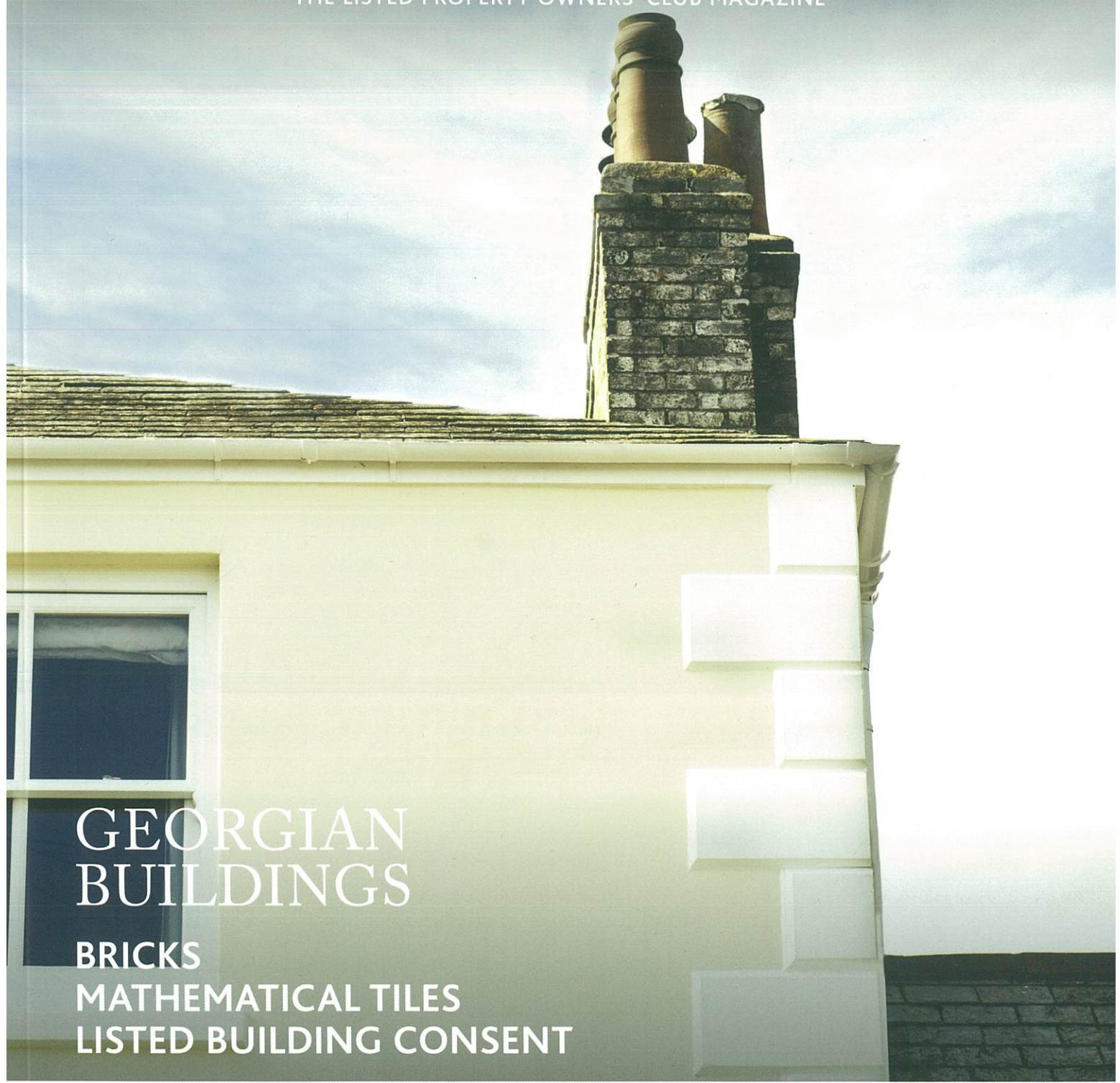


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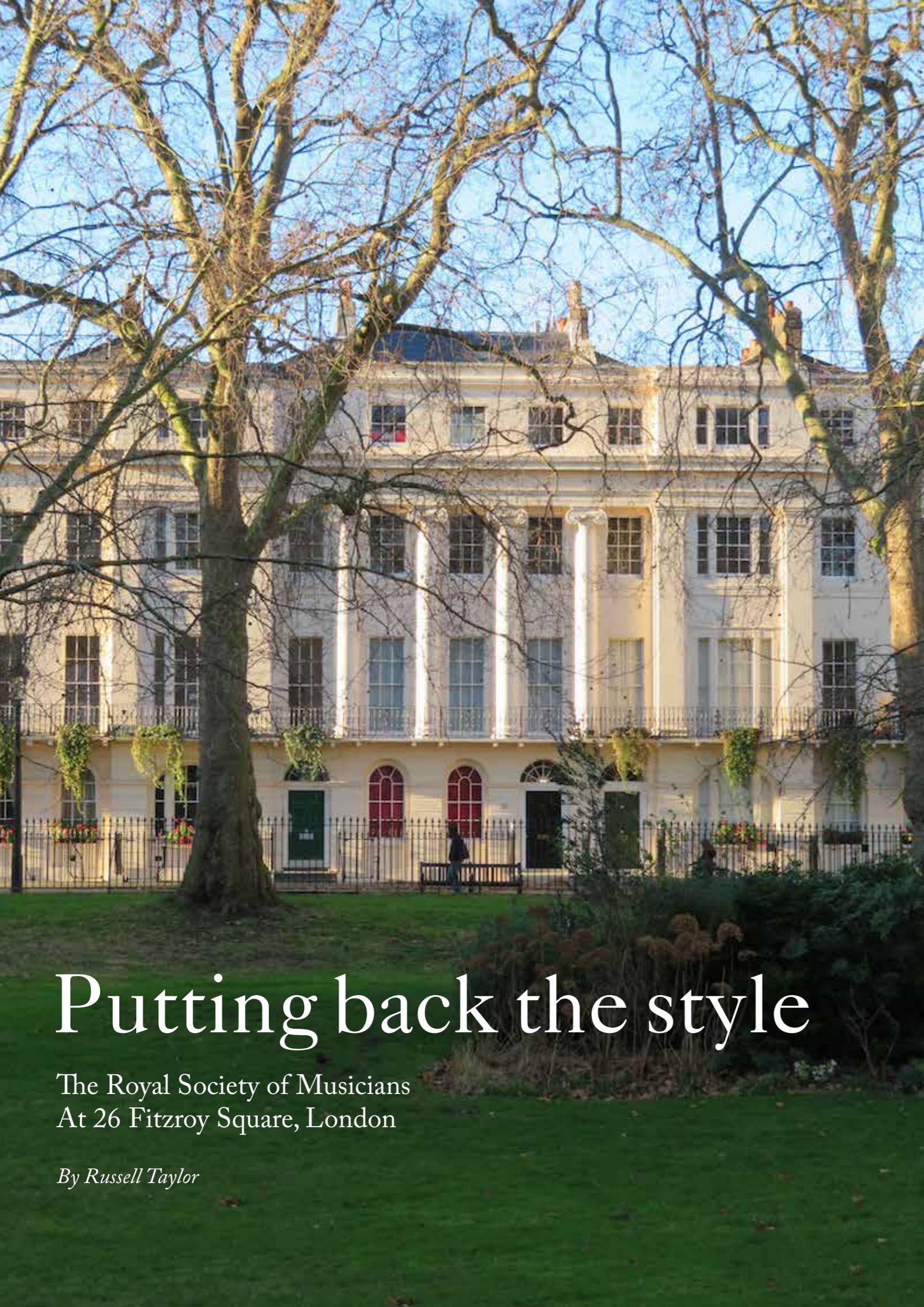
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Putting back the style

The Royal Society of Musicians
At 26 Fitzroy Square, London

By Russell Taylor



The elevation to Fitzroy Square with the centre of the terrace distinguished by engaged Ionic columns

The new home of the Royal Society of Musicals, 26 Fitzroy square is a grade II listed London townhouse refurbished by Russell Taylor Architects in 2017. It was formally opened by HRH The Prince of Wales in November 2018.

HISTORY

The Royal Society of Musicians was founded in 1738 by a group of musicians including, most notably, G. F. Handel for whom it was a favourite charity. In 2015 it purchased 26 Fitzroy Square, the third home for the charity in its 280 year history.

Fitzroy Square was initially developed by the Adam brothers 1793 - 1798. They built the East and South sides; the North and West sides were built some years later, in the Regency period, between 1827 and 1835. The West range has engaged Ionic columns in the centre, flanked by pavilions with triple windows. Behind the façade, the houses are arranged as typical London townhouses with basement, ground, first, second and third floors. No. 26 is in the very centre – a primary location marked by also being a little larger.

THE BRIEF

In common with most historic properties, 26 Fitzroy Square has been adapted and altered over the years to serve a number of differing uses, a fate that always seems to lead to an erosion of the buildings original style and detail. An important part of the architects' brief on this project was to put back the 'style' – the detail and elegance of the Regency design. But of course, as this was a charity, it had to be done in the most economical way without extravagance. Putting back the style is just one task to be accomplished alongside all the usual work of repair, refurbishment and rearrangement, but it is the most enjoyable part of an architect's job, requiring an in-depth knowledge of historic architecture, design flair and ingenuity. It's often a dogged persistence to see a design turned into a built reality. Putting back the style is one of the specialities of Russell Taylor Architects.

THE WORKS

At the back of the house there was an existing, singularly unattractive extension. This was rebuilt, slightly larger, in the plain brick manner of the original rear elevation.



Inside the building there were more exciting challenges. In the entrance hall and up the stairs, traces of blocking-out were discovered. Blocking-out giving the appearance that the walls are made of a fine stone ashlar or marble was a common decorative scheme in the late 18th and early 19th century. The remains of the blocking-out were directly on top of the plaster; it was without doubt the original decorative finish. What remained was very patchy, but it proved fairly easy to reconstruct the layout of blocks (regular course heights, uniform block sizes, and so on). Each individual block was then painted in imitation of marble by a talented specialist.

The ceiling cornices had been lost in all rooms (except the entrance hall and the



Top: Before and after views in the rear courtyard. The rebuilt extension houses the Royal Society's archives.

Bottom: A first floor office with a new black marble chimneypiece.

stairs). For some of the minor rooms off-the-shelf, fibrous plaster cornices were selected, but for the principal rooms nothing suitable seemed available. Therefore, simple reeded cornices of a type typical of the period were designed. Bespoke cornices such as these are not expensive.

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CHIMNEYPICES

Chimneypieces remained in some of the rooms on the upper floors and in the first floor back room, but not on the ground floor or in the first floor front room. In the entrance hall it was assumed that there had been a fireplace, and during the refurbishment of the property, its location was discovered.

The first floor front and back rooms had been joined by the reinstatement of a large opening and folding doors – certain evidence of such an opening was found here. The two chimneypieces will therefore often be seen together and their designs should be related. The existing back room chimneypiece is white marble and it was decided to match it in the front room, but in black.

The new entrance hall fireplace is made of Portland stone. Marble was not used here because the space is a less important part of the property and because the floor is paved in Portland stone slabs.

The front and back ground floor rooms are, like those on the first floor, united by a large opening. They are the Royal Society's main meeting and events rooms and the designs of the new chimneypieces incorporate elements of their crest. The marble is Bardiglio – a sophisticated, subtle grey – with gilded bronze mounts (ormolu) of alternating lyres and wreaths. The wreaths are half laurel and half oak. The ormolu mounts are an example of the assistance that can be provided by modern technology. They were modelled on a computer and 3D-printed. The 3D-print was then used as the pattern from which the moulds were made and then the mounts cast in the usual way.

FURNITURE

The administrative offices of the charity are on the first floor. Even in what is supposed to be a paperless age there is always a need for storage: papers, files, ledgers, etc. especially for an organisation that is 280 years old. In keeping with the rest of the building, the storage units, shelves and cupboards were designed in the spirit of the Regency and veneered in Karelian birch, a timber that was considerably popular in the period and widely used in Europe for Biedermeier furniture.

SUMMARY

This was a very happy project with client, contractor and architect working together with a common goal. The Regency saw the grace and balance of Georgian architecture reach a pinnacle of perfection. The Royal Society of Musicians must be applauded for having the vision and enthusiasm to encourage the reinstatement of Regency grace and balance into their new home at 26 Fitzroy Square.



Top: Before and after views in the entrance hall. A new entrance screen, a new Portland stone chimneypiece and marbled walls



Middle: The ground floor meeting rooms. Inset: Detail of one of the chimneypieces in grey, Bardiglio marble with ormolu mounts

Bottom: Specially designed storage units veneered in Karelian birch

Architect:
Russell Taylor Architects
www.rtarchitects.co.uk

Main Contractor and Joinery Contractor:
M H Costa Construction Ltd.
www.mhcostaconstruction.co.uk

Chimneypieces:
Jamb.
www.jamb.co.uk

Ormolu Mounts:
(Simon Goodall) Alexander Edward Fine Art & Jewellery
www.alexanderedward.com

Marbling:
Bruno Romette of Paris
www.brunoromette.eu