FT.com
FINANCIAL TIMES

The other side of the baton

Published: May 8 2006 17:34 | Last updated: May 8 2006 17:46

When the Chamber Orchestra of Europe celebrates its 25th birthday next week, its figurehead will not be one of the celebrity conductors who helped shape its destiny, *writes Andrew Clark*. Instead it will welcome back one of its own who flew the nest and is now wielding the baton over other ensembles at home and abroad.

Douglas Boyd was instrumental in founding the COE in 1981, and spent 21 years as principal oboe. But the past five years have seen what he calls a "life change". He has been building up his repertoire as music director of the Manchester Camerata; he also holds conducting posts with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and the City of London Sinfonia. The invitation from former COE colleagues to front their silver jubilee bash is evidence that his transition from player to guv'nor is complete.

After spending most of his life bending his will to the needs of the ensemble, Boyd has no qualms about calling the shots: he seems a natural on the podium. His Camerata recordings – of Beethoven's Second and Fifth Symphonies, and the chamber arrangement of Mahler's Fourth – may reveal a debt to Claudio Abbado and Nikolaus Harnoncourt, the COE's gurus of the 1980s and 1990s, but they also establish that Boyd has a mind of his own.

Which is hardly surprising, given that the COE has never espoused the anonymous ethos of other great orchestras. With 18 of its original 35 members still in place, it has always been a collection of individuals, determined to continue developing as musicians rather than sink into the mindset of a jobbing professional. It is this ethos, married to unanimity of style and attitude, that Glasgow-born Boyd carries wherever he goes "as my benchmark of how a chamber orchestra should think and work".

That is partly why he clicked with the Manchester Camerata when he was first invited to conduct it five years ago. Like the COE, it was a freelance orchestra whose musicians did other things but always looked forward to getting together again. Boyd's foray into conducting had begun modestly, with wind ensembles and university orchestras. For its part, the Camerata was clearly an underachieving orchestra – no radio work, no Proms, no recordings (all since remedied) – "and it's easier to take over an orchestra where the sky's the limit, rather than a Rolls Royce."

But it is unusual to make the move from player to conductor so late: Boyd, 47, is still some steps behind his erstwhile COE colleague Thierry Fischer, who made the jump earlier and is now principal conductor of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. So what was it like, after listening to others calling the tune for so long, having to take the lead every time?

Typically, Boyd shapes his answer around the music rather than in terms of personnel management. Referring to the core Mozart and Beethoven repertoire, he says he fell in love with the notes "all over again. I'd played these pieces countless times, but when I first studied them as a conductor it was like a miracle. I began to rediscover them – as opposed to turning up at 10.00am to play the oboe part. You get under the skin of the music – even pieces you weren't so hot on. I had never been a Liszt fan, but *Les Préludes* came up. I had to do it. It turned out to be a fantastic piece."

Didn't he wish he had moved into conducting earlier? "If I had I would have had an arrogance… For 21 years I had the most extraordinary learning experience, thanks to Harnoncourt and Abbado. I can't think of a better lesson."

He says Claudio Abbado's example was primarily technical – "how to create a sound by a gesture". Nikolaus Harnoncourt's influence, by contrast, lay in the fantasy department. "He'd done all the academic research, he understands the rules, but in the end it doesn't matter whether or not you use a baroque oboe. Ultimately it's about how you make music."

It is no surprise, then, that even full-size orchestras such as the BBC Symphony are chasing Boyd. "The music world is very conservative – 'You can't possibly conduct because you play the oboe.' You break that barrier and it's 'We'll give him Mozart's Symphony No. 29.' Break that barrier and you're through to the whole chamber orchestra repertoire. Eventually you reach Mahler, and of course 'You're only a real conductor if you do Mahler.' It's different going the other way. Put a Haydn or Mozart symphony in front of a Mahler man and it's not very interesting. There's nothing more difficult than Mozart."

Except, perhaps, the dynamics of orchestra psychology. On that score Boyd admits he is still learning. "What you're trying to do is make them empowered, not disempowered. You want them to create your vision but in a way that makes them feel they are creating it themselves. There are things that are easy to say and harder to do. You've got to convince them musically, that your approach has integrity. Without that musical respect you're not going to get anything from them. On the other hand, if you go in wanting to be loved, forget it."

Boyd might not couch his feelings for former COE colleagues in terms of love (except where his wife, the cellist Sally Pendlebury, is concerned), but there is a mutual bond of affection, forged through shared experience. Otherwise the orchestra would have waved Boyd goodbye after his final concert as an oboist in 2001. Instead it invited him to conduct a private Friends concert – "weird to begin with, but it went really well" – and now they are embarking on a short European tour together.

While looking forward to it, Boyd confesses to feeling "slightly terrified. It's actually much easier to stand up in front of complete strangers: there's no baggage, they either like you or they don't. With the COE, I've worked with these people for 21 years. You can go wrong if you're too respectful – 'they're my friends.' My job as a conductor is to go and do it. We can always have a drink later."

The COE's 25th anniversary tour begins at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, on May 16. Tel 8703 800 400