

# CONCERTGEBOUW




 profile

# ARE THEY THE WORLD'S BEST ORCHESTRA?

The Royal Concertgebouw, who perform here this month, frequently top the rankings. But what makes them tick? **Albert Ehrnrooth** finds out

A number of years ago the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra were voted “the best symphony orchestra in the world” by *Gramophone* magazine. In 2013 their mission seems to be proving this to the world, as they tour six continents in one year – a feat never before achieved by a symphony orchestra. This month, it’s Australia’s turn to experience the Concertgebouw sound, but before we meet the band, I wanted to find out if the rumours are true. Do the insiders actually agree that the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (RCO) is the best orchestra in the world?

I phone Italian maestro Daniele Gatti, music director of the Orchestre National de France, who has also conducted the Concertgebouw on many occasions – both abroad and on their home turf in Amsterdam. Does he agree with the *Gramophone* verdict?

“With the utmost respect for the classification I do not believe that there is a best man or woman, the best soccer player, best composer or best orchestra. We are talking about the Concertgebouw Orchestra being *among* the best. Putting it that way is also more respectful to the orchestra, which is part of a community of great orchestras.”

Gatti is clearly not amused by rankings – and is also being a bit diplomatic. “Part of a community of great orchestras” is hardly a slogan you might splay across a billboard. Undeterred, I turn next to honorary Melburnian Markus Stenz, who has no problem giving credit where it’s due. He has conducted the Concertgebouw and is also in charge of the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic

Orchestra, a not-too-shabby ensemble in a country where the general standard is very high. Stenz is positively gushing when speaking of the RCO.

“There is no hint of arrogance. They are completely in command of their art and music-making. There is a naturally sensuous sound. The brass section do themselves proud playing with a sound that is never overpowering, yet always has the right amount of puncture. There is no weakness. There is simply not a weak section.”

This is more the kind of response I was expecting. In fact, in the course of my research it appears impossible to find anyone willing to criticise this ensemble – even off the record. How does the RCO do it? How have they, for more than a century, managed to maintain the veneration of colleagues and audience alike?

Everyone agrees that the RCO still has a very distinctive sound. Ideally, it has to be experienced live, but the velvet and satin textures that the string section can weave may be beyond compare. Then there is the 18-carat golden brass section and the rich oak timbre of the woodwinds.

The Concertgebouw concert hall in Amsterdam has almost certainly contributed to the genesis of this unique sound. Markus Stenz reckons that De Grote Zaal (the Great Hall) is in a league of its own.

“I’d like to think that the Concertgebouw is the top hall for performances and audiences alike. Anything goes. You can take it right down to the most sensitive sounds. And the orchestra has cultivated a sound that plays to this particular acoustic.”



The Concertgebouw on tour

Symphony orchestras, in general, don't have very imaginative names, but the RCO is slightly unusual in that it is named after a pile of bricks and mortar. The building and the orchestra's name was modelled on the Gewandhaus hall in Leipzig. The English translation for Concertgebouw is simply concert building. When the newly built venue opened in 1888 it was on the outskirts of Amsterdam. A rather haphazard symphony orchestra was formed in the same year. Everything changed after a visit by the Meininger Hofkapelle, which was arguably the best orchestra in the world, conducted by the admired Hans von Bülow. Their thrilling performances made everyone in the audience realise that the Dutch band needed to raise their game.

“WHEN MAHLER CAME AS A GUEST CONDUCTOR HE WAS SO MUCH IN HIS ELEMENT HE RETURNED TEN TIMES”

This task was taken very seriously and musical discipline became one of the orchestra's hallmarks. When Mahler came as a guest conductor in 1903 he was so much in his element that he returned ten times, always presenting his own symphonies. No wonder Mahler has remained a cornerstone of the RCO repertoire. Richard Strauss dedicated the tone poem *Ein Heldenleben* (which will be performed on the Australian tour) to the orchestra and its second chief conductor Willem Mengelberg. The Dutchman put an indelible stamp on the orchestra during his 50 years at the helm and managed to attract top class soloists and conductors to Amsterdam. Mengelberg's behaviour during the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands was less impressive, and after the war he was accused of being a quisling and was blacklisted. Still, many of his recordings stand the test of time, much like the Rembrandts in the Rijksmuseum across the square. After WWII, Eduard van Beinum stepped in, re-employed the surviving Jewish musicians and brought the orchestra back from the brink.

When van Beinum suffered a heart attack while rehearsing Brahms No 1 in 1959, Bernhard Haitink took over (after a respectful few years hiatus). Still an angry young maestro in the early '60s, Haitink set out to rejuvenate the orchestra, and his magnificent renditions of the late romantic works raised the orchestra's profile abroad. He stepped down in 1988 but he is still Conductor Laureate of the RCO championing Shostakovich's symphonies. The Italian Riccardo Chailly (1988-2004) introduced contemporary music that before had seemed outside the RCO's comfort zone. The Latvian conductor Mariss Jansons took over at the helm in September 2004, making him only the sixth chief conductor of the orchestra in 125 years.

The long and rich legacy of the Concertgebouw Orchestra (only in 1988 did they get the Royal stamp of approval) is another contributory factor to their success story. The orchestra consists of 120 musicians, of



Workmen fix the Concertgebouw's iconic lyre in 1957

whom around seventy are Dutch, while the rest hail from all over the world. Second violinist Jane Piper is the sole Australian in the orchestra, and thinks Jansons is a "fantastic chief conductor".

"He wants to create something really special and demands high quality from the orchestra all the time. He is an extremely hard worker and good at rehearsing. There is a very human understanding with him and he wants that the orchestra plays more than just well."

Self-aggrandising baton wielders have historically not fared well with this orchestra's members, who have a say in the appointment of guest conductors and more or less decide who becomes the "chef dirigent".

I finally get to meet the RCO's current chief Mariss Jansons in London, where he is visiting the BBC Proms with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. After last night's compelling rendition of Mahler's *Resurrection* Symphony Maestro Jansons is clearly not in the mood for a light-hearted chat about "best orchestras".

At 70, Jansons is even smaller than I had anticipated, and makes a slightly frail and brittle impression this morning. But give him an orchestra and he will turn into a giant. Jansons has a reputation for being a perfectionist – without being a dictator. To begin with, his manner is bordering on gruff, but he quickly warms up (after my first dud questions have misfired).

Apart from his day jobs with the RCO and Bavarian Radio Symphony, Jansons makes guest appearances only with the Berlin Philharmonic (ranked No 2 in the same *Gramophone* survey) and the Vienna Philharmonic (No 3).

So I'm curious to know how the RCO measures up to the three other legendary orchestras he has access to?

"The Concertgebouw Orchestra is very transparent and balanced. They are more like the Vienna Phil in sound, style and feeling. All four orchestras have individuality and they are musically intelligent – which is rare. When you rehearse with them you can talk about interesting interpretations, about what lies behind the notes. You propose some interesting ideas, some fantasy, and they react immediately, not only by playing the right texture, but also by putting an accent here, no accent there, a subtle piano, accelerando or ritenuato. They also respond to the very profound messages which are in the music."

Jansons spent his early life in Riga, where his father Arvids conducted at the the opera house where his mother also sang. The family moved to Leningrad when Arvids was made second conductor of the Philharmonic, then under the stewardship of Yevgeny Mravinsky. The legendary Russian became a crucial influence on the young Mariss, who attended the Leningrad conservatory, where he remembers the competition being fierce. He has particularly fond memories of Vienna where he studied conducting with Hans Swarowsky (who was taught by Schönberg, Anton Webern and Richard Strauss!).

"I went every day to a concert and heard many great conductors there who impressed me". He starts listing them, but there are simply too many to mention and he stops himself. Even today he enjoys watching colleagues rehearsing his orchestras.



“I get inspiration and new ideas or new questions come up, which I then analyse and answer for myself.” After his studies, Jansons accepted the job as Mravinsky’s assistant and in 1973 followed in his father’s footsteps as second conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic.

Jansons still lives in his “beloved city of St. Petersburg” and is married to a Russian. It was during his time as chief conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic (1979-2000) that he won international acclaim, leading to a feeding frenzy of the world’s most prominent orchestras. He remembers doing Mahler with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 1995 and eleven years ago he toured Australia with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, of which he was the music director. But the maestro’s schedule was simply getting too hectic. The warning signs were there. His father Arvids had died of a heart attack in 1984 during a concert with the Hallé in Manchester.

Jansons had his first nearly-fatal heart attack in 1996 while conducting a performance of *La Bohème* in Oslo. He knew that something had to change. “After my heart attacks for half a year I didn’t conduct and I was very much analysing the value of the life – what is important and what is not. This time out that I had very much influenced me. I think my interpretations became much more profound. Somehow I felt that I now liked more slower tempos.”

The music may have slowed down but Mariss Jansons’ performance schedule has again steadily increased. During the orchestra’s 125th anniversary year he will have visited all continents, except for Antarctica. There are always concerns about his health and he has previously stated that he really struggles with jetlag. Yet Jansons feels that it is important to give people an opportunity to experience the Concertgebouw Orchestra. He does, like Bernard Haitink, point out the

chasm between listening to a recording and hearing an orchestra playing live. The concert hall is the best place to hear what distinguishes one orchestra from another.

Over the last 20, maybe 30, years the differences between orchestras, even from totally different continents, have started to blur. Now they are threatening to vanish entirely with the increasing globalization of musicians and musical style. Mariss Jansons reckons that the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra still produces a unique sound that it can only be appreciated fully during a live performance.

“There are many excellent orchestras and many good orchestras. In recordings they can all sound the same but I think the top-class orchestras they don’t lose their individuality, especially when you hear them in concert. It is then, I think, that you really feel the individuality.”

**The RCO tours Australia (Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney) from Nov 21-30 ●**

Audiences queue round the block to enter The Great Hall

## DE GROTE ZAAL: A VERY SPECIAL CONCERT HALL

The Great Hall of the Concertgebouw is noted for its excellent and lively acoustics. The orchestra is in the unusual and lucky position that it can use the hall for both rehearsals and performances. The classic long, tall, relatively narrow and rectangular “shoebox” shape of the hall allows for a long reverberation time. Shallow side balconies and the coffered ceiling are ideal for enhancing and spreading the sound. All this makes the space particularly suited to the late Romantic works of Bruckner, Strauss and Mahler. De Grote Zaal is considered to have only two equals: Vienna’s Musikverein and Boston’s Symphony Hall.



