

Culture notes: Let's fight for a radical orchestra

Spira Mirabilis, the orchestra without a conductor



Spira Mirabilis, the orchestra without a conductor Lydia Goldblatt

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In Italy a small town supports a musicians' collective as they intensively learn a symphony. The idea could work here

Imagine a small town in rural England — Market Drayton, say, or Spalding — giving accommodation and rehearsal space to a bunch of idealistic young musicians who want to revolutionise what it means to play in an orchestra. Imagine, too, the town's deputy mayor (a trombonist in his youth) becoming so swept up by the fervour of these musicians that he persuades his fellow councillors to build a proper concert hall for them. Then imagine (not so difficult) the grim economic climate in which this dream must be turned into bricks and mortar. Think of the resolve needed to press on regardless. Then picture what it must have been like to be there on opening day when this brilliant orchestra proudly assembled in its new hall and gave three free performances of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, each packed to the rafters with locals. Well, I don't have to imagine, because I was there, one Saturday just before Christmas, when this improbable project came to fruition. Sadly, though, it wasn't in Market Drayton or Spalding. It was in Formigine, a town of just 31,000 inhabitants near Modena in Italy. What happened in that small community, however, should inspire musicians and music lovers everywhere. It is yet another remarkable development in the story of Spira mirabilis, an orchestra founded by four young Italian musicians just seven years ago. Their basic methods are

now well known. The 40-odd players earn their living in different ensembles across Europe, but give up several weeks each year to rehearse a single symphony with an intensity that may strike some as monastic, even cult-like.

Eating together, sleeping together in dorms, working democratically without a conductor, they don't just study the chosen piece, they live, breathe and make love to it. No wonder that, when they come to perform, the players know their own parts (and everyone else's) so well that they can concentrate on responding to each other. That was strikingly evident in the concerts to open the new hall. For an encore the players thronged into the aisles around us and played two whole movements of the Beethoven symphony from memory.

Of course, it isn't quite as democratic as it seems. In theory all the players contribute equally to the preparation. In practice the powerful personalities dominate, especially the formidable first violinist Lorenza Borrani. And as a model for how the orchestral world in general might operate, Spira is a non-starter, as its players cheerfully admit. For a start they don't get paid when they are in Formigine. The idea is that these periods are like sabbaticals: refreshing batteries, deepening musical understanding, fortifying ideals.

Which makes it all the more remarkable that Formigine's citizens so quickly "got" what the orchestra was about and provided such tangible support. The hall is part of a new school and nobody will hold it up as stunning architecture: it's soulless and acoustically brash. None of which matters because Spira could play in a bus shelter and make glorious music — as some British audiences have already discovered. Its residencies at Aldeburgh and the Southbank Centre in London had everyone reaching for superlatives. I'm just surprised that Spira hasn't been snapped up by the BBC for the Proms. The one-symphony-plus-audience-discussion format would work perfectly as a late-night event.

I wonder, however, whether it's enough simply to invite Spira to perform in Britain. Shouldn't we also be considering whether the British musical scene — so much more diverse and efficient than Italy's in other ways — should support our own version of Spira? True, many fine new orchestras have sprung up here. Yet they all work "within the system" rather than breaking the mould. Their concerts are conventionally rehearsed, usually with conductor or instrumentalist/director. Their body language is restrained and insular rather than flamboyant and engaging. And on the whole the players don't talk to their audiences.

So the first obstacle in setting up a British Spira would be the attitude of young British musicians emerging from conservatoires. Their first priority at present is to secure a foothold in the profession, not to rethink from scratch their approach to music.

After that the harsh realities of earning a living kick in and any notion of devoting time to unpaid sabbaticals seems laughable. Then there's the question of whether any British town would have the vision to support such an orchestra, as Formigine has done.

Given how many local authorities are shredding their cultural programmes, that seems unlikely. But Spira operates for only a few weeks a year. Why couldn't a festival or summer school — Dartington, Edinburgh, Aldeburgh or Cheltenham, say — set up a similar project? Why couldn't a culturally enlightened university (there must be a few left) host it during the long summer hols?

No British music lover could watch Spira at work in Formigine without wishing that we had one here too. Surely where there's a will . . .