4, £51 per hour, which is normally only available if the production is engaging musicians for over 800 hours total. This rate also applies to any orchestral recording for computer games, as the MU's session organiser Peter Thoms explained to me: 'We decided as a union to encourage games, as we saw it as a growth area, basically the players will receive at least £153 for the minimum 3-hour session call. The agreement has been very popular since it was negotiated, we've seen quite a lot of films come over here partly because of the rights package on offer: they get the film, the TV, the DVD, the Soundtrack and the EPK (Electronic Press Kit). The rights package available under Union agreements in the US is more limited, studios have to pay residuals and add-ons.'

Jonathan Williams (pictured) is an orchestrator and conductor who works for production house Nimrod. He told me the new agreement has been a boon for outfits like his: 'I don't think some sessions would be possible without PACT, if we were having to pay Scale 1 we certainly wouldn't be able to do such large scores! For the game 24 — based on the SKY

TV programme — we went to Abbey Road. We had quite a big orchestra, and even though there were no woodwinds we had over 60 players. We have been asked to explore Prague and Bratislava in the past for budget reasons, but I always advise that it will save money in the long run because the standard is so good in London.'

One advantage London has is the ready availability of featured soloists, and the UK orchestral musician's ability to play pieces with a more jazz-based or contemporary feel. The Philharmonia recently played together with a jazz big band on the soundtrack for the new James Bond movie, and currently the score for the film of the Da Vinci Code is being recorded in London. Williams also made a good point to me about the phenomenal work rate of UK orchestras. 'I sometimes push to the maximum allowable ... I have recorded 20 minutes of score per hour. I schedule it very carefully because we can't afford to dawdle, there's not the same amount of time available [for games] as there is for TV and film work. I have to prioritise and say: we absolutely have to record this and this, if we can get to these pieces then it will be a bonus — otherwise we'll just have to use samples.'

Twenty minutes of recording per hour is a truly phenomenal work rate, and a testament to the ability of UK players. 'London's orchestral musicians are the greatest sight-readers ever known,' confirms André Previn, 'and the fascinating thing is that if you are doing a particularly complex piece, it usually tends to be better on the first reading than at the second. At the first reading, everyone is usually concentrating, while the second time through they relax!' Suddenly the www.orchestra.net deal doesn't look so economical after all: 'I usually tell clients to budget for one hour per three minutes of material,' Salani told me, 'we are able in some cases to get up to twice as much recorded, but that depends entirely on the material and orchestra configuration.' By that measure Jonathan Williams is getting very good value from his players. Even if two or three days by the Danube sounds superficially attractive, he has even managed to match the lowest budget Slovakian £7 per hour (if their work rate is only three minutes of score.)

'I think UK orchestral musicians have to work many more hours now than they used to. In America and Germany orchestras pay their players comparatively more than they do in the UK, but that is tied up with education and the perceived value placed on classical music,' noted Allan Wilson. 'But there will always be orchestral music recorded: the orchestra as an instrument is an amazing machine and will never be replaced. You can have the best samples in the universe, but if it's performed electronically, it lacks soul and spirit, the qualities that are yearned for by other human beings.' ■