

The classic way to stay young

The Nash Ensemble celebrates 40 years of fresh players and new commissions

By Jessica Duchen

Published: 21 October 2004

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The ensemble's mission then, as it is now, was to combine well-loved chamber works with little-known ones and new commissions. This season, the group of 12 - comprising string quartet, wind quintet, piano, harp and double bass - celebrates its 40th birthday with 11 concerts at London's Wigmore Hall and Purcell Room, including 10 new works penned for it by some of today's highest-profile composers.

"I always had a vision for the programmes I wanted to present," Freedman remembers. "I look back at some of the concerts we put on in the Sixties, and they had the same principles that we have now." Back then, she was already galvanising the youthful ensemble into playing unusual repertoire, be it Richard Rodney Bennett, Paul Patterson, John Tavener or Michael Nyman, often weaving the weird and wonderful into programmes themed around *fin-de-siècle* Paris or unknown Czech masters. The Nash even collaborated with Eartha Kitt and Cleo Laine - and gave Sir Simon Rattle his first professional conducting engagement.

Freedman, the ensemble's founder and artistic director, is the constant element in the Nash and a powerhouse of the British music scene: she is also head of classical music at the South Bank Centre and artistic director of the annual Bath Mozartfest. The next longest-serving member is the pianist Ian Brown, who joined in 1978. "The group has changed tremendously," he comments, "but what's stayed the same is that it is still a group of people who are totally committed to what chamber music entails: listening, relating to people yet remaining individuals as well."

Crucial to this phoenix-like renewal are the Nash's latest recruits, including some of the UK's best young players: the violinist Marianne Thorsen, violist Lawrence Power and cellist Paul Watkins. "I loved the ensemble from the start," says Watkins. "Everyone has this intense way of listening to each other, a bit like a string quartet; but because there are so many different combinations of instruments, we have to boil that down to its essence."

Watkins is especially excited about the new commissions - one of which is by his brother, Huw Watkins, regarded as one of Britain's most interesting young composers. "Amelia has such a broad knowledge of contemporary music and such fantastic contact with the composers that when she commissions something, it tends to be a good piece," Watkins remarks.

Freedman sums it up thus: "I think what binds the players together is their willingness to open their minds and ears, to trust me and take on works they've never heard before."

The Nash Ensemble's 40th anniversary series, Wigmore Hall, London W1 (020-7935 2141); Purcell Room, South Bank, London SE1 (0870 380 0400) from 23 October