

A paperless future

Could a symphony orchestra ditch its entire sheet music library in favour of digital scores and tablet computers? The Brussels Philharmonic is setting out to do just that, as **David Kettle** reports

THE BRUSSELS PHILHARMONIC

is on a mission: to become the world's first paperless orchestra. On 7 November 2012 it gave its first concert playing, not from traditional sheet music, but from tablet computers. South Korean technology company Samsung had donated 100 of its Galaxy Note 10.1 tablets, and the orchestra worked with Samsung and Belgian company neoScores on new software to display the musical parts for the Prelude and Liebestod from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and Ravel's *Bolero*.

'It was a big success, and everything worked really well,' says concertmaster Otto Derolez. Each player, even in the string desks, had their own tablet, and they turned pages simply by sliding a finger over the screen. 'It's easy,' says Derolez. 'The new page appears immediately – it works very quickly.'

But the music that players see is far from just a scan of their original paper parts. Brussels Philharmonic production manager Bart Van der Roost, who has run the tablet project since its launch in July 2012, explains: 'There's just one large music file of the whole score, and the software interprets what needs to be shown locally on the individual devices.'

This way of working allows for enormous flexibility in what is displayed. Van der Roost continues: 'You can change the font and magnification of the score, and it adjusts automatically to the screen space available. You can change colours and even keys or clefs – obviously we don't touch the composer's work, but if something is written in the treble clef but you're more at ease seeing it in the bass clef, why not change it?'

The software also allows players to adjust page breaks to the most suitable points in the music – a function, explains Van der Roost, that will allow string sections to stagger their turns so that the maximum number of musicians is playing at all times. And working from one central file means that changes and annotations from the conductor or concertmaster can be carried over into all



the relevant parts – although individual players are also free to annotate their own parts themselves with special pens.

The orchestra predicts huge financial benefits if it moves to an entirely digital music system. 'If we can totally digitise our library, we're going to save about €25,000 a year in printing costs,' explains Van der Roost. He admits, though, that such a digitisation project would itself carry a significant financial burden.

THE TECHNOLOGY IS STILL at an early stage of development, Derolez accepts: 'The tablets are magnificent – apart from their size.' Brussels Philharmonic librarian Emmanuel Sproelants agrees that screen size is a concern. 'Normally we use A4 parts, and that's bigger than the 10-inch screens we're using. Ideally you would have two connected 17-inch tablets.'

But a bigger issue, according to Sproelants, is the availability of scores in a compatible digital format. For the November concert, the orchestra itself digitised the two scores it needed, but for tablet use to expand, music publishers will have to provide digital files themselves – a costly process. 'And I don't know if publishing houses are interested in doing that,' says Sproelants. Rights control is another issue that faces publishers considering letting loose digital versions

of their scores, but Sproelants suggests a solution: 'The publishers could control the days that you can use the electronic score. You would enter a code each time you need to use a score, with the code running out after the last performance.'

Derolez accepts that moving entirely to tablets will be a gradual process. 'The total change is still a few seasons off. In 2013 we'll do another concert where the software will have developed further, and slowly we'll use paper less and tablets more.'

This is not the first time that tablets have been used in an orchestral setting: Kazakh violinist and conductor Marat Bisengaliev has experimented with them for several years with orchestras in Kazakhstan and India. Nick Lander, concerts and tours manager at the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, sees clear advantages in moving to tablets, but he points out one further concern: 'We do risk discarding the history. There is often a tradition of signing orchestral parts, so that they become a record stretching back decades of the performance history of the piece and of orchestral personnel. Maintaining our connection with the past is important.' Whether such a soft-edged argument will be able to compete with the financial and practical advantages promised by the use of tablets remains to be seen. ■