

# Classical & Opera

## The future of classical music

For almost 200 years, the Royal Philharmonic Society has been dedicated to promoting and supporting classical music. Its chairman tells **Jonathan Lennie** about the vital role it continues to play today

When the Royal Philharmonic Society commissioned Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the result may well represent the best £50 ever spent in classical music. Graham Sheffield certainly thinks so. As chairman since 2006, he supervises the work of the RPS; that is, when he's not doing his day job – the small business of artistic director of the Barbican Centre. However, illustrious as the RPS history is, Sheffield recognises that its remit is to support and promote music of today and tomorrow.

And there is little doubt that the organisation is committed to this aim. Founded in 1813 as an orchestral concert society, the independent charity now spends its energies funding young composers and musicians, sponsoring competitions, organising lectures and recognising excellence through its awards. Its events roster is chock-full. This week, for instance, Tuesday saw a concert of five new pieces of music inspired by World War I, the result of an RPS competition for young composers run in conjunction with the Imperial War Museum; and

Thursday sees the performance of work by young RPS prize-winning composer, Evis Sammoutis, at the Royal Festival Hall. And it's not just concerts: the project Hear Here! involves lectures (last month neuroscientist Professor Susan Greenfield spoke about 'Music on the Brain').

For most, though, the RPS is known for its annual music awards. Now in their twentieth year, these 'Oscars of Classical Music' reward individuals and organisations for their contribution to 'creativity, excellence and understanding'. This year's 13 winners include eminent composer Harrison Birtwistle and the Hackney Music Development Trust. Is one more worthy than another? Sheffield doesn't think so. 'The strength of the awards is that it can encompass those two things – to

acknowledge and judge work that is going on in classical music at the top and at the grassroots level, enabling young people to participate and discover whether they have great talent for music or just a love of it.'

The highest award is the RPS Gold Medal. Bearing the image of Beethoven, it was cast in honour of the RPS's friend and associate composer, who, following an appeal to

the society from his deathbed, received £100 with 'pathetic relief and delight'. Last month, when the German bass-baritone Thomas Quasthoff stepped up at the Dorchester Hotel to receive it, he joined an illustrious elite stretching back to 1871, which included the violinists Joseph Joachim and Fritz Kreisler, soprano Adelina Patti, conductor Hans von Bülow, pianist Arthur Rubinstein and composer Johannes Brahms.

Another prestigious accolade is to be made an RPS Honorary Member. Last year, when maestro José Antonio Abreu, the founder of the Venezuelan El Sistema music-education system, was inaugurated into this circle, he too joined an impressive pedigree of members – composers Max Bruch, Richard Strauss and Sergei Rachmaninov among them.

### Beethoven's Ninth Symphony may be the best £50 ever spent

The RPS concert activities continued under a succession of regular conductors including Thomas Beecham and starry guests such as Mendelssohn, Dvorák and Tchaikovsky, until the dissolution of the orchestra in 1988, but its other activities have continued apace. The funding for all the RPS's selfless work, particularly with helping young people discover and develop their musical talents, has come from private donations and the sale of its archive to the British Library on Euston Road – worth visiting to see the manuscript scores alone. But this money won't last forever, and private donors are still the key to the society's continued work.

So, if you love the art form and you have a few quid to spare or bequeath, why not invest in the future of classical music?

Discover the work of the RPS at [www.royalphilharmonicsociety.org.uk](http://www.royalphilharmonicsociety.org.uk).



Chair Graham Sheffield and winner Thomas Quasthoff

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