

# PLENTY OF ATTITUDE

and even a few women too...

The Vienna Philharmonic has long been known as music's most exclusive boys' club. But now women have begun to infiltrate the orchestra, and maestro Christoph Eschenbach is certain the new line-up will wow Australia this month.

WORDS ALBERT EHNRROOTH IMAGES TERRY LINKE

**I** think it's the best orchestra in the world." Had this statement come from the press office or even from a regular concertgoer I would have had my doubts. But this is conductor Christoph Eschenbach's spontaneous answer to my question: "What makes the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra so special?"

And Eschenbach knows his orchestras. Not only is he a conductor of some 40 years' standing (and a former protégé of von Karajan and Szell), he has also played with many of the finest orchestras in the world as a soloist. Before his career as a conductor took over, German-born Eschenbach was a pianist, particularly respected for his interpretations of Mozart and Schubert.

I am talking to Eschenbach on the telephone from Paris, where he is based, and although I can't see his expressions, his voice reveals how passionately he feels about this orchestra. ▶

Eschenbach turns waltz king at the Vienna Philharmonic Ball



# WOMEN IN ORCHESTRAS

"I do not like, and never will, the association of men and women in orchestras and other instrumental combinations," declared Sir Thomas Beecham in 1942. "As a member of the orchestra said to me, 'If she is attractive I can't play with her, and if she is not then I won't.'"

This has been the attitude for much of the history of symphonic music. Today, about half of the members of the New York Philharmonic are women; roughly 25 per cent of the London Symphony Orchestra is made up of female players; and the Sydney Symphony is very egalitarian with 47% women. But it's taken decades to come that far.

From the 1820s on, harpists were the only women to be admitted into the otherwise all-male institutions. It was believed women could not muster the stamina to endure hours of rehearsal and that their nerves were too delicate for the stress of public performance. Gradually, female performers on so-called dainty

instruments such as the violin and flute were tolerated, but brass instruments and anything that forced a player to contort her facial features or maintain an awkward pose was strictly off-limits.

Women responded to the discrimination by forming their own orchestras, which flourished during the 1920s and 1930s. During WWII female American players replaced many of the absent men, staying on after the war. They've had their advocates and small triumphs along the way. In 1916 Leopold Stokowski argued it was "poor economy... to take it for granted that women are not capable of becoming fluent channels for the expression of genius".

The first woman hired to the New York Phil was bassist Orin O'Brien in 1966, under Bernstein. The first ever female concertmaster of the Vienna State Opera, and soon to be official member of the Vienna Phil, is Albena Danailova (left). The first woman to play in the Berlin Phil was clarinettist Sabine Meyer, who was voted out by the blokes at the end of her probation period in 1982. Meyer has since embarrassed them all by enjoying a dazzling solo career!



"There is so much interest from the musicians in the conductor's interpretation. These people have a very special dedication and devotion to the music," Eschenbach explains.

On its second visit to these shores the Vienna Philharmonic will perform works by composers with a Viennese connection: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Bruckner and Mahler. Classical buffs with a sceptical disposition have been quick to point out that the other "best orchestra in the world", the Berlin Philharmonic, came here last year with a more, to put it mildly, adventurous program. A fair point, but if you were given just one chance to see Usain Bolt run, surely you'd choose the distance he is most famous for, the 100m, rather than the 200m?

Ideally, you want to hear the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (VPO) in the grandiose and golden ambience of the Grosse Musikvereinssaal. But to experience its brand of magic in Perth, Brisbane or Sydney is a worthy alternative – this orchestra can produce a very distinctive sound in any concert hall. Eschenbach has toured several times with the VPO

and knows exactly what distinguishes this ensemble from the rest.

"There is a very strong tradition of string playing which is traded from one generation to the other. That makes the unique sound."

Another reason for the string section's closely attuned and silky coherence is the fact the orchestra actually picks and owns its instruments. The wind players, with their trademark Viennese versions of the oboe and the horn, are also trained to extract that über-romantic sensitivity from the Austro-German repertoire.

"This unique sound has been established through centuries, and they have honed their craft with these great composers who conducted or whose works were first performed with this orchestra – Bruckner, Mahler, Beethoven and many others. It is an excellent tradition. Sometimes tradition can be a negative. This is totally positive.

"Every time I step onto the stage of the Musikverein it touches me. I get goosebumps thinking of the great people that have performed on this floor. That is very moving and gives me an enormous feeling of ... ja, responsibility."

Another reason why the VPO sounds so well, Viennese, is that most of the members of the orchestra have actually studied in the Austrian capital. Culturally the VPO is quite a homogenous bunch, but non-Europeans and women are slowly entering its ranks. The orchestra has even admitted an Australian violinist, Benedict Lea, as a member, but surprisingly it does not have a single person of Asian origin.

The Vienna Philharmonic's statutes don't contain any guidelines about what nationality or gender the members of the orchestra should be. Officially, the VPO has never excluded women, but for 150 years it was the unwritten rule that "the other half" simply didn't fit in. The ensemble remained unashamedly a boys' club.

The Vienna Phil is a privately-run organisation which a musician can't join unless they also play in the publicly-funded Vienna State Opera Orchestra. This symbiosis between the State Opera and the Phil is fairly unusual, and it means that the musicians are constantly put through their paces. The pit orchestra accompanies some 300 opera and

ballet performances a year. The VPO gives about 90 concerts per season, including the summer engagements at the Salzburg Festival, international tours and the New Year's Concert. Life on the road and hundreds of evening performances with the two orchestras would be a heavy burden on any musician. The punishing schedule used to be put forward as a reason why female musicians wouldn't be able to cope year after year. And then there was the view that women falling pregnant would have to take too much time off.

In the 1970s, the VPO began to invite female musicians to perform with them, but they never became full members. Then, finally, in 1997 harpist Anna Lekes was accepted after sharing the stage with the VPO for 20 years. Male harpists are very hard to come by so the VPO's hand was, basically, forced. In 2005, another milestone was reached when our own Simone Young became the first woman to be invited to take on podium duties at the Musikverein.

Dr Clemens Hellsberg, who is first violinist and chairman of the VPO's members committee, invites me for *Kaffee und Kuchen* at his home in Vienna. He is keen to defend the orchestra's original standpoint.

"When the orchestra was founded in 1842 there was practically no orchestra worldwide with women. But then there were neither female physicians, nor female architects either. It was a different world. Society has changed in many respects. When you look at the figures in universities and conservatoires today, 70 per cent of the students for some instruments are female," he says.

There was initially opposition to admitting women into the exclusive club, but Hellsberg was one of the orchestra's strongest advocates for change.

"In the beginning we had a lot of internal discussions. But the decision in 1997 was not only a result of a development of society, it was an artistic necessity. We can't afford to say to people of top quality who want

to play with us: 'No, we can't take you because you are not Austrian or not a man, or not European, or whatever'. We have to strive for the highest quality in each performance. We can't say: 'Okay we have an audition with four finalists and three turn out to be women, but we can't employ them. Number four is a man, so let's hire him'. That is ridiculous."

The audition process for the Vienna State Opera and the Vienna Phil is as rigorous as you would expect. First you have to be accepted into the State Opera Orchestra. After spending three years with the State Opera, you then become eligible to submit an application for membership to the association of the Vienna Philharmonic. The subsequent test involves three steps. The first two auditions are performed behind a screen so that gender, looks and race are of no consideration. At the third audition the screen is lifted and you play in full view in front of a panel of judges. It is at this stage that, in the past, a number of female candidates

Eschenbach will conduct the VPO, as their guest, on the Australian tour



EVERY TIME I STEP ONTO THE STAGE OF THE MUSIKVEREIN IT TOUCHES ME. **I GET GOOSEBUMPS...** CHRISTOPH ESCHENBACH



# TOP TEN VIENNA PHIL RECORDINGS

**Greg Keane chooses the orchestra's must-have discs\***

1 Solti's *Ring Cycle* (Decca 4555552, 14 CDs), recorded over seven years and completed in 1965, was a terrific commercial risk, yet brought the glories of Wagner's magnum opus (and John Culshaw's producing genius) to a wider audience. It was, predictably, voted the greatest recording of the 20th century by BBC Radio's *CD Review*.

2 Another opera recording with the VPO as the world's ultimate backing group is Rudolf Kempe's *Lohengrin* from 1957 (EMI 4564652, 3 CDs), where not only the orchestral playing was *sans pareil* but the casting, even down to the smallest roles, was pure luxury. Listen and weep.

3 In 1975, DG released Carlos Kleiber's Beethoven Fifth (DG 4474002). Its coiled-spring tension and kinetic climaxes instantly catapulted it to the pantheon of Beethoven recordings, from which it's unlikely to be dislodged. Kleiber was recently voted the greatest conductor of all time in a BBC survey.

4 Another one from Kleiber, who conducted the New Year's concert in 1992 (Sony SK48376). For once, the audience got their money's worth at this often tedious event. Kleiber's baton technique and subtle rubato in Strauss are ineffably beautiful. It's also on DVD (Philips 6816162).

5 In 1968, Otto Klemperer gave concerts with the VPO which included a magnificent Schubert *Unfinished Symphony* (part of an 8-CD boxed set on Testament, SBT81365). I was recently reminded of how "right" they are in this music, with their consistently burnished tone and flexibility of phrasing. I've never heard the last movement sound so full of *Weltschmerz*.

6 This 9-CD Decca set (4780155) showcases everything that's wonderful about Herbert von Karajan's conducting. It has marvellous Brahms, an outstanding *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, idiomatic Johann Strauss, a luminous Haydn *Drumroll Symphony* and even a suite from Adam's *Giselle*. Any track from this 1961 set deserves to be in everyone's top ten.

7 From left field, John Eliot Gardiner's 1995 CD of Chabrier, *España* (DG 4477512), including the *Suite Pastorale*, *Habañera* etc, must rate as one of the most counterintuitive recordings ever made: music's greatest crusading bore conducting repertoire which sounds like Johann Strauss meets Poulenc on speed. Though well beyond the VPO's comfort zone, it's an absolute treat.

8 In 1985 Carlo Maria Giulini, the most aristocratic of conductors, led a performance of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony (DG 4455292), which reaches the heights of spiritual intensity followed by a truly apocalyptic climax in the slowest, most majestic version ever recorded. Every phase is telling. No detail is missed.

9 At Sir John Barbirolli's second rehearsal for his VPO Brahms cycle he noticed most of the musicians had been replaced. Even the VPO has an A-team and a B-team, it appears, and he'd been upgraded overnight. No mistaking the A-team playing in his Brahms Fourth Symphony from 1967 (EMI CC30-3294, 4 CDs out of print), equalled only by Szell.

10 Lorin Maazel's 1986 VPO Mahler cycle (Sony SB14K87874, 14 CDs) generally played down the phantasmagorical expressionist elements in favour of a softer more romantic aura, but his Seventh, always the hardest to bring off, is one of the few (Tennstedt's is another) to capture the wonder but also the sheer wackiness of this misunderstood work.



have failed for various specious reasons. Not so any longer.

A few years ago the Vienna State Opera Orchestra was looking for a new fourth concertmaster. There were four candidates and five rounds of auditions. In the end a male violinist was leading according to the orchestra's points system.

"A lot of the jury members didn't feel comfortable with the overall quality," says Hellsberg, and therefore it was decided to give it a rest and repeat the process a year later. At the end of the second attempt, the Bulgarian violinist Albena Danailova was leading on points.

"The common level was higher, more satisfying, and we said okay. It would have been so easy for us to have hired a man because in the first audition he had enough points. But we weren't satisfied. And no one in the jury said: 'Let's just take him because he is a man'."

Danailova is still employed on a working association basis, and will qualify as a full member later this year. Still, at the moment there are only four active female members of the orchestra.

The Vienna Phil is also quite unusual in that the orchestra is autonomous and major decisions are made in a democratic fashion involving all the members. An administrative committee, elected by the members, is in charge of managing the orchestra. There is no principle conductor, music director or general manager. Guest conductors are invited by the orchestra. Amazingly, most of these principles were set out in the original statutes in the 1840s.

The famous subscription concerts started in 1860, with just one conductor for the whole season. Nowadays there is a different guest for each program. During Hans Richter's monumental tenure (1875-1898) the orchestra scaled new heights. Richter was a remarkable conductor who championed many contemporary composers; inspired by him, Wagner, Brahms, Liszt, Verdi and Bruckner flocked to the Habsburg capital to conduct their own works. Richter's successor was Gustav Mahler (1898-1901), who took the orchestra abroad for the first time.

In those days the subscription director was supposed to deal with

## THE VPO COMES HERE WITH BAGS OF TRADITION, SOME WOMEN FOR FRESH IMPETUS, A PENCHANT FOR HARD WORK AND PLENTY OF POSITIVE ATTITUDE.

administrative duties as well, which Mahler refused. He was already leading the State Opera and had no interest in dealing with more day-to-day business not related to music.

There are many misconceptions about the Mahler era and some experts are convinced that he was pushed out by the anti-Semitic members. Hellsberg begs to differ. He looks after the orchestra's historic archive and has studied records of committee meetings, letters and many other documents that reveal much about the relationship between Mahler and the VPO. Yes, there was sometimes tension, even hatred, and their collaboration indeed hit rock bottom after he resigned.

"For a while it was like an Ice Age. Then they looked for a compromise and it came to reconciliation. And then in 1902 Mahler was asked to conduct his Fourth Symphony himself," says Hellsberg.

Two years later, the VPO played Mahler's Third Symphony with such great success that the composer invited the whole orchestra to a *Gasthaus* (pub) afterwards. There were more performances of Mahler's work during his lifetime, and after WWII Bruno Walter and Leonard Bernstein made sure the composer

was never forgotten in Vienna.

During the war, the orchestra's reputation was inevitably soiled as composers with Jewish roots were left off the program. Wilhelm Furtwängler was their main conductor during those dark days but was not a Nazi sympathiser (and actually saved a number of musicians from the Holocaust). Maestro Eschenbach is an admirer of Furtwängler, a formative influence:

"When I was eleven I saw him conduct Beethoven's Symphonies No 4 and No 5, which impressed me so much that I decided that I wanted to be a conductor too."

Hellsberg has been with the orchestra since the 1970s and has also experienced some of the giant conductors of the last century: Karl Böhm, Herbert von Karajan and Bernstein. All three were made honorary members of the orchestra.

"Bernstein could dedicate himself totally to the music. Not for one second did you doubt him or think he did something by routine. He was always burning from the inside. At the same time I also played a lot with Karajan. The two conductors came to a similar result in the end. Similar from the point of view of intensity and fascination, but with a completely different approach."

No one would question this orchestra's credentials when it comes to the classics, but what about today's composers? When I accuse the Vienna Phil of not being particularly interested in presenting modern-day composers, Eschenbach berates me – in the politest manner, of course.

"They are more and more interested in new works. A few years ago I did a piece by the German Aribert Reimann at the Salzburg Festival. They now want me to do a new composition by Matthias Pinscher. I have always found them very open-minded. There is nothing stuffy about their attitude."

So there you go. The Wiener Philharmoniker may come to Australia to dust off some pre-loved classics, but don't expect some good ole boys out on a jolly. This band of "incomparables" (as the conductor Hans Knappertsbusch called them) also comes with bags of tradition, some women for fresh impetus, a penchant for hard work and plenty of positive attitude. While they may still be catching up when it comes to equal-opportunity hiring, their music-making is, as always, miles ahead of the game.

The VPO is in Perth on Sept 29 & 30, Brisbane on Oct 2 & 3 and Sydney on Oct 5-7. [www.wienerphilharmoniker.at](http://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at)

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