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## The Telegraph

### Glory on a plate: the Berlin Philharmonic with Sir Simon Rattle at the RFH

By Michael White, February 24, 2011

***“Simon Rattle with the Berlin Philharmonic – over for a residency shared in a recession-driven partnership between the Barbican and Southbank – were the real thing: glorious, substantial, and fulfilling expectations.”***

Another week, another hot ticket in London – but this time, one that truly delivered. Anna Nicole at the Royal Opera House seven days ago turned out to be a briefly dazzling skybound squib: ascended, gone, forgotten. But **Simon Rattle with the Berlin Philharmonic – over for a residency shared in a recession-driven partnership between the Barbican and Southbank – were the real thing: glorious, substantial, and fulfilling expectations.** Which, it has to be said, were verging on the oppressive.

The relationship between Rattle and his orchestra has been a source of endless fascination since it started back in 2002. I remember the euphoria that greeted his appointment. The very idea that an Englishman could take over this orchestra of orchestras seemed so unlikely, so outlandish, it felt (in a subserviently childish way) like a pat on the head for us all from the cultural high-command of mainland Europe: a recognition that after centuries of trying – from Purcell through to Elgar, Britten, Birtwistle et al – we’d finally made it to the top-table as a musical nation.

Thereafter, of course, the relationship had widely reported ups and downs – signalled, perhaps, by the premature whitening of Rattle’s hair – but it seems to have weathered them (the relationship, not the hair), and now it’s become a powerful brand: a promise of unsurpassability in much the way that discs from Deutsche Grammophon, the classy ‘yellow label’, used to be.

Faced with such foregone conclusions, critics tend to get more critical, scrutinising the golden image for hairline cracks and suspicious about being handed glory on a plate. But plated glory it was last night when Rattle and his Berliners delivered a Mahler 3 of extraordinary stature.

Like most things of wonder, it was riddled with paradox: monumental in scale but mercurial in movement; opulent in sound but crystal clear in detail; subtle and refined but with a muscular directness. And the great achievement of Rattle’s conducting was the way it held all these

Sir Simon Rattle

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conflicting qualities together, in meaningful balance, though the span of a seriously long symphony that comes in around the hour-and-three-quarter mark.

I could fill an essay with the incidences of miraculous musicianship encountered on the way: the smooth, seductive eloquence of the trombones (yes, that was trombones!), the immaculately synchronised timpani in the penultimate bars, the perfect placement of the final chord...

I love our British orchestras but have to say that none of them deliver at this level: it was like a lesson in how things can be, given the talent, will, and (not to be forgotten) funding. Certainly a landmark in the London concert year.

Sir Simon Rattle