

Sound investments

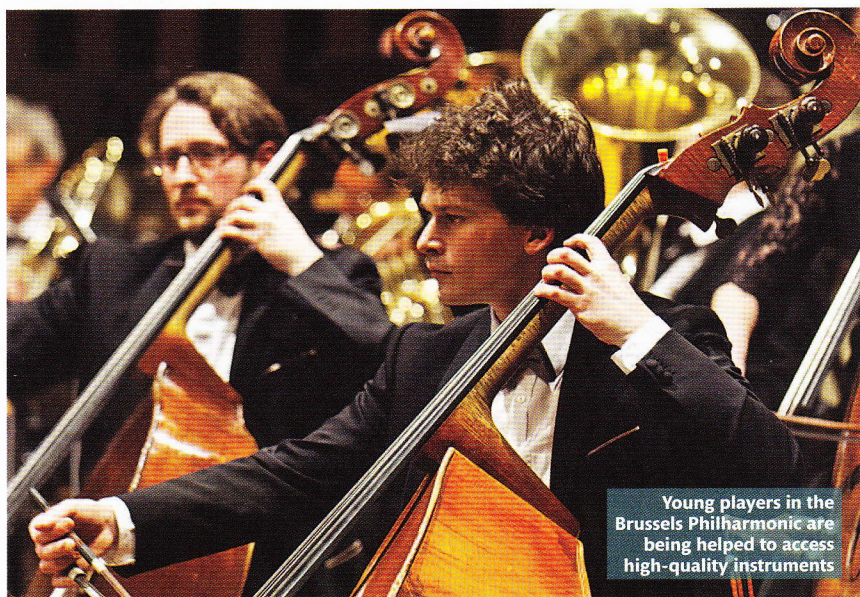
As a Belgian orchestra launches a foundation to buy instruments for its players, **David Kettle** explores how such purchase schemes fit into ensembles' aims to enrich their sound and become more attractive to potential recruits

THE APPARENTLY RELENTLESS RISE in value of fine stringed instruments, even in times of economic crisis, is a boon that's being increasingly appreciated by investors. But it's a worry for the musicians who depend on access to those instruments – and also for orchestras that employ those players.

Several ensembles have taken steps to address the issue, most recently the Brussels Philharmonic, which announced in December that it had established a foundation to purchase instruments for use by its musicians. The decision was prompted by an intake of younger string players, as Gunther Broucke, the orchestra's general manager, explains: 'Following retirements, we've had 20–25 new colleagues in the string section in the last ten years, all of them around 30 years old. It has become almost impossible for younger string players to get hold of valuable instruments, so I thought: how can I build a good orchestra if there's such a big difference in the quality of my instruments?'

The Brussels Philharmonic Foundation is a three-way collaboration between the orchestra, private bank Puilaetco Dewaay and legal firm Delboo Deknudt. Potential investors discuss a sum they would be willing to invest, then orchestral musicians themselves seek out suitable instruments. 'Every orchestra has certain string players with an excellent network of contacts in the lutherie and dealing worlds,' explains Broucke. 'I tell them the sum the investor is offering, and ask them to find a suitable instrument, with two conditions: it has to be a fine instrument in its own right, and there has to be a likelihood that its value will grow over time.'

Investors have no involvement in the choice of instrument, Broucke is keen to stress, and the chosen instruments are later matched with possible recipients in the orchestra. So far, Broucke says, the orchestra has a total investment of around €1m, with which it intends to purchase ten instruments. What marks the Brussels Philharmonic Foundation out is that it's a



Young players in the Brussels Philharmonic are being helped to access high-quality instruments

one-on-one deal, with an investor owning a particular instrument that's played by a particular musician. 'It's not purely a hard investment – it's an investment of passion,' Broucke says. 'There has to be a warm connection between the investor, the instrument, the musician who plays it, and the orchestra.'

OTHER ENSEMBLES have found different solutions to similar issues. The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (IPO) has long prided itself on its large intake of immigrant and refugee musicians, but that in itself has brought its own instrument issues: a spokesperson explains that the quality of instruments owned by incoming players, particularly from the former Soviet Union, seldom matches the musicians' abilities. The American Friends of the IPO launched a fundraising campaign in 1998 to purchase instruments for the orchestra. It also manages instrumental donations and loans, and currently deals with 18 instruments and bows, including Stradivari and Guaragnini violins and a Grancino cello.

The Berlin Philharmonic has a long-standing instrument purchase

scheme managed by its friends department, where funds raised through membership, and donations are used to buy instruments according to the wishes of the orchestra board and individual players.

The Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO) has a broader project that allows investors to participate in the ownership of a collection of instruments. The ACO Instrument Fund currently owns Australia's only Stradivari violin (of c.1728), played by principal violinist Satu Vänskä. And for both Broucke in Brussels and the ACO's general manager Timothy Calnin, sound and recruitment are key factors in their contrasting schemes. 'The aim is to deepen the richness, colour and quality of the sound of the ACO,' Calnin explains. 'And we expect this to be a hugely attractive element of a musician's life in the ACO – that they would have access to an instrument completely out of their reach in other circumstances.'

Broucke agrees: 'Not all of us can afford to pay the highest salaries in the world, so by providing musicians with high-quality instruments, that encourages them to stay with us. And these instruments will definitely be available to new players joining the orchestra.' ■