



**why i love...
playing second violin**

Words: **Abi Bliss**

Illustration: **Anke Weckmann**

I'm a musical hypocrite. The things I love most about music are nothing unusual and can be found spattered through these pages any month: newness, complexity, grit, vulnerability, accidents, risk-taking, individualism, ideas. But then, every Tuesday evening, I go and sit in a room with 40 other people, in a hierarchical semicircular formation. There, we play music from yellowed, crumbling scores that was old even when the sheets were crisp and white. We willingly submit to arcane rules and conventions – directions in Italian, 12/8 time, double flats – dreamt up in a period when a well-tempered clavichord was a novelty. More often than not, our pieces end this way – *bam-bam-bam-bam-BAM!* [rest] *TA-DAAHH!* – because that's what 18th Century people did for excitement. And we do it all when and how a man with a baton says so, and not otherwise.

Yes, I play in an orchestra, and it's considerably more fun than the last Mogwai album. I play second violin and, as my boyfriend and neighbours would tell you if I ever got round to practising, I play it pretty badly. But the advantages of an amateur orchestra go beyond not having to worry about getting sacked. The main one – and this makes me such a hypocrite that I should probably be put

in stocks wearing an Oasis T-shirt – is that we play traditional, chocolate box and Classic FM-cheesy repertoire: Beethoven, Mozart and Mendelssohn. You would think that I should be rushing off to discover contemporary composition; that my love of Sonic Youth would lead me to Glen Branca and Steve Reich, that Shostakovich would scratch that dischord itch. I am open to the idea. Just don't make my not nimble enough hands have to play any of it.

**I can still read music!
How did I learn that?**

The reason why I find orchestra so rewarding is nothing to do with what you hear on classical albums. It's not even to be found sitting in the audience at a concert: I enjoy the rehearsals more than the concerts and would play even if no one turned up to watch. For me, it's to do with how playing immerses you in sound. It feels like sitting among the branches of an ancient, twisty tree, with foliage made of melodies, chords and swirling rhythms. You can focus on one leaf, or crane your

neck back and try to grasp the totality, yet it's far too complex and changeable to ever do both. And sitting back isn't really an option, anyway: you're part of the pattern, busy weaving your own notes and pauses into the whole. I don't surf, but I imagine there's something similar in that combination of control and balance amid helplessness in the face of something larger and unstoppable.

I played violin for many years at school, before scales and studies became less appealing than sitting in my bedroom trying to pick out PJ Harvey's 'Sheela-Na-Gig' on guitar. Taking it up again six months ago, it felt like part of my brain that had been locked for many years was slowly unfurling. Wow, I can still read music! How did I learn that?

Thanks to the opportunity of free school lessons (until funding was cut in the mid-Nineties), there must be lots of other lapsed players out there. Perhaps I should seek them out, gather together the owners of all those dusty cellos and unloved oboes so that we can start our own group. We could play by our own rules, leave out the fusty parts and save our love for the good bits. We'd create our own 3D soundworld without having to be out of tune with the rest of our musical lives...

Anyone got an 'A', then?