

The Olympic orchestra born on YouTube

Israeli musicians are part of a unique Cultural Olympiad ensemble

By Jessica Duchon, July 19, 2012



The Aldeburgh World Orchestra

The Aldeburgh Festival, based in Benjamin Britten's home town on the Suffolk coast, is an annual highlight of the UK's classical music calendar. Less attention, though, is generally focused on the year-round activities that take place at its Snape Maltings concert hall and the surrounding complex of studios. They are in fact home to some of the UK's most important training programmes for young musicians. There, the Britten-Pears Orchestra has long offered a rare opportunity for gifted players to bridge the gap between finishing college and finding a foothold in the profession.

But with the Cultural Olympiad surrounding London 2012, Aldeburgh has formed a brand new orchestra for this age group, with members drawn from no fewer than 34 different countries.

When the Cultural Olympiad asked the chief executive of Aldeburgh Music, Jonathan Reekie, to think about how his organisation could participate in the London 2012

Festival, the cogs quickly began to turn. “I felt that whatever we did would have to resonate with the ideas behind the Olympics — internationalism, multiculturalism, excellence, youth. So I thought we could put an orchestra together including musicians from every continent,” he says.

It all started four years ago, and the result is the Aldeburgh World Orchestra, currently meeting for the first time: a gathering of 119 professional musicians aged from 19 to 29. With the conductor Sir Mark Elder at the helm, they assembled for two weeks in Suffolk to rehearse before their inaugural concerts: two at Snape itself, then a tour to Ingolstadt, Amsterdam and, last, the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall, where they will perform music by Britten, Mahler, Stravinsky and the young British composer Charlotte Bray. While the project was coined specifically for this summer, Reekie is sure that this will be the first session of many.

There is a strong representation in the orchestra from Israel, including the bassoonist Nadav Cohen, who has been studying in Amsterdam, and three string players from the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music at Tel Aviv University — violinist Ohad Cohen, violist Nir Rom Nagy and cellist William Weil. And leading the AWO is the violinist Avigail Bushakevitz, who was born in Jerusalem and grew up in South Africa. A graduate of the Juilliard School of Music in New York, she came to Aldeburgh for the first time last year to participate in the Britten-Pears Orchestra.



Lead violinist Avigail Bushakevitz

To say that she is thrilled to be back, this time as such a prominent player in the AWO, is putting it mildly. “I think it’s fascinating to be able to play with people from so many places and with so many different playing styles,” she says. “It’s a wonderful repertoire and to work with Sir Mark Elder will be a really great experience. Playing at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and the Royal Albert Hall in London is very exciting for me. I’m from a small town in South Africa, I’ve only heard about these halls and I never thought I’d have the chance to play in them one day.

“Last year, I was supposed to be in the first violin section of the Britten-Pears Orchestra. But then the original concert-master pulled out, so they asked me to do

that job instead. I loved it, so I wanted to audition again for the AWO. We all auditioned by putting videos of ourselves playing on YouTube. That way, you can audition anywhere you are.”

That audition process is central to the concept of the orchestra — and it is something that simply could not have happened 10 years ago, since it depends so much on the internet technology. Says Reekie: “Recently there have been celebrated examples of young classical musicians emerging from places like Venezuela, the Far East and projects such as Buskaid in the townships of South Africa. As an organisation we therefore needed to change the way we find our talented musicians. To do that, we had to expand our recruitment network — the traditional methods of travelling and auditioning in key centres wasn’t going to work.”

The solution was, of course, YouTube: “We can genuinely access any talented musician wherever they are, provided they have access to YouTube — some countries don’t, and that’s another problem — but this will leave a real legacy for Aldeburgh.”

The orchestra’s range and reach means that the young musicians will be rubbing shoulders with colleagues from a dizzying range of countries and cultures. According to Marie Bennell, Aldeburgh’s artist development manager, the cello section alone includes players from Australia, Canada, Cyprus, Egypt, UK, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Russia, South Africa and the USA. Does that give the AWO a mandate similar to organisations such as the World Orchestra for Peace or even Daniel Barenboim’s West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, building bridges between cultures through musical activities?

“The important thing is not to force the issue,” Bennell emphasises. “If you put them into a set-up with agendas that force things, it often doesn’t work. But the fact that they’re in this space where there’s nothing around them except inspirational atmosphere, the seaside, some really nice local ales and music they’re working intensely on — it makes for a really good mix.”

Bushakevitz, meanwhile, is hoping that the AWO will be a vital step in her professional experience and also part of a gradual move towards life in Europe. She has a duo with her brother, a pianist who divides his time between Germany and France, and the pair would like to build on their success following a substantial concert tour of South Africa this year. “First I’d like to go to Jerusalem for a few months so that I can learn Hebrew properly,” she says.

With an experience to her name as notable as serving as concert-master of the AWO, she may find she is spoilt for choice when it comes to career opportunities. “It’s a bit frightening,” she admits. “But extremely exciting as well.”

The Aldeburgh World Orchestra performs at the BBC Proms on July 29. Box office: 0845 401 5040