

TIM Minchin's face floats into view as I come out of the tube station at London's O2 Arena. Twenty metres high, with Kohl-blackened eyes and red hair teased into a fright wig, it looms like some demented apparition on the digital billboards flanking the venue. Commuters are double-taking; one of the largest indoor arenas in Europe, the O2 has hosted many an international rock star — but an Australian stand-up comic? With a 57-piece orchestra? This Minchin chap really must be mad.

The venue's foyer is testament to his hubris. Here are Tim Minchin badges, wallets and autographed silkscreen posters. Here are Tim Minchin T-shirts with "I am so f...king rock" and "Rock 'n' roll nerd" written on them. "A genius, pure and simple" runs a quote by *Time Out London* on the cover of a Tim Minchin DVD. I toy with the idea of a Tim Minchin canvas tote bag, or at the very least a Tim Minchin tea towel. When a man asks me if I'd like to pre-purchase a live recording of this evening's performance by Tim Minchin, I scurry away. Hardly: what if it's rubbish?

Inside, the auditorium feels cavernous. It is only half-full. With the Heritage Orchestra's heavier instruments (cellos, drums, a large gong) resting on stage and the black-clad musicians milling, I start to feel a little worried for the Perth-raised Minchin. While there is no doubting his credentials — his acclaimed piano-and-jokes routine has won him a clutch of coveted awards; he garners full houses at theatres and concert halls in Britain, Australia and the US; his new musical for the Royal Shakespeare Company, based on Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, is to transfer to London's West End — a British arena stand-up tour is clearly pushing it.

Then a recorded voice gives the five-minute call and something miraculous happens. The auditorium's many doors fling open and thousands of people start pouring down the aisles, filling up entire blocks. The place is suddenly heaving with smiling punters — largely white middle-class 20 and 30-somethings — clutching Tim Minchin programs and wearing Tim Minchin T-shirts. When the conductor raises his baton and the stage erupts into a *son et lumiere* of megadecibels, manic strobing and video footage on giant screens, I can't locate the man himself. I look up. There he is. Descending from the ceiling in a cage.

"Nothing ruins comedy like arenas/ Your enjoyment is not as important as my self-esteem is," sings the faux rock god once he's magically reappeared at his baby grand, backcombed and in black frock coat, stretch jeans and bare feet. So famous has he become, he croons, that he no longer cares about his audiences. He would rather flog DVDs, make lots of money and drink himself under swanky hotel bars.

Or so he'd have us believe: his next song, the semi-autobiographical *Rock 'n' Roll Nerd*, punctures the pomposity with its lyrics about private schools, cosseted upbringings and not knowing quite where iconic ends and ironic begins.

The fresh-faced Heritage Orchestra joins Minchin and his band halfway through. "Oh, this?" he says, jerking his thumb over his shoulder during the first of several chat breaks. "That's just my symphony orchestra. Deep down I've always believed I deserve a symphony orchestra poised to respond to my every musical whim."



ON A ROLL

Tim Minchin used to be in a covers band; now he plays arenas. He talks to **Jane Cornwell** ahead of a homecoming tour

JUST six years ago, Minchin, 35, was playing keyboards in a Melbourne covers band. Having completed a BA in English and theatre and an advanced diploma in contemporary music at the Conservatorium of Western Australia, he headed east to make a career out of acting, writing and music. Then he got sidetracked by his penchant for self-penned satirical songs about rationalism and secularism, blow-up dolls and cheese. That his act required a piano meant he bypassed the usual comedy dives and went straight into theatres. His break-out show, *Dark Side*, wowed the 2005 Melbourne Comedy Festival and won the Perrier Award for best newcomer at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

His subsequent rise has been swift and — without the usual blanket TV exposure — artful. There have been sell-out shows (45,000 Australians saw *Ready For This?* in 2009-10) and international festivals, choice television appearances (he made his US TV debut on Conan O'Brien's show this month) and guest turns on starry bills. *Rock 'n' Roll Nerd*, a lauded documentary about his life, received a release in Australian cinemas in 2008; he was the subject of Sam Leach's winning 2010 Archibald Prize portrait. His celebrated nine-minute beat poem *Storm*, in which Minchin takes a witless hippie to task at a dinner party, has been made into a potentially award-winning animation.

He has written musicals, soundtracks and BBC radio plays; his 2010 sitcom *Strings* tells (ahem) of an emotionally fragile Australian wannabe rock star who leaves Australia to live in Britain. With his CV including such heavyweight venues as the Sydney Opera House and the Royal Albert Hall, an arena show wasn't beyond the realms of possibility. A solo performance in an arena, however, was.

"Way too scary," says Minchin the next day, when we meet in a cafe near the Crouch End home in north London he shares with his wife and teen sweetheart Sarah and their children Violet, 3, and Caspar, 18 months. Despite the fact his entire extended family — his mother and retired surgeon father, his brother and two sisters and their respective children — have flown in from Perth to see the O2 show and *Matilda* ("They loved the O2 but they loved *Matilda* more"), he is punctual, gracious, matter-of-fact. "I wanted to make the art fit the space," he says. "To make the orchestration enhance the comedy. Fatten it up. See how big we could make it."

Numerous comedians have tried marrying comedy with symphonic music over the years. It isn't an easy union: 20th-century funny men Gerard Hoffnung and Victor Borge managed it beautifully. But Monty Python's 2007 oratorio *Not the Messiah* fell painfully flat, as did Barry Humphries's *Last Night of the Poms* British tour in 2009. Minchin gets points for audacity: while he'd conceived the show in Australia with Sydney-based producer Baz Archer, he brought it to Britain only because he was writing material for *Matilda* and didn't have time to pen the fresh stand-up set his British promoter had wanted. He ended up writing seven new songs anyway.

"I might have resisted if it wasn't for the coming together of a whole load of things," he says, ignoring the muffled squeals of recognition coming from two women seated at the table next to us. "I'd just moved house. I had *Matilda* opening in December for the RSC. I'm touring Australia in February. And I'd re-found my music-theatre