

## Music: Magic moments

With Kenneth Branagh's *Flute* film coming up, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe is hitting the highs.

By Hugh Canning

Since its foundation 25 years ago, the London-based Chamber Orchestra of Europe has become a byword for excellence in its field. It specialises in modern-instrument performance in the baroque and classical repertoire, and has established unrivalled credentials in the core 19th-century symphonic works. In just over a week's time, the COE will celebrate its silver jubilee with a gala concert at Queen Elizabeth Hall, bringing together players both past and present in a work they have never previously tackled together, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, under the baton of one of its founding members, its former principal oboist, now conductor, Douglas Boyd.

Now 47, and no longer officially a player, Boyd came up through the orchestra's ranks and currently holds conducting posts with the Manchester Camerata, the Gardner Chamber Orchestra of Boston, the City of London Sinfonia and the St Paul Chamber Orchestra, Minnesota. So he seems an entirely appropriate choice to conduct the anniversary concert, and it was his idea to invite past members to bolster the ranks for the Berlioz epic. "I didn't think they would be able to afford it," he says, "but Peter and June never do anything by halves." Peter and June are Peter Readman, the COE's chairman and principal fundraiser, a financial consultant, and June Megennis, its administrator almost from the beginning.

So, I ask Boyd, how did the COE come about? "I was lucky enough to get into the European Community Youth Orchestra. You can't imagine what it was like, going from Glasgow schools' orchestras to the ECYO with Abbado. It was an incredible experience with amazing young players from all over Europe, who had this extra-ordinary commitment. They were golden years for the ECYO, with Abbado appearing regularly and Karajan conducting the orchestra in Salzburg. I'll be able to tell my grandchildren that I played in a concert with the 13-year-old Anne-Sophie Mutter, looking like a little doll in a party frock."

Youth orchestras, by their nature, are transitory, and the ECYO's age limit was 23, so Boyd and a group of his peers wanted to replicate the commitment and intensity of the ECYO experience in a professional context. "We'd been doing freelance work, and I suppose we had been underwhelmed by the routine," he remembers. "So I talked to Claudio (Abbado) and he agreed to be involved. Claudio's assistant at the time, James Judd, was incredibly helpful. A friend of his, Peter Readman, was honeymooning in Salzburg around the time of the ECYO Karajan concert; he was fired by the project and agreed to become chairman of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, and help to raise funding."

The first concert, at Merchant Taylors' Hall in 1981, raised £25,000. With that money, the COE hired Megennis as administrator. From there, the orchestra's reputation snowballed, with a big European tour under Abbado and a stint in the pit for the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro. Then the recording projects came flooding in. "The early 1980s were a brilliant time, because it was the beginning of CDs — everything was being recorded anew," says Boyd. "It's a much tougher world now."

It's tougher, partly, because the COE pattern has been emulated by succeeding generations of young musicians. Even though it remains arguably the outstanding chamber orchestra in the world, the COE can no longer play the youth card and call in favours from the top international conductors, who were only too happy to do their bit for budding talents. However, in something of a coup, the orchestra has landed the prestigious, high-profile job of playing the soundtrack to Kenneth Branagh's forthcoming film of *The Magic Flute*, with the American James Conlon as conductor.

Boyd is full of optimism: "From the start, the COE's philosophy was not to be full time, so every time we got together, it would be an event. Of course, there have been changes of personnel, but about half the orchestra are founding members and the spirit is still there." He says it is "weird" mounting the rostrum to conduct his former colleagues. Now he is, as it were, on the other side of the "fence", what does he think of orchestral routine? "Well, I think that in the UK, with the lack of resources, it is quite astonishing what orchestras achieve," he says. "Inevitably, if you are a full-time player, it's not always possible to keep the same level of intensity on a day-to-day basis, and you're not going to get, say, Gergiev or Abbado every day of the week. The advantage the COE has is that when we get together, we have time — the rehearsal schedule is fantastic. We come together like friends making music, and it feels special. What happens musically in Britain may be far from ideal, but it's miraculous." On May 16, at the QEHL, Boyd won't be counting on miracles. With the COE in front of him, Berlioz's symphonic rollercoaster should be an exhilarating experience.