

Achim, tell us a little bit about your musical background. How did you get into conducting?

My mother was the leader of her own Jazz band and it was always clear for me, even when I was very young, that I would sooner or later be a professional musician. I decided to become a conductor when I was twelve and received my first tuition two years later. I conducted my first public performance with 17 and immediately afterwards started studying conducting, piano and music theory at college.

Tell us about the two Beethoven pieces being performed on the 3rd Feb.

Both works are absolute favourites of mine, Beethoven's 5th symphony was one of the first classical pieces I regularly used to listen to and I played Beethoven's own piano concerto version of the violin concerto when I was 14. The concerto is one of the structurally most accomplished and well balanced compositions of all times and the symphony is not only the very model of motivic conciseness, but also a super human political and emotional statement.

For a conductor, is Beethoven any more of a challenge to perform than other composers?

Beethoven is always incredibly difficult, especially the 5th symphony. There are huge technical challenges for both orchestra and conductor in this work and the progression from the first movement's fatalism to the revolutionary passion of the end has to be absolutely authentic and natural. Everyone knows this repertoire and you have to convince the audience with technical brilliance, originality and genuine emotional power.

What composers do you most admire?

Musically I definitely feel at home in the first half of the 19th century and Beethoven's focused mind and fighting spirit very much appeal to me. I love Schumann, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Chopin and Liszt but Brahms is probably my favourite composer. Although he lived till the end of the century, I consider his work to be the highest accomplishment of the early romantic period. And being Austrian I have of course a very special relationship with Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Mahler and - Johann Strauß.

What conductors do you most admire?

Claudio Abbado, Sir Colin Davis, Charles Dutoit and Lorin Maazel are mainly because of their technical and professional superiority my favourite conductors for a very long time now. Sir John Eliot Gardiner is certainly the most remarkable interpreter of our time and I am very happy that I had the chance to work so closely with him. Nevertheless, the most amazing live concerts I ever experienced were those with Leonard Bernstein and the Vienna Philharmonic in the 80s, he will always be the standard we will have to live up to.

Being from Austria, how does London differ from continental Europe in terms of classical music?

We are very proud on our music history and tradition and there is a lot of knowledge, conscious and unconscious, in our music making. The standard of string playing in Vienna is very high and the emphasis on flexibility and beauty of sound you find there is close to my heart.

But London is now undoubtedly the most important place in the classical music world and the musicians here are not only technically enormously skilled, but also incredibly fast to work with. And in the end the really significant part of music making will always be the authority, vitality and spirit of a performance and not the story associated with it.

Are you excited by the developments of the Orpheus Sinfonia and the newly created Foundation?

Yes, I am very excited and I believe that the Orpheus Foundation under the artistic direction of Marc Corbett-Weaver has the potential to become one of the most important music promoters in London during the next years.

You are due to conduct our concert at Radley Farm in June including a very special concert for children as part of the Orpheus for Schools programme. How important do you feel it is to involve children in classical music?

I used to present many educational concerts in Austria during the last years, for children from six to 16. They are an enormous challenge, you cannot fool kids. You always have to be absolutely honest, down to earth and respectfully with them and they are the ultimate test for your own authenticity. I am convinced that art has an immensely positive effect on the personal development of people of all age groups and the earlier someone gets involved with high quality music the better.

What does 2010 have in store for you?

I am very happy with what I achieved during the last ten years with my orchestra in Graz and the music festival in Bad Aussee, but I love the UK and the English people. Till now I was still standing with one leg in Austria, from 2010 on the centre of my life will exclusively be London. My heart belongs here and British audiences will definitely see much more of me during the years to come!

Achim Holub was interviewed by

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