

# Best sound man in the business

Few knew the extent to which he was a self-made man. The first orchestra he heard, Russell told me, was as a soldier fighting in the Philippines in 1945. Born and raised in Berwick, a country town near Philadelphia, his only access to grand performance was Saturday night opera from the Met on the radio. His education was meant to end with high school, before working like his father and grandfather in a car plant.

**T**HE war won him a break from small town destinies. Assigned to the Signal Corps after telling the draft board that he engineered his own recordings, he saw combat against the Japanese and his first concert on a night off in Manila. "I was stunned," he told me once over lunch (meals were his main recreation). He was hearing details in the orchestra that were beyond anyone else's perception.

Demobbed, he put himself through college on the GI Bill, taking a degree in architecture and going into practice in New York, only to quit and invent a new profession: theatre acoustician. The shape of sound was changing. Until the war, halls were

built in brick and wood, in a shoebox design with 2,000 odd seats and satisfactory acoustics. Modernism and the post-war boom delivered concrete 3,500-seaters in varied forms and deadened sound. That's where Russell came in.

Acoustic theory tended to be a mixture of musical mumbo-jumbo and trial and error. Herbert von Karajan demanded bits of green glass beneath

**Bursting point:** Johnson in Lucerne, where, as usual, he burst a balloon to test the sound reverberations

the stage of Berlin's Philharmonie because some had been found in the bombed-out Gewandhaus at Leipzig. At Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall, cloth banners were hung from the rafters in a bid to attenuate dry sound. Russell cut the nonsense and talked of unity: "Musicians must hear or sense what the audience is hearing."

He would sit for hours with the second fiddles, discussing characteristics of sound, what felt right and what not. Conductors came to trust his ears as much as their own.

He preferred to work with bold architects — Cesar Pelli, IM Pei, Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid and, lately, London's up-and-coming Foreign Office — and found common ground with the best of them. Lucerne's Nouvel said: "I am the guardian of the eye, Russ Johnson is the guardian of the ear."

When he failed, it was usually because a weak musical management refused to back him against a rampant developer. The Verizon Hall in Philadelphia flopped on opening, much to Russell's chagrin, and Budapest is not as warm as he wanted, though both have improved. Almost all the best sounding halls of the past 35 years are Johnson's.

He assured me that his junior rival, Larry Kierkegaard, would do a fine repair job on the Barbican and Southbank, as indeed he did. But a city like London should not have declined to give a hearing to the visionary of theatre acoustics. Russell Johnson has left his mark on the world, London excluded.

## CD OF THE WEEK

**Igor Raykhelson**

Moscow Soloists, Yuri Bashmet  
(Toccata Classics)

★★★★☆

COMPOSERS were big losers in the collapse of communism. Unwanted in the new Russia, they dispersed abroad, seeking a meagre livelihood.

Raykhelson, 46, born in Leningrad, plies jazz clubs and chamber halls in New York. His *Little Symphony for Strings* is a deceptively classical piece with lashings of ironic commentary, rather like the young Prokofiev visiting the Chernobyl disaster site. Even more

captivating is a five-minute Adagio for viola and strings that Yuri Bashmet delivers tenderly and without virtuosic showiness as an internal meditation on dashed idylls — perfect for late-night listening.

The second half of the disc is a jazz suite for viola, saxophone and band, part scored, part improvised, a cross between New Orleans nostalgia and Soviet-era samizdat gatherings where musicians shook off the shackles of state and let it swing for a few hours of free expression.

Raykhelson is the latest discovery on Toccata Classics, a British label devoted to neglected composers. He won't be ignored much longer.

TOUGH TO TAKE POWER REVERENCE TO attract high-spending audiences, Salzburg has become a hostage to the capriciousness of celebrity.

Five years ago, Netrebko won stardom and a record deal after singing *Donna Anna* in Salzburg's *Don Giovanni*; she was subsequently granted Austrian citizenship. Now she does as she pleases. Flimm, a straight-talking theatre director who has just taken over in the bleak year after the Mozart blowout last summer, needs artists of her calibre to stay loyal until he can reform the festival. But loyalty is anathema to celebrity, a lesson that Salzburg is learning the hard way.

It should perhaps study the BBC Proms, which rations stars sparingly over eight weeks. When a big name cancels, as Maxim Vengerov has done this Saturday with a serious shoulder complaint, the gap causes very little turbulence in a well-stocked larder.



**Last-minute cancellation:** Anna Netrebko