

EIO regroups with accent on energy and education



David Kettle

The story behind the Edinburgh Incidental Orchestra – or at least its story so far – feels rather like a coming-of-age tale. That's perhaps not surprising, given the still youthful ages of its musicians. It's not a new ensemble, but its two all-Stravinsky performances at Edinburgh's Church Hill Theatre this weekend nevertheless mark a new beginning for the group.

"It all started in 2009," explains Calum Zuckert, one of the EIO's original founding musicians, and now its conductor and de facto director. "Originally we were all friends from Edinburgh music schools, with some folk from Glasgow, and some of us had also played together in the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland. We wanted to get together as an independent orchestra, to learn some new repertoire, get experience – and have some fun along the way."

Things went well for four or five years, with several well-received performances around Edinburgh balancing performance experience for the EIO's young musicians with high-quality music making for its audiences. But the players were getting older, graduating from universities and music colleges, and increasingly in demand for professional work. "So getting together for fun wasn't necessarily what we all wanted to be doing," Zuckert explains.

But rather than letting the project quietly die, Zuckert and his colleagues have instead rethought their group from scratch. "We're now relaunching ourselves as a professional ensemble," he says. "Our key focus is on finding new audiences, and also on giving something back. We're conscious of how much we ourselves got from music making in Edinburgh when we were at school. So we want to go into schools now and say: we're not much older than you, but this is what we've achieved – and you can do it too."

It's a bold aim and – though still at the planning stage, as Zuckert



Edinburgh Incidental Orchestra founder and conductor Calum Zuckert

acknowledges – it's backed up with some serious projects in the pipeline. "We're working with composer Peter Longworth on a major new piece," he continues. "It'll be premiered some time later this year, and it's written for a large children's choir of about 200 plus chamber orchestra, so we're working with the City Council on the best ways of delivering that."

Equally bold is the decision to relaunch the newly professional EIO with two all-Stravinsky programmes. For the concerts' centrepiece – Stravinsky's devilishly witty, pared-

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down, Faustian music theatre piece *The Soldier's Tale* – the EIO is joined by two starry figures: eminent international baritone Sir Thomas Allen as narrator, and actor and comedian John Sessions as the Devil. "It's a very approachable work," says Allen. "It's easily understood, but it lacks none of the invention one associates with Stravinsky. And it's exciting for me as I've never been involved in it before."

Zuckert worked with Sessions at Orkney's St Magnus Festival in 2014. "I just called him up and said: I've not seen you for a while, but would you like to do it? He was really keen –

The Soldier's Tale is a piece he's done lots of times before." For Sessions, it was an opportunity to re-establish a valued working relationship: "Calum has the energy and courage of youth," Sessions says. "Too often young folk coming up are underestimated. Calum most definitely shouldn't be."

After a more conventional first half of Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks* and the lesser-known *Two Poems of Paul Verlaine*, with Allen as baritone soloist, *The Soldier's Tale* provides the concerts' theatrical conclusion, in a new staging by young Welsh director Hannah Noone, and with emerging actor Bethany Young in the title role. And in line with Zuckert's educational plans for his ensemble, it's been complemented by a modest schools programme. "I've had three musicians going into Edinburgh schools in the past couple of weeks, in really interactive sessions designed for primary school kids. At this stage we're testing the water."

It's still early days for the EIO, certainly in its new professional incarnation. But to judge from Zuckert's enthusiasm, determination and entrepreneurial ideas for future projects – it might well end up a significant player in the Scottish capital's music scene – and beyond. ■

The Edinburgh Incidental Orchestra performs Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* at Church Hill Theatre, Edinburgh, 18 & 19 May, www.theeio.co.uk