



THE WORLD'S WORST

A Guide to the Portsmouth Sinfonia

Edited by Christopher M. Reeves and Aaron Walker

The Portsmouth Sinfonia on Southsea Beach, in their earliest known photograph. This image was used for the 1970 Portsmouth College of Fine Art Diploma show. (L-R) Noel Forster, Marilyn Ryan, unidentified, Robin Mortimore, Maurice Dennis, Gavin Bryars, Gary Rickard, unidentified, James Lampard, Pete Clutterbuck, John Farley (back to camera), Adrian Rifkin, unidentified. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Gavin Bryars.

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PREFACE

PORTSMOUTH SINFONIA

★ Portsmouth Sinfonia Play the Popular Classics / Col. KC-33049

An orchestra of fifty-odd musicians, mostly untrained, attacks the William Tell Overture, Beethoven's Fifth and seven others, with predictably devastating results. This is a by-product of Brian Eno's experiments into the nature of the accident in music. Perhaps the worst record ever made; best dismissed as an intellectual joke. Liner notes, however, a must-read.

So issued Frank Rose in his 1974 *Rolling Stone* review of *Portsmouth Sinfonia Plays the Popular Classics*, the first album released by the Sinfonia.¹

Rather than undercut the ambitions of the orchestra, reviews such as Rose's became an integral part of the Portsmouth Sinfonia's appeal as a deskilled orchestra, whose working premise—that accidental mistakes could be considered a fundamental quality of the music—dismissed much of music criticism's standard tools and methods of assessment. While undoubtedly an important part of the ensemble's unexpected decade-long career, the self-styling of the Sinfonia as “the world's worst” also obscures their rather remarkable accomplishments.

Best remembered as a footnote to the careers of its more famous members, the Portsmouth Sinfonia can now be appreciated for the highly unusual artifact that it was: a populist, collectively organized project that inhabited the outré edges of avant-garde sound through its approach to music as conceptual art. Unlike many of its intellectual peers, the comedic effect of earnestly “butchering the classics” gave the Sinfonia an appeal and legibility that found them an audience well-beyond the gates of experimental and improvised music, with the ensemble even breaking into the UK Top 40 Singles Chart at the end of the 1970s with a medley of their renditions, aptly titled *Classical Muddly*.





John Farley with members of the orchestra in front of the Royal Albert Hall, May 1974. Photograph © Doug Smith.

Liner Notes from **PORTSMOUTH SINFONIA PLAYS THE POPULAR CLASSICS**

John Farley (1974)

Within the collective minds of a small group of friends eager to air a mixture of musical feelings at the College of Art, the Portsmouth Sinfonia was first conceived, and with all opposition brushed aside, born into the summer of 1970. Struggling to find its own path amongst the forests of musical activities, it parted its lips, one May afternoon, to speak for the first time. The occasion was the memorable Festival of Light Entertainment, where the excited audience waited patiently, wide-eyed in anticipation. Forthcoming was the very special though vaguely recognizable rendering of *The William Tell Overture*. Through the flushed cheeks of the brass section and unaccustomed fingering of the violinists a certain passion and desire was evident, though clearly, control and restraint [were] in [their] infancy. The months to follow produced more pieces to play and more people to play them, [as] concerts became more frequent and a deeper interest was about to flourish.

Characteristic of the time was the precocious interpretation of Beethoven's *Fifth* [*Symphony*] at the Purcell Room. It was for many a high point and the Sinfonia, now comprising fourteen members, flattered itself with the reassuring response. However, such "success" was not allowed to outweigh and overpower more sober qualities the Sinfonia had to accomplish. The "high seriousness" was not to be fogged by complacent whims or pretentious eccentricities. The Sinfonia was



Liner Notes from **PORTSMOUTH SINFONIA PLAYS THE POPULAR CLASSICS**

Brian Eno (1974)

The Portsmouth Sinfonia usually claims a membership of about fifty . . . the number fluctuates. Within the orchestra is represented the full range of musical competence. Some members playing difficult instruments for the first time; others, on the other hand, concert standard. This tends to generate an extraordinary and unique musical situation where the inevitable errors must be considered as a crucial, if inadvertent, element of the work. It is important to stress the main characteristic of the orchestra—that all members of the Sinfonia share the desire to play the pieces as accurately as possible. One supposes that the possibility of professional accuracy will forever elude us since there is a constant influx of new members and a continual desire to attempt more ambitious pieces from the realms of the popular classics.

My own involvement with the Sinfonia is on two levels—I am a non-musician in the sense of never having “studied music,” yet at the same time, I notice that many of the more significant contributions to rock music, and to a lesser extent avant-garde music, have been made by enthusiastic amateurs and dabblers. Their strength is that they are able to approach the task of music-making without previously acquired solutions and without a too firm concept of what is and what is not musically possible. Coupled with this, and consequent to it, is a current fascination with the role of the “accident” in structured activities.

Opposite: Brian Eno (September 22, 1973). Members of the Portsmouth Sinfonia—Robin Mortimore, John Farley, and Jim Lampard—took Eno to Bill Lewington’s Music Store in London’s West End to choose a clarinet, which they presented to him as a gift in recognition of his work as producer on the first Portsmouth Sinfonia album. Photograph © Doug Smith.

Tchaikovsky - Piano Concerto No. 1. orchestral parts page 1.

Handwritten musical score for Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1, orchestral parts, page 1. The score is written on multiple staves for various instruments including violins, flutes, Bb euphoniums, bass, first and second violins, Bb clarinet, bassoon, string bass, and strings. It includes dynamic markings like 'ff', 'f', 'pizz.', 'arco', 'piano Solo.', and 'cresc.'. There are also tempo markings like 'TEMPO.' and 'pizz f'. The score is signed 'Portsmouth Sinfonia.' at the bottom.

ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN, IT'S A CLASSICAL GAS

Charles Nicholl

Rolling Stone (March 13, 1975)

LONDON—It's been called "the funniest thing since Attila the Hun," "a magnificently decadent joke," and "a disgusting waste of time," but the Portsmouth Sinfonia, a collection of amateur musicians who are doing to the classics what Mrs. Miller did to the ballad, shrug off the insults. After bemusing English audiences with their contorted interpretations of Beethoven and Bach, the Portsmouth Sinfonia is being set up for some dates in the U.S. Founder and first violinist Robin Mortimore was a guest recently at the annual CBS conference in Los Angeles (the shrine of one of his heroes, Liberace) and brought home news of a possible concert at Carnegie Hall. Concertgoers should note that the ugly rumors which will precede the Sinfonia's stateside debut are probably all true.

The Sinfonia cultivates its self-definition as "the orchestra that can't play." The criterion for membership—currently about 40 strong—is passion rather than proficiency, enthusiasm rather than polish. For four years, the Sinfonia has been ingeniously mangling the classics in various citadels of classical pomp—most recently the Purcell Room, the Queen Elizabeth Hall, and the Albert Hall—and delighting audiences with their vigorous if approximate renditions of such favorites as Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat* (transposed to A-minor because the notation is tricky), Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, and Beethoven's *Fifth*.

Opposite: Transposed sheet music for *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Courtesy of Suzette Worden.