

ROARING FOR ORATORIO

Gabrieli Consort & Players, directed by Paul McCreesh, performing Handel's Messiah on our 'Handel in Malta' festival, November 2025



Conductor Paul McCreesh has shaped early music performance for over four decades. Before a performance by the Gabrieli Consort in Malta, he talked to our Artistic Director, Lizzie Watson.

LW: What are the origins of the Gabrieli Consort and what does it mean to you?

PM: I fell in love with Gabrieli's music, the sonority of cornets and sackbuts very early on. The cornet is a beautiful instrument, quite unlike any other modern instrument. We formed Gabrieli Consort & Players in my last year at university. I had no idea where the world would take me. I thought maybe it would be a nice hobby, perhaps no more than that.

The Consort is very important to me. I lead a group of vastly committed, intelligent and enthusiastic musicians. They are pushing me all the time, really hard. I find the joy of sharing music and the wider culture deeply rewarding. It's a fantastic honour to have worked with some of the greatest orchestras of the world.

The beginnings with Gabrieli saw us doing a lot of early music and we had quite a famous recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon. We're not one of these rented Baroque bands where everybody plays on half modern instruments and half Baroque. We do it properly. We have different violins for

Monteverdi, different violins for Bach and Mozart and we string them historically in a way that few groups do, particularly in the UK. We've invested a huge amount of time, particularly in our Purcell projects, in things like learning to play with the French bore-oboe, which is appropriate for English music in the 17th century.

Education has also always been very close to my heart. I started off as a school teacher before becoming a professional conductor and reinventing myself as a symphony conductor in my forties, which is what I tend to be doing most of the time nowadays. But there is nothing quite like a young child saying "that's the best thing I've ever done" and looking at you just glowing with joy. So as I've got older, I've deliberately disciplined myself not to work professionally more than half the year, and to concentrate a large part of my life working with young people.

It's not unknown for me to get off the plane from conducting some famous orchestra and squeeze in a rehearsal with a group of teenagers. We work in areas of low cultural provision because all kids need music, and the ones with

more challenging backgrounds need it more than anyone else.

LW: Do you remember the moment you were first wowed by live music as a child?

PM: Absolutely I do. I would have probably been about eight or maybe nine. I was taken to see the local semi-pro symphony orchestra do a programme of classical music. I feel myself slightly welling up recalling the experience. Just the sheer thrill of an orchestra at full tilt. The second half was the New World Symphony, which is still one of my favourite symphonies today. And actually, when I conduct it, I'm so invested because it's the piece that brought me to music. It was just completely amazing. The music was in this little boy's head for days and weeks in quite a physical way. I got the bug.

It was absolutely not written in the stars that I would be a musician. And that's why I feel I've got skin in the game when I do Gabrieli Roar. I want to find those kids who could easily avoid music – or rather, I should say, perhaps that music could easily avoid them.

LW: Tell me more about Gabrieli Roar. What is the aim?

PM: With Gabrieli Roar, we give people access to music through using the voice. We train our young people so they can sing alongside the consort. Much of the repertoire that we sing and play was originally music performed

by young people, in Renaissance polyphony. So, we're bringing music back to the young. They're getting the chance to stand on the stage alongside some of the world's greatest musicians.

We view music as the door to a wider culture, something which nicely connects with the Martin Randall Travel experience. If you put music in a fantastic historic venue and you connect people to it through talking and lectures, then you get a different level of cultural engagement. And so it is with young people. Through music we give them the opportunity to think about history, to think about beautiful places; to think about the way music connects with society, both in its time and today.

I think one of the biggest challenges that education faces, particularly in the world of culture, is a tendency to dumb things down for young people. I feel passionately that if I have any skill at all, it's to bring that slightly recondite world of choral singing and oratorio – into the world of young people. It sounds terribly worthy. In fact, we have a hell of a lot of fun. We laugh a lot as well.

LW: Your recordings of King Arthur and The Fairy Queen are highly acclaimed. What made them such a success?

PM: Well, I think it's absolutely our approach. We played this music before we recorded it for well over a quarter of a century. And it constantly changed. It constantly evolved, both in terms of the techniques of playing and historical approaches, but also our feeling for the music, which is very hard to describe, evolved a lot. It became immensely subtle.

The other very important thing was looking at the vocal style. I think the great advantage of Gabrieli is we came to Purcell knowing a lot of 17th-century music, particularly Italian music in the early years, but also doing a lot of Humphrey and Blow and

others. We sort of felt that music organically before we moved on to Bach and Handel. It's much easier to do it that way around. Or even worse, if you're a modern conductor and you start with Brahms, you've got to try and get back to Bach. You can't do it. But if you feel things chronologically, things develop much more organically. So I think that's part of it.

“
I had no idea where the world would take me. I thought maybe it would be a nice hobby, perhaps no more than that.”

LW: What have you got coming up in the future that you're excited about?

PM: Well, I mean, we have loads of things which excite us. The future is a very healthy emphasis on Gabrieli Roar, which is great because it means we are performing a lot of concerts, often in places that don't get music, and particularly in places that don't get much music. So, you know, it's often to audiences who are not even really classical music goers. So I find that really quite exciting.

I hope we're going to be able to do a little bit more work on Handel's oratorios, which is something that is always quite difficult for us because touring large-scale Handel pieces that require reasonably large orchestras and large choirs is always a challenge.

We certainly hope to be doing more of the Handel pieces, particularly things like *Theodora*,

which I think is among the greatest pieces of 18th-century music ever written. Honestly, we should hear those pieces every week like we hear Beethoven or Brahms' Requiem.

We've got a brilliant biannual Christmas tour, which, if we can fund it, needs to become annual because so many kids take part. This year we had about 6,000. We go to ten or twelve cathedrals with several hundred kids in each cathedral. It's a massive undertaking. So we want to do that again next year again. And I'm really excited about that because I've made a new Handel oratorio for it: *Mr Handel's Christmas Story*.

We also want to do some more recording. We've got ideas in Berlioz. We just recorded *Gerontius* to huge acclaim, which was a massive statement of faith, a piece I just deeply loved and wanted to record. First time on period instruments, which is absolutely revelatory in Elgar's music. I'd love to do more of that. But there are funding challenges.

We've had some of our most enjoyable and rewarding work as musicians under the Martin Randall Travel banner. We've been allowed to make music in fantastic historic venues that lift our souls as musicians, particularly when the music is well married to the historic places in which we play. One of the great things about MRT over the years is that it's enabled us to put on projects which commercially would have been really difficult elsewhere. And the people who come on your fantastic musical pilgrimages, these great celebrations of the art, are really helpful to us because not only do they have a fantastic holiday and cultural experience, but it also enables musicians to work and to create projects that we can't do elsewhere.

Find out more about Gabrieli Roar, the exciting partnership between Gabrieli and a network of diverse British youth choirs: <https://www.gabrieli.com/roar/about-roar/>