



# Play on...

Sarah Chase introduces the Rusty Players of Oundle, an orchestra where members reignite their love of playing a musical instrument

**I**F, when strolling down Oundle's West Street on a Monday evening, your spirits are unexpectedly lifted by the rousing strains of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, or you feel yourself transported to a French café in the 1920s by the cool sounds of Gershwin's *American in Paris*, don't be alarmed or bemused. You will simply have stumbled upon the Nene Valley's very own RPO: not quite the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, but the Rusty Players of Oundle, an orchestra where young and old, beginners and intermediates, come together to make music - and to enjoy themselves in the process.

The Rusty Players sprang to life following a chance remark by Alexander McCall Smith during his talk at the Oundle Festival of Literature in 2009. Besides being a celebrated and popular author, McCall Smith has achieved recognition for his 'Really Terrible Orchestra', with its strapline 'the cream of Edinburgh's musically disadvantaged'. Their remit is to play for friends, family and the wider world in between frequent breaks for refreshment, and the format appealed to Chris Gill, whom many will know for his numerous community projects around Oundle. Inspired, and with his own clarinet rescued from his loft, he set about finding a conductor and some founder members.

Like Edinburgh's RTO, the Rusty Players started small, with around 20 players arriving via word of mouth for its first rehearsal in November 2009. Since then, the group has more than doubled in size to 50 regular players, with even more making occasional appearances, and prides itself on its inclusive approach to membership. Vince Davy, who has conducted the orchestra since its inauguration, explains his approach as 'aspiring to produce a reasonable standard of performance', but is keen to maintain the feeling of fun, and tolerance of the odd wrong note.

For some, it provides a welcome opportunity to reignite their love of playing a musical instrument, which may have been pushed to one side since the days of the school orchestra; others enjoy the challenge of playing a second or even third instrument; whilst a minority are flexing their musical muscles for the first time. Playing collaboratively adds another dimension to music-making, and of course offers a social aspect that can make it far more fun than practising alone at home.

For David Webb, who has been with the RPO since its early days and has recently taken on the role of Treasurer, it was a chance to unpack his tuba for the first time in nearly 40 years.

"I had learned to play the tuba at school," he says, "and although I had kept the instrument, and enjoyed torturing my family with impromptu performances every year or so, I hadn't played properly since childhood. A tuba really needs to be played in a band or an orchestra, and I felt I was simply not good enough to join one."

That changed, however, when David spotted a write-up in a local paper about the Rusty Players, calling for brass players to join them. "I turned down the invitation to join them in their first concert, which was just a couple of weeks after my first rehearsal," he remembers, "but being part of the RPO has rekindled my schoolboy enthusiasm for playing the tuba, and I thoroughly look forward to both rehearsals and concerts."

His fellow brass section player, Hugh Illingworth (trumpet), agrees. Having played briefly as a teenager, Hugh took up the trumpet again 20 years ago. "I attended a serious orchestral concert in St Albans," he explains, "and a friend, who is a highly skilled classical trumpet player, was playing with the orchestra there. During the interval he encouraged me to have a blow through the mouthpiece of his trumpet, and I realised



just how much I had forgotten!" Undaunted, Hugh started to play again. "With many lessons, I have got myself up to a reasonable standard," he says. "I'd still like to improve, but the Rusty Players offers the perfect opportunity to practise in a supportive environment. I would encourage anyone who has ever played an instrument before to blow out the dust in it and start again: it is so rewarding, and has a lovely social side to it as well!"

Word of the orchestra has spread over the years and members now travel to Oundle from as far afield as Wellingborough, Oakham, Spalding and St Ives for the fortnightly rehearsals, suggesting that demand for fun, informal and unpressurised music-making far outstrips supply. Part of the Rusty Players' appeal seems to lie in the diversity of its members, whose ages range from the early 20s to the late 70s. Some are retired, and see this as their opportunity to spend time on an enjoyable hobby. Many members of working age see it as respite from the demands of the professional world, whilst for others, such as Teresa Balchin, the RPO offers the chance for a spot of personal development outside the full-time world of motherhood.

"It's a wonderful thing to immerse yourself completely in the music for a couple of hours - particularly when I am on call to my two children for the rest of the week!" she says. "My children love coming to see me perform in the concerts, too, and are very proud of their Mum. I hope it

*Part of the Rusty Players' appeal seems to lie in the diversity of its members, whose ages range from the early 20s to the late 70s*

inspires them to learn a musical instrument when they are a little older."

Of course, the choice of music plays an important part in attracting a variety of people, and the committee, made up of eight volunteers, takes this part of the job very seriously. The current repertoire includes pieces by Brahms, Stravinsky and Gershwin, alongside such favourites as *Lara's Theme* from *Dr Zhivago* and *New York, New York*. Challenging pieces such as Holst's *Mars* from his Suite *The Planets* are given their best shot, whilst the lighter side of music is also celebrated: past performances have seen the entire orchestra don cowboy hats for Elmer Bernstein's wonderful theme tune to *The Magnificent Seven*, whilst audience participation has been encouraged during Tchaikovsky's iconic *1812 Overture*, in the form of paper bags to pop in place of cannon fire.

The concerts themselves are open to everyone and the RPO has built a loyal following who attend for the musical performances - and the tremendous teas. The annual summer concert (this year taking place on 26 June at Titchmarsh Church - 4pm for tea, 5pm for concert) has become such a draw that it outgrew its original venue, St Mary and All Saints Church at Fotheringhay, a couple of years ago.

• **More information on rehearsal times and venues can be found on the website, [www.rustyplayersoundle.org.uk](http://www.rustyplayersoundle.org.uk), and the organisers can be contacted via links there, too.**