

Not the Messiah

Its performances are fresh and committed, its players are motivated and it is acclaimed wherever it goes. And yet the members of Spira Mirabilis reject the notion that they are launching a new orchestral model, writes **Toby Deller**

Spira Mirabilis, says opinion, is a band of revolutionaries setting out to overthrow the musical establishment. They refuse to conform to accepted programming norms; they break free from the confines of the concert hall, taking music to the masses in their outdoor flashmob gigs. They take a stand against autocracy by banishing conductors. They are ready to take on anything thrown at them. They are the future of the orchestra.

'No we're not,' says Spira Mirabilis.

When I met them, near the end of their spell as resident ensemble at the Aldeburgh Festival, they would – firmly, if somewhat apologetically given they are getting the kind of reception that others would sell their Guarneris for – return to the subject time and time again.

'The problem,' says horn player Francesco Bossaglia, 'is that often the more spectacular aspects of our work come to the front and the very important ones are misunderstood. So maybe people write about not playing with a conductor, or this thing we do with flashmob. This is a bit of a problem because it kind of creates a misunderstanding.'

These young European professionals assembled as an orchestra for the first time in Formigine, a small town near Modena in Italy. Their aim was simply to spend lots of time – much more time than would be available in regular professional rehearsals – getting to know core repertoire. They would not be paid, but in the process the players would gain a thorough insight into the rehearsal process and become better, more self-sufficient musicians.

'My personal view,' says Bossaglia, 'is the modern classical musician today must have this kind of knowledge, he must be able to read the score, he must be able to make a decision, he must be historically informed, he must be someone who has an interest in what he does.'

The whole Spira project is founded on this idea of self-improvement and it is the real reason that the group doesn't use conductors. As principal violin Lorenza Borrani

explains: 'It's always written that we are the orchestra who don't play with a conductor, or don't need a conductor. But this is not the point. Doing this project we see more about the role of the conductor, how interesting his job is. We should all do it, all musicians should study how to do it.'

Timoti Fregni, also a violinist, is more forthright: 'It's not a circus – we don't just want to show you we can play without a conductor.' He is discussing the group's working methods after the second of their concerts at Snape Maltings Concert Hall (these post-concert Q&A sessions are another regular feature). A fair number in the packed house would have seen the group give one of its informal pop-up shows a few days earlier in Aldeburgh and been encouraged to attend the concert as a result. These events, where the players perform

from positions throughout the audience, are almost guaranteed to get the cynics sneering. Talk about a circus act! But Fregni insists that, as with everything they do, there is a serious musical reason. The Snape audience hear him describe how it started out as an ensemble listening exercise – putting players in unfamiliar spatial relationships with one another, and with distractions everywhere, makes it crucial that concentration is maintained for the piece to be safely negotiated.

He admits it is fun to do, and the festival organisers will have been delighted with the buzz they helped create. The players too must have been delighted with the way they were welcomed. But Aldeburgh, which runs a year-round programme of musician residencies, has served them well in a way that goes beyond applause.

'I would say that the greatest thing about



Spira Mirabilis in Brixton Market

coming to Aldeburgh is that here they gave us the freedom to realise a Spira project as we mean it away from our usual place, Formigine,' says Borrani. 'Having a residency means we can really rehearse all day, we have the space to do it. And also to perform the concert in the way we intend.'

And those rehearsal sessions are certainly animated. Every so often a violinist, or a horn player or timpanist, will jump up and head into the auditorium to satisfy themselves that balance is correct. There could be a moment's upheaval as seating adjustments are made, woodwinds brought closer, trumpets good-naturedly shooed away a metre or two. Musical ideas come from all quarters, although Borrani emphasises that these cannot be made lightly – for a suggestion to be adopted, the whole orchestra must be convinced it works. But it does, on occasion, mean that practices which normally have the force of law – for instance that string sections should always match bowing styles – may be thrown out. The defiance is there in the players' body language: 'We know what you're thinking, but don't listen to what you see, listen to what you hear.'

Leaving aside their standard, the most notable thing about Spira concerts is that they invariably include one piece only. It's an artistic

decision that must have raised some eyebrows, but Fregni is strong in his defence: 'It's like watching a movie. You go to the cinema and watch one movie. No matter how long it is, it's one thing. We do believe there is enough to say in one symphony, one symphony is already rich enough in contrasts. Of course, there's quite strong resistance from organisers – not here, not at the Southbank Centre [where the group

“The spirit is really just in rehearsing”

performed last year and will return in 2012] or other places we have accepted to play. But some institutions raise the argument: how can I propose to my audience to have half a concert for the same price? Well, then we feel a little bit like butchers selling meat!

And besides, adding other works to the programme would defeat the object since it would reduce the time they could spend working on them – 'which anyway is not enough', adds Borrani.

'That's why it's not an alternative, or a model for the "new chamber orchestra",' says Fregni. 'It's not new! It's people studying; it's people sharing with those who are interested in supporting what we do. It's very difficult to book us because we are not very flexible about programmes, we don't play with conductors, we don't play with soloists, we play just one piece. We are open to suggestions if a festival has a theme, for example – it is also interesting for us to try things. But we are not here to make a career with this group. We are already very busy playing in other orchestras.'

It's not really our business to wonder if we rehearse too much, to make it sustainable, you know. The spirit is really just in rehearsing. Of course there are institutions, festivals that are interested in having us performing concerts. This helps us to sustain ourselves economically, of course, but the moment we will be able, if ever, to get a normal fee for an orchestra – well it's a long way away, because we rehearse way too much.

'This is not the group that plays without a conductor, or that plays in the street. This is the group that rehearses a lot. And fights a lot in rehearsals.'

CM

www.spiramirabilis.com



Learning experience: Lorenza Borrani with Spira Mirabilis