

Charlotte Fairbairn MAKING MUSIC, HISTORY & FRIENDS

The London Festival Orchestra in and around the Americas



The London Festival Orchestra in disguise

WHEN, during the recent London Festival Orchestra tour of the Americas and the Caribbean, Ross Pople, his colleagues and I were all uncomfortably seated on an Air Cubana Ilyushin 18, fighting off cockroaches with one hand while trying to block out the roar of the propellers with the other, it felt as though we were indeed on a pioneering mission.

In fact, on a five-week, twenty-one concert, twenty-four flight tour, we believe the LFO made history four times — as the first British chamber orchestra, if not the first foreign orchestra, to visit Paraguay, Barbados, Cuba and Guatemala in several decades, and in the case of the first two, ever.

Although not perhaps notably historic, the first leg of the tour, to Brazil under the auspices of the Mozarteum Brasileiro, was memorably well-run, successful and enjoyable. Numbering twenty-two, including the brilliant young Norwegian trumpet player, Ole Edvard Antonsen, we aired Telemann, Tartini, Stanley and Neruda as well as Grieg,

Haydn, Boccherini, Britten and J.C. Bach. Two programmes, eight concerts, ten days and happy memories of playing football on Copacabana beach are remembered, and of a fine performance by a brave and tenacious cicada who refused to allow Haydn to daunt him.

Our visit to Paraguay, on the other hand, seemed to disprove any thesis that Experience is essential. Having been escorted into the country via the spectacular Iguassu Falls, we were treated royally. Asuncion welcomed us with open arms, courteously interviewing, lavishly entertaining, cajoling, applauding and ovating, and by the time we had spent a few hours in the capital, we felt quite at home.

Malcolm Messiter earned the eternal gratitude of the Paraguayan Symphony Orchestra's principal oboist by giving him a reed, and soloists Steven Smith and Nicholas Logie held the packed Japanese-Paraguayan Cultural Centre in thrall when they gave the tour's first performance of the Mozart

Sinfonia Concertante for Violin & Viola (K364). So pleased were the Paraguayans, the sponsors Lloyds Bank and the British Embassy with the venture (our visit) that we were escorted for a special command performance of local harp-playing at 'Don Folklorico', the club belonging to the last surviving member of Los Paraguayas.

Treading a better-worn path, we progressed from South to Central America where we made our first visit to Mexico for the Cervantino Festival in the miraculous town of Guanajuato. Ours was the closing concert and the euphoric atmosphere on the 16th century colonial streets spilled into the hall. To our surprise and delight, the Frank Bridge Variations came second only to Malcolm Messiter's Marcello Oboe Concerto in popularity and, packed on our way back to Mexico City with the requisite Festival plate, we felt quite pleased to have been invited to return to the Festival in the near future.

We also felt quite pleased to be headed for Barbados and four days of Rum Punch and sunshine. Indeed, as soon as we arrived in Bridgetown and congregated in the Caribbean for a midnight swim, everyone was ready to agree that this was a piece of history well worth making. We swam, sunned and played — one schools' concert and one 'main' performance — transported everywhere by corporals from the 350-strong Barbadian Army. If unused to classical concerts, the Barbadians were warm and welcoming. If they thought, like the local pop disc-jockey, that we were really Ron People and the London Symphony Orchestra, they were tactful enough to avoid questions. And if they believed their eyes when they saw a photograph, which claimed to portray the LFO and Director, of Sir Yehudi Menuhin with some Japanese students, nobody dared to comment on the change of line-up. Like our visit to Paraguay, the trip to Barbados was assiduously noted in the record of Experiments-to-be-repeated.

As the reader may already have guessed, pioneering took on a slightly different aspect when we embarked on

our flight for Havana. Aside from the aeroplane's insect population, we found ourselves confronted with a bus whose blood-red painted windows seemed a painful memento of revolution and with hotel-rooms which were already revolting. Havana's sad and perhaps irredeemable decay was all too clearly reflected in our dirty bed-linen and damp-stained walls.

But never, I discovered, should one underestimate the power of twenty mosquito-bite-ridden musicians. Within hours, we were upgraded. The bus was consigned to a depot happily out of our sight and the unfortunate hotel (officially designated a 'protocol residence') left far behind. To the Hotel La Habana, men, and don't forget your instruments.

Nobody did and if there was an unusual sting in the performance of the Boccherini 'Devil's House' symphony, the irony was unintentional. Indeed, so far did the Cubans redeem themselves by their overwhelming applause that, in spite of the 'protocol experience', players were caught perceptibly smiling at the prospect of a possible return visit to collect the Red Star of Cuba (awarded to

performers of the best event of the year), for which we found ourselves nominated.

And so we progressed, warmed by the enthusiasm of Latin audiences and constantly enlightened by a mixture of new and well-tried experiences. Costa Rica will be remembered for the thousands of ocarina players in the San José market-place; Guatemala for the marimba band which greeted us on our arrival. As for our return visit to Mexico, to the Instituto de Bellas Artes in Mexico City and the Sinaloa State Festival — therein lies a Very Long Article Indeed. Suffice it to say, that in the capital as in the provinces, the hospitality was wonderful, the Holst St Paul's Suite a wow, attempts to find a genuine Mexican restaurant almost entirely in vain and the single rooms and daily subsistence for the cellos courteously but firmly declined.

The tour can be summed up in two contrasting incidents: a round of applause by political rioters in Mazatlan as we disembarked from our bus to go to rehearsal; and a comment by an irate fellow-passenger: 'Why, in God's name, do they need three cellos? Surely one would do?'

MUSIC & MUSICIANS

INTERNATIONAL

February 1990

Founded 1952

POSTSCRIPT: Readers may be interested to know that on 5th February 1990 we received a telex from the theatre in Cuba which said: "for its artistic excellence and your exemplary musical values which led to an extraordinary response of the audience, the London Festival Orchestra was selected among the best performances of 1989 and has been included in Gran Teatre de la Habana's Honor Book".

14 February 1990