

Today's top orchestra and conductor? The critics have spoken; here's my list

Classical music database Bachtrack asked critics to name the greatest orchestras and conductors. Who would make your 10 best?

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Friday 4 September 2015 14.42 BST

Who doesn't love a list? Above all, one that is subjective, speculative, and ripe for discussion and probable violent disagreement? That's what Bachtrack.com has just compiled, asking an international panel of critics - including our own Tim Ashley - to name the world's best orchestra, and the best conductor.

To no-one's surprise, the North Lofoten Chamber Players and their chief conductor, Tine Thøresen, took both gongs for their transformative work developing classical music culture north of the Arctic Circle, convening concerts for the gigantic colloquies of sea-birds that gird the Lofoten Island's sea-stacks.

Yes, that's of course a not-very-good joke, since the honours decided by the 15 wise men and just one wise woman of the chosen panel (a much poorer ratio of gender equality, incidentally, than nearly all of the orchestras they nominated) went to the Berlin Philharmonic, and Riccardo Chailly.

From the US, only the Chicago and Boston Symphonies made it in the top 10, in 5th and 9th place respectively, perhaps reflecting the fact that no North American critics took part: Bachtrack says they "abstained ... on the basis they felt they had not seen enough of the world's top orchestras recently enough to cast their votes".

Only the London Symphony Orchestra represents the UK, coming in 6th; Amsterdam's Concertgebouw is 2nd, and there are six orchestras from Germany and Austria: the Berliners, Wieners, Leipzigers, the Staatskapelles of both Dresden and Berlin, and the Bavarian Radio Symphony.

What about an alternative orchestral canon? In terms of artistic adventure, ambition, imagination and quality, I think you have to look outside the conventional symphony orchestras for the most consistently brilliant music-making. My top 10? In no particular order, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Lucerne Festival Orchestra, Ensemble Intercontemporain, Spira Mirabilis, Budapest Festival Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra.

And an alternative roster of conductors? Incredibly, Bernard Haitink didn't make the Bachtrack top 10. He has to be on my list, alongside Nikolaus Harnoncourt, René Jacobs, Herbert Blomstedt, Daniel Harding, Oliver Knussen, Susanna Mälkki, Ivan Fischer, John Eliot Gardiner, and Jonathan Nott.

What about your choices? You too can indulge your listomania (not to be confused with Lisztomania) and tell us who should, or shouldn't, be there.

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