

AWFULLY GOOD

The Really Terrible Orchestra are bad – and they know they are.
Nina Large reports on the rise of a happy group of adult ‘musicians’

PHOTOGRAPHY: NINA LARGE

With all the talent in the higher echelons of the musical firmament you wouldn't expect there to be any competition at the talentless end of the musical rainbow. But that's what's happening up in Edinburgh ever since the invasion of The Really Terrible Orchestra. The band of hopeless players has become so popular that they're having to stop recruiting new members of what amounts to little more than a group of musical illiterates.

All this awfulness began 12 years ago as a parents' revenge. So fed up with their constant ferrying of talented children to and from music lessons, choirs, rehearsals and concerts, a group of parents decided to start up some of their own music making. The fact that they hadn't touched an instrument in decades, and could only read music if it didn't stray into the leger lines did not deter them. 'Had any of us been sufficiently good at music we probably would have found our way into a proper orchestra,' says founder member, chairman and clarinettist Peter Stevenson. 'But we thought, just because we are damaged musically, does that mean we aren't allowed to play music?'

So they enlisted the help of their children's choirmaster, conductor Richard Neville-Towle. These days he spends much of his time conducting the leading Scottish ensemble Ludus Baroque, but even then he wasn't convinced there was much merit in their plan: 'I really didn't want to do it. The idea is to make music beautifully and that wasn't going to be possible with them.' The first gathering included the writer Alexander McCall Smith and his wife Elizabeth, whose musical children

had foxed them. It turned out to be such good fun that they made it a regular meeting. The Really Terrible Orchestra was born.

Soon doctors, lawyers, bankers, and teachers around the city were dusting off instruments from the attic to join. 'There was a sheer delight in playing music with other people which by rights we should not be entitled to, not having the musicianship to justify it,' says McCall Smith, who owns over 30 different wind instruments but can barely play any of

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them. Since auditions were not appropriate there was never going to be any balance in the orchestra – whatever instrument you played was welcome. 'If I decided that I was giving up the piano and going to come in one day with an accordion, I could still sit somewhere and have a go,' says the RTO pianist Margaret Anderson, a retired GP. The RTO now has 60 squawkers and Stevenson regrets turning away ten Terribles each month.

In the tradition of all esteemed conductors the players bestowed an honorary knighthood



on their own leader, Neville-Towle. Sir Richard, as he is affectionately known, is key to their 'success'. His sharp banter keeps everyone entertained and negotiates the fine line between nurturing the little skill

they have, and letting them all enjoy the experience. 'I'm not here to create anything beautiful. My job is to make it fun for the players,' he says, adding wryly, 'If you put pressure on them they get flustered and play even worse, so getting them to do something again is counter-productive.'

You only have to witness them in rehearsal to hear what a job he has on his hands. Tempos are decided by what they can play, not by the music: as Neville-Towle admits, 'the score is merely a guide, it is by no





FEATURE THE REALLY TERRIBLE ORCHESTRA



TERRIBLE TRUTH: members of the Really Terrible Orchestra enjoy themselves, including (top right) chairman Peter Stevenson and (bottom left) conductor 'Sir' Richard Neville-Towle

means something we adhere to.'

'We've had other good guest conductors, but the serious ones don't work so well because they do get frustrated. We are very frustrating,' says Susie Stevenson, percussionist and wife of Peter. McCall Smith, for example, refuses to play anything with a C-sharp in it, and it's not uncommon for members of the orchestra to be playing the wrong piece without noticing. Ever resourceful however, the orchestra have developed a system where players can subcontract tricky bars to others in their section.

'Sir Richard's capacity to get into the brains of people of our limited talent and treat us the way we want to be treated is skilful,' says Peter Stevenson. There is, however, a serious point

lurking behind the chairman's words. 'I don't want to be humiliated and upset by being given music I can't play,' he says. 'The problem with amateur groups is they often play music that is too difficult for them. The good amateur would like you to believe that you want to go and hear them for the pleasure of hearing music played well, but the trouble is they are offering a poor man's version of a professional orchestra and it will inevitably be inferior.' The RTO on the other hand makes no such pretension: 'We can say that the RTO is simply the leading orchestra of its genre in the world.'

ZERO COMPETENCE

Finding the right music for the group has often been tricky but it's not for lack of offers: eight different composers have been compelled to write works for them, with varying success. 'Competence is not a word in our vocabulary. If the music is too hard for us, we will just sulk.'

says Winnie Wood, maths teacher and RTO bassoonist. Composer and bandmaster, the late Douglas Mackay understood the group best, arranging huge swathes of music which forms RTO's core repertoire. Concerts might include 'Winter Wonderland', Strauss's *Pizzicato Polka*, and a favourite is the *1812 Overture* (or the last 43 bars of it). Mackay's own composition *Mma Ramotswe*, written after McCall Smith's literary heroine, is another signature piece.

McCall Smith admits that an orchestra would make a brilliant place to set a book and though he hasn't yet been tempted, another of his heroines, Isabel Dalhousie, has been to an RTO concert in one of his books.

The concerts are major events in the Edinburgh calendar. They sell out in days and perform to packed houses. Crucially, all concerts are preceded by a free wine reception in which audience members are encouraged to drink as much as they can to numb the ears. ▶



THAT WAS DREADFUL: an audience applauds the Really Terrible Orchestra, which counts among its members the author Alexander McCall Smith (above right)

The sheer obstinacy of the players pays dividends in various ways, not least that they somehow manage to secure concert venues which would be the envy of many professional ensembles. Early concert highlights included the Village Hall in Pittenweem, but the group have since gone on to glory at The Queen's Hall and Usher Hall in Edinburgh, and most recently Edinburgh Castle, where they miraculously managed to navigate the red tape of both Historic Scotland and the army in order to stage the event. Only 60 audience members were allowed in to the Great Hall and, to top it off, the RTO managed to convince major general Euan Loudon, the former general officer of the commanding division and now chief executive and producer of the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, to take the lead role as soloist in Gilbert and Sullivan's 'I am the very model of a modern Major General' – complete with a wry, new text. Two Pipers in full battle dress of the Regiment of Scotland also joined them (looking bemused) for the orchestra's version of 'Highland Cathedral'.

'FUNNY AND ODD...'

Ten years on and with increasing press coverage, they are probably the best-known bad orchestra in the world. 'We love all this press because it makes us feel more important than we really are,' quips one player. 'I've got some friends who are accomplished musicians and they are always amazed that we get more exposure than they do,' says clarinettist Christine McKechnie. Their notoriety owes a much to McCall Smith, whose own fame has been great since the publication of his lovable *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* stories. During book tours he often talks of the RTO and this had led their CD to be broadcast on Radio CBC in Canada, ABC Radio in Australia and even the USA's National Public Radio as

part of McCall Smith interviews. Fan mail has come in from all corners. 'In the US they find it funny and odd. Out there you don't do anything to lose – the idea is that you should be a winner so the RTO is what they would describe as an orchestra of losers.' McCall Smith prefers to describe the ensemble as 'an orchestral Eddie the Eagle'.

You could think that the total breakdown of their performance of Mackay's 'All at Sea' was a kind of staged theatrics, but you couldn't invent the look of terror on most of the player's faces. 'Even if the sound did one day become better,' McCall Smith muses, 'we would still be a great study in concentration.' Of course when things do go wrong the audience is delighted and Neville-Towle is quick to capitalise on it. 'We know that if things go wrong I can make a joke of it and everyone loves that. You can twist the event from something that could be dull to being something that is a hoot to watch.'

However, despite all the tongue-in-cheek joking this isn't an orchestra playing for laughs. In work and home one has to be 'together'; there is no time for messing up when only the best will do. The RTO provides a haven where slipping up is the norm and where mistakes are given an encouraging pat on the back. 'It's very liberating to be allowed to do something badly, but still enjoy doing it,' says McCall Smith. The real humour of the RTO comes from the fact that these people, often from Edinburgh's highest professional and academic circles, are trying their hardest to get it right... but almost never do. And that's strangely comforting. ■

The RTO will be performing on 2 September at Edinburgh's Fringe Festival and on 4 November at London's Cadogan Hall.

MUSICAL MURDER
'TERRIBLE' PAST ENSEMBLES



'ARE WE REALLY THAT BAD?': the Portsmouth Sinfonia in 1974 and (left) its collectable album

THE ORIGINAL SCRATCH ORCHESTRA founded in 1969 was founded as a 'musical'

experiment. The group was an expression of 1960s 'free for all' principles. They used graphic scores and 'Improvisation Rites' were written up in its constitution. The inclusive concept is still popular today and concerts where anyone can turn up are held around the country.

In 1974 a group of unmusical art students formed the Portsmouth Sinfonia and billed themselves as the World's Worst Orchestra. Their only rule was that you couldn't play the instrument you were holding. Players included Brian Eno on clarinet and Michael Nyman on euphonium. Their LPs sell at auction for more than £60 a pop.

In January 2007, a Cornish group was so inspired by the RTO that they decided to set up a terrible orchestra of their own and threatened to usurp the name. At the threat of court injunctions from Peter Stevenson the southern 'talent-free' ensemble called themselves the Seriously Awful Symphonia (SAS).