

# In search of the Trondheim sound

After a Norwegian orchestra with a distinctive sound bagged a string of accolades in the magazine, Reviews Editor **Andrew Mellor** went in search of its secrets...

**T**he concept of particular orchestras having distinct 'sounds' can be pretty intimidating. The highfalutin' music critic will tell you that the famous Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam has a trademark 'burnished' sound; that the Vienna Philharmonic boasts a particular 'warmth'. You can be forgiven for not being able to tell the difference between them – don't they just sound like very good orchestras?

In truth, while it has provided many a critic with the opportunity to flex his or her superior perceptiveness in public, the phenomenon of orchestral sound is both real and fascinating. I'm going to try, with the help of some new friends in Norway, to prove that – and to show, in one case at least, what may be behind it.

It starts with two CDs sent to us last summer by Norwegian string orchestra the Trondheim Soloists. Both discs took Editor's Choice slots in our reviews pages: our critic Philip Clark was struck by the energy of the playing; I was taken with its moving purity. Soon afterwards I heard the same ensemble's recordings of violin concertos by Mozart. Listening to these performances, I felt I understood for the first time one of the most alluring but ambiguous concepts of orchestral sound: its relationship to geography. The orchestra's pure, breezy performances of Mozart concertos put me in mind of Norway – of clean air, emotional simplicity and the rigours of outdoor life. It seemed whimsical – so I went to Trondheim to run my ideas past members of the orchestra. And that's when things got really interesting.

Øyvind Gimse, the Trondheim Soloists' principal cellist and artistic director, began by explaining the past existence of a particular orchestral style in Norway. 'Karsten Andersen was a major figure on the orchestral scene in Norway earlier this century,' he told me. 'Together with many Norwegian composers after Grieg, he was extremely proud to be Norwegian – he even felt he had to prove it by running naked in the mountains! The sound Karsten got from his orchestra in Bergen [Norway's second city] was connected with the purity of mountain folk music, and it was something the Trondheim Soloists' founder Bjarne Fiskum instilled in this orchestra. It was a very clear sound; if you've ever been up a Norwegian mountain in September or October, you'll know how pure the air is. You can see for hundreds of miles.'

Halfway up one of those mountains, nestling in the woods on the edge of Trondheim, is a wooden villa housing hundreds of historic musical instruments. Øyvind has brought me here to show me physical evidence of the Trondheim Soloists' sonic heritage. Alongside Chopin's Chaise Longue and Cherubini's clavichord is a set of 'Hardanger fiddles' – violins from this particular area of Norway that are part of a thriving folk tradition. Underneath the four normal bowed strings, the 'Hardingfele' has additional, un-bowed strings that resonate with 'overtones' drawn out by the vibrations of the upper strings. When Øyvind plays it, you immediately hear something of the Trondheim Soloists' pure, resonant, breezy playing style. 'Some of our sound ideals come directly from the Hardingfele,' explains Øyvind. 'If you cultivate the sound of those high overtones – harness their pureness – it sounds like ice or glass. It's this clearer, more light, more open sound that's one of our signatures.'

Norwegian folk music, and life in general, is deeply rooted in the outdoors. 'You get the most extraordinary sunsets and sunrises here,' says Øyvind. 'At Trondheim's latitude they last two hours at the height of summer. They create a very particular light that brings a certain energy from people. It's a visual thing, but it can become an audio thing, too. After folk music, I'd say these sunsets – this distinctive light – are the second secret of the Trondheim sound.' But it still seems to me too abstract a concept. How does a person translate these ideas into actual music? 'You rely on your own inner musicality,' says Øyvind, 'and musicality in Norway is connected to nature. It's already there. The old Norwegian farm girls up in the mountains wanted to get the cows in, and so they sang.'

Watching the Trondheim Soloists that night – playing Bach's Third and Fifth Brandenburg Concertos, standing up, the strings full of broad movement, moving their bows with light agility – those abstract thoughts seem more concrete. Conductorless, focusing mostly on music for strings, the ensemble is highly malleable – it's easier to hone particular characteristics in an ensemble like this than it would be a large orchestra. But while the world's great orchestras, including Bergen's, have become increasingly international in sound, this ensemble has retained the mountainous Norwegian purity of Karsten Andersen. 'Trondheim is a cosy place,' says Øyvind. 'It doesn't have

the history of international trade that Oslo and Bergen have.' Remarkably, he explains, the vast majority of the orchestra's players are from here; they know the town and its traditions. One step removed from the thrusting economies of southern Norway and mainland Europe, the group has preserved its distinct identity – maybe even worked on it.

If it's local in ethos, membership and sound, the Trondheim Soloists' reputation is becoming international. As Øyvind talks excitedly of its upcoming tour of the UK and the growing prominence of its recording activities, I think of the ensemble's distinct stage manner – its curious, relaxed energy, the final piece in its sonic jigsaw. It seems obvious to me where that comes from. Øyvind is a remarkable character: laid back, perceptive, irreverent, fun and suave. Almost every one of his sentences is punctuated with loud infectious laughter. He's a total musician and a total Norwegian, and he's totally dedicated to the Soloists. I suspect the orchestra's distinct, strong and very native personality – its connection to this place – has an awful lot to do with him. ■

*The Trondheim Soloists on Tour:*  
*Cadogan Hall, London; Thursday 29 October*  
*cadoganhall.com; 020 7730 4500*  
*Canterbury Cathedral; Friday 30 October*  
*canterburyfestival.co.uk; 01227 452 853*  
*Leeds Town Hall; Saturday 31 October*  
*leedsconcertseason.com; 0113 224 3801*  
*All concerts begin at 7.30pm*

## EXPLORING SOUND STYLES

### Vienna Philharmonic

This famous orchestra is said to glow with inner warmth – a combination of easy virtuosity from its talented players and a tradition of playing highly Romantic music by locals Mahler and Strauss, both of whom conducted it.

### Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, New York

A unique combination of gung-ho Americanism, operatic sensitivity and true understanding of its acoustic mean this orchestra delivers music with a perfect finish but a dramatic excitement, too.

### São Paulo Symphony Orchestra

Its membership isn't exclusively Brazilian, but South American street rhythms like those of the tango are in this orchestra's musical DNA. Rhythmic emphasis, discipline and concurrent freedom are noticeable in almost everything the orchestra plays.