

Flexible friends

The Scottish Chamber Orchestra enters its 40th anniversary season with principal conductor Robin Ticciati's contract extended to 2018, new commissions, recording plans, and an extensive touring programme, reports **David Kettle**

'I love to challenge the musicians, myself and the public' – principal conductor Robin Ticciati

'Not that long ago, somebody said that the orchestra was playing better now than it ever has.

Then some of the players who were here 20 years ago replied that it wasn't *that* bad back then.' Sensitive to certain of his musicians' length of service, Scottish Chamber Orchestra chief executive Roy McEwan is understandably reluctant to crow too loudly about the band's growth in quality since he took on the position in 1993 – let alone since its founding back in 1974.

But as the orchestra reveals its celebratory 40th anniversary season for 2013/14, there is no denying that (let's put this carefully) it is as strong an ensemble as it has ever been, both in sound – with consistently fine strings, and stand-out players in its wind section – and in repertoire. You could even be forgiven for thinking of it as several different ensembles, such are its many faces – as convincing period-instrument group, bold usurper of symphony-orchestra repertoire, and even crack new-music outfit.

'We are fortunate to have players who can switch between modern and period instruments,' says principal conductor Robin Ticciati, 'which means we can start a concert with some mind-bending Ligeti, move on to some romantic Berlioz, and finish with a classical Beethoven symphony. Not many orchestras can inhabit those worlds with such different soundscapes.'

It is a versatility that McEwan puts down to the vision of certain inspirational conductors. 'Charles Mackerras introduced a lot of things to the orchestra – natural instruments, for example, and different styles of playing for different kinds of music. And he got us thinking about what were the legitimate boundaries of repertoire for a chamber orchestra – he wanted to do the Brahms symphonies with a 50-piece orchestra, and he had lots of academic reasons why.' Mackerras is a figure indelibly associated with the

SCO, both as chief guest conductor from 1992 to 1995 and as conductor laureate from 1995 until his death in 2010.

'Joseph Swensen was principal conductor for nine years, and he gave the orchestra quite a big, confident, outward-looking sound,' McEwan continues. 'And Robin's brought in a very different, much lighter, more detailed way of working.'

It is Ticciati's precision that was put to such startling effect in some of the wealth of new works commissioned for the SCO's 2011/12 season. And the orchestra's commitment to contemporary music – both brand new and recently composed – is something to shout about in the anniversary season, McEwan feels. In November, there is a new piece from Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, and as well as recent music by Sally Beamish, Kevin Volans and James MacMillan.

The orchestra has asked Glasgow-born composer Martin Suckling for a new piece for the anniversary concert itself, in February 2014. How is Suckling approaching the responsibility of writing for the occasion? 'They're such an energetic band,' he says. 'Maybe it's something to do with their size – you see them communicating with each other as they play, and they look like they're having a good time. It's those sorts of life-affirming things I'll be trying to channel into the new piece.'

Links with composers are just some of the ties that the orchestra has fostered during its 40-year history. 'We like building relationships,' says McEwan. 'That's true for conductors, who don't necessarily have official positions with us – like John Storgårds, Nicholas McGegan and Richard Egarr, who are all with us in our anniversary season.' It's also true for returning soloists: Piotr Anderszewski, Colin Currie, Christian Zacharias, Jaime Laredo and Maria João Pires all have a history of working with the SCO, and return in 2013/14.

In terms of collaborators, it is very much an international outlook, but the orchestra's Scottish identity is an important part of the mix too. McEwan explains: 'Since we became directly funded by the Scottish government, our role has been much more clearly articulated – that as a national company, we're here to serve the whole of the country as much as we can.' To that end, the anniversary season is not very different from other years, with concert performances in



Young veteran:
Sub-principal cellist
Su-A Lee joined the
SCO 20 years ago

MARCO BORGREVE

Perth, St Andrews, Dumfries and Inverness alongside Edinburgh and Glasgow, as well as festival gigs in Orkney and Fife, and touring from Selkirk in the Borders to Thurso way up north.

When the SCO arrives in a small, far-flung village, it can find itself playing to almost everyone who lives there. 'I think we've been able to create a sense of community around the orchestra that wasn't there 20 years ago,' says McEwan. 'But we also see ourselves as cultural ambassadors, one of the companies in Scotland that can go abroad and make people realise what cultural achievements there are in the country.' The anniversary season is busier than most in terms of overseas touring, with a Far East trip taking in China and Japan, as well as visits to Vienna, Salzburg, Budapest, Lucerne and Cologne.

For Robin Ticciati, one of the new season's highlights is a Schumann cycle in November, which the SCO also plans to record. It is repertoire that draws strongly on the SCO's stylistic adaptability, and on his own passions. 'I'm fascinated by the 19th century at the moment – the extension of classicism

into the romantic period,' he says. 'I love to challenge the musicians, myself and the public with questions of phrasing, articulation, period performance.'

In terms of future challenges for the SCO, top of McEwan's list is, unsurprisingly, money: 'Our public funding is not going to go up in the next couple of years, and we're working hard at getting individual support to part compensate for that.' Audience building comes a close second: 'The audience we have is a very loyal one, but it's a question of diversifying both in terms of age and of demographic.' They are hardly issues that will shock anyone involved in the arts, and the trick up McEwan's sleeve is news, hot off the press, that Ticciati's contract is to be extended until 2018.

'It's tremendous,' says McEwan. 'And Robin is very good at thinking far ahead, so if we have this commitment now, we can plan in detail about what we want to do between now and 2018.' With the strong foundations that the SCO already has, and secure plans for where it's going in the next five years, players may just have to accept that growth and progress are pretty much inevitable. **CM**