



# Chamber Orchestra of Europe

## The story continues...

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The Chamber Orchestra of Europe was conceived at the Salzburg Festival in August 1980 when around 40 of the most experienced members of the European Community Youth Orchestra, at the time performing with Herbert von Karajan, decided to form a chamber orchestra to enable them to continue performing together on a professional and long term basis. The idea was encouraged by Claudio Abbado, then Music Director of the ECYO, and taken forward by his assistant, James Judd, who introduced it to Peter and Victoria Readman during their honeymoon in Salzburg. Some nine months later, on 18 May 1981, a launch concert was organised by Peter and Victoria at the Merchant Taylors' Hall in London. The programme included Mozart Piano Concerto K491 played by Steven Bishop Kovacevich and conducted by James Judd. However, after the interval as James was preparing to conduct Mozart's Symphony No. 29, he spotted Claudio Abbado at the back of the hall, and spontaneously handed him the baton. It is tempting to write that after that master stroke by James, the rest was history, but that of course would not do justice to the numerous individuals who have made such a massive contribution to the COE's three decades of music making throughout the world.

Shortly after the launch concert - which generated sufficient financial support to give the Orchestra at least a chance to get off the ground - June Megennis joined as General Manager, taking over the reins from Victoria Readman after the COE's first ever professional engagement at the International Rossini Festival in Pesaro, and continuing to lead it on its momentous journey for the next 25 years. At the end of September 1981 the final phase in the launch of the Orchestra took place at the yet-to-be-officially-opened Barbican Hall in London, when another fund-raising private concert was performed to a packed audience.

As the Orchestra began to make its presence felt throughout Europe it undertook its first major European tour with Claudio Abbado in the autumn of 1982. Visiting many major European cities and winning outstanding critical acclaim, it was with Claudio Abbado that the COE had its greatest success throughout the 1980's, touring not merely around Europe but also in Japan and America, and winning a host of recording awards including its first two Gramophone Records of the Year for the Rossini opera *Viaggio a Reims* and a Schubert symphony cycle. This was a period of great development for the Orchestra with extraordinary friendships being formed not merely



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with Alexander Schneider, one of the most enthusiastic and committed supporters of the COE until the end of his life in the early 1990's, but also Sandor Vegh who had been an inspiration to many of the string players both in Salzburg and at Prussia Cove. It was also in the mid 1980's that the COE undertook its first projects with Sir Georg Solti, culminating in award-winning performances and recordings of Mozart's late symphonies and his operas *Così fan tutte* and *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Due to Claudio's position as General Music Director in Vienna from the early 1980's, much of the COE's work took place in that city, and it was there in 1986 that the Orchestra first performed with Nikolaus Harnoncourt in a concert at the Konzerthaus with the soloist Gidon Kremer. We were not to know it at the time, but that concert was the beginning of an especially close relationship with Nikolaus Harnoncourt which over the 1990's became the bedrock of much of the COE's work and which continues to this day.

It was in 1987 that Nikolaus first invited the Orchestra to join him at the Styriarte Festival in Graz, his home town, and it has been in residence there every year since, undertaking a series of major projects, many of which were recorded on the Teldec label to international acclaim. Most noteworthy, without doubt, was the cycle of Beethoven symphonies performed and recorded in Graz over 1990 and 1991 and released by Teldec in 1992, winning every major recording award in the world and selling over one million copies. For many critics and international audiences these performances were ground-breaking in their style and approach, and were repeated at the Salzburg Festival and at Carnegie Hall in New York, on both occasions to standing ovations. As well as the significant recordings with Nikolaus Harnoncourt of Beethoven orchestral works including the piano concertos, overtures and *Fidelio*, he also went on to conduct the COE in performances and recordings of works by Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Dvorak and Bartok, many of which have won international awards.

During the 1990's, another major influence entered the COE's life in the form of Paavo Berglund with whom numerous concerts had been given in earlier years, and for whom the Orchestra developed a special affection. Paavo, with his Finnish background, introduced the Orchestra to Sibelius and was sufficiently inspired by his collaboration with the COE to undertake a Sibelius symphony cycle which was played at the Helsinki and Edinburgh International Festivals. The cycle was recorded and released on the Finlandia label, and again won several international prizes. Apart from the great



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success the Orchestra had with the Sibelius symphonies with Paavo, they also explored the symphonies of Dvorak and Brahms together, resulting in a Brahms symphony cycle performed throughout Europe in the late 1990's which was then recorded and released on the Ondine label in 2001.

Since 2000 the Orchestra has been able to build on its successes in the 1980's and 1990's, and over the last decade it has developed extremely important new relationships with a number of eminent conductors including Bernard Haitink, Vladimir Jurowski, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Sir Antonio Pappano and Robin Ticciati.

In 2008 Bernard Haitink began a Beethoven cycle with the COE at the Lucerne Festival which went on to be repeated in Amsterdam and Paris. They then embarked on a major Brahms cycle in Lucerne, with further performances in Amsterdam, Paris and Frankfurt. In 2015, they also undertook an extensive Schumann cycle in Amsterdam, Lugano and Vienna. Following acclaimed all-Dvorak concerts at the Lucerne Summer Festival in 2016, Bernard Haitink the COE reconvened in Amsterdam in January 2017 for two performances with Kristian Bezuidenhout and Alina Ibragimova. At the end of 2017, the COE, Bernard Haitink and singers Anna-Lucia Richter, Eva-Maria Westbroek and Hanno Müller-Brachmann performed works by Mozart, Mahler and Wagner at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and at the Philharmonie Luxembourg. The COE's relationship with Bernard Haitink is very special and, in his words: "with the COE, I feel I am not a conductor anymore. I feel like a musician who can make music with them" and "this Orchestra is the greatest gift in the later stages of my career."

At the same time as the development of this significant relationship with Bernard Haitink, the Orchestra had the good fortune to work with Yannick Nézet-Séguin in Lisbon in 2008, and since then major projects have been undertaken with him throughout Europe and in New York, including recordings for Deutsche Grammophon of *Così fan tutte*, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *La Clemenza di Tito* in Baden-Baden as well as Schumann and Mendelssohn symphony cycles in Paris.

2008 may have marked the COE and Yannick's first engagement together – at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon – but in fact Yannick's love of the Orchestra developed many years earlier, devouring COE recordings conducted by Abbado, Harnoncourt and others. Then when Yannick came from Canada to Europe to study



with Carlo Maria Giulini, he got to know the COE as a result of Giulini's concerts with the Orchestra in Ferrara.

So by the time of Yannick's debut with the COE in 2008, in his words "it felt like we had already known each other for a long time". He remembers his first ever rehearsal with the Orchestra as if it were yesterday – "the light in the room, where everyone sat, every second of it". From the intensity of that first rehearsal, which was immediately so rewarding musically, developed a "deeper and deeper connection".

Yannick believes that the key to the partnership is "keeping things fresh, by being truly in the moment. To be able to do this, you need the absolute best musicians in the world... The COE's members totally embrace that kind of freedom, and that is very inspiring to me because I can then truly express all my ideas about the music without any limitations".

We have had so many exciting projects with Yannick to date, including many marathon performances and recordings for Deutsche Grammophon, such as the 2012 cycle of Schumann symphonies and 2016 cycle of Mendelssohn symphonies. The Mozart late opera series is ongoing, with the latest opera *La Clemenza di Tito* just recorded in Baden-Baden.

The COE's principal double-bass Enno Senft said: "It is only a natural progression of our friendship with Yannick to welcome him as Honorary Member. His unfailing musical intuition, infectious energy and depth of understanding just bring out the best of the COE spirit. Not to mention his sense of humour! Simply listen to our latest recording of Mendelssohn Symphony No.1 for proof. Yannick and the COE, we speak the same language."

In addition to these exciting achievements, great tours have been undertaken with Vladimir Jurowski, Sir Antonio Pappano and Robin Ticciati while in April 2012 the Orchestra celebrated 25 years of glorious music-making with another great friend, Sir András Schiff who joined Nikolaus † and Alice Harnoncourt † and Bernard Haitink † as Honorary Member of the Orchestra. In July 2017, we were thrilled that Yannick Nézet-Séguin also became a COE Honorary Member.

The COVID-19 Pandemic affected the Orchestra greatly and we were not able to perform between March 2020 and July 2021 apart from one project in October 2020: our debut with Sir Simon Rattle, joined by violinist Vilde Frang in Berlin. This project



has been the first of many and we are thrilled to count Sir Simon amongst our strongest artistic partners, alongside Robin Ticciati and Sir Antonio Pappano. While the COE was absent from the platform during the global pandemic, it remained in people's minds and ears thanks to a number of releases of archive recordings with ICA Classics: Nikolaus Harnoncourt conducting the COE in all of the Schubert Symphonies at the Styriarte in Graz in 1988; Nikolaus Harnoncourt conducting the COE in works by Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn; and a DVD/BluRay of Paavo Berglund conducting the COE in all of the Sibelius Symphonies at the Helsinki Festival in 1998. In 2022, we also released all of the Beethoven Symphonies with Yannick Nézet-Séguin for Deutsche Grammophon, recorded in July 2021 at the Festspielhaus in Baden-Baden where we have had a summer residency for just over a decade now. In 2023, Warner Classics released the Piano Concertos by Robert and Clara Schumann, featuring the COE, Yannick and pianist Beatrice Rana. The release of our Brahms Symphonies with Yannick for Deutsche Grammophon is planned for 2024.

Now in its fourth decade, the COE is very fortunate to have such eminent and important musical friends, but the reality is that none of this could have been achieved without the additional support of so many people behind the scenes. The Sainsbury family's Gatsby Charitable Foundation, the Clark family's Underwood Trust, the American Friends and more recently the Rupert Hughes Will Trust, Dasha Shenkman, Sir Siegmund Warburg's Voluntary Settlement and The 35th Anniversary Friends continue to provide a vital financial lifeline for the Orchestra and while it has their support and continues to enjoy their friendship and that of so many others, the COE is able to look forward to the future with a high degree of confidence.

Peter Readman