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Simon Rattle: 'Learning music is a birthright. And you have to start young'

The conductor on his lifelong love of the Proms, performing with Mr Bean - and becoming a father again at 59

By Fiona Maddocks, August 30, 2014

You're bringing your orchestra, the world-leading Berlin Philharmonic, to the Royal Albert Hall this week for two Proms: first Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* and Stravinsky's *Firebird*, then Bach's *St Matthew Passion* directed by Peter Sellars. Why these works? And why stage the *St Matthew Passion*, a religious choral work?

When we come to London we always try to show as wide a range of music making as possible. The Stravinsky and Rachmaninov are two extraordinarily different Russian orchestral showpieces and seemed a great way to kick off. The Bach has been a journey for all of us. We didn't necessarily know the staging would work, but we wanted the chance for orchestral soloists, as well as singers and chorus, to perform off by heart, to move around, to achieve an intimacy, even on a huge stage like the Albert Hall. We have all had to leave our egos at the door. That's the best you can do with Bach.

Sum up your own relationship with the Proms. You first conducted there in 1976 when you were 21. You've hardly missed a year since.

I first went as a kid. It was a small personal triumph as a child, growing up in Liverpool, to persuade my parents we didn't always have to sit on the beach in Tenby every summer but we could go to London. I heard a couple of amazing Malcolm Sargent Proms. He was a wonderful choral conductor. I'll never forget him doing [Walton's] *Belshazzar's Feast* as long as I live.

So you've been down there, sweating it out in the arena as a real Prommer – not just lording it on the podium?

You bet. Standing through *Don Giovanni* when I was about 15 was extraordinary, and very long and hard on the legs. My best Prom moment was when I was in my 20s and already conducting. I used to freelance as a percussionist with the Royal Liverpool Phil in my spare time. I walked up to the percussion at the back of the stage and the Prommers chanted: "Simon, you're going the wrong way!"

Sir Simon Rattle

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We're doing this phone interview as you hurtle by car from the Lucerne festival in Switzerland home to Berlin. Why the rush?

In Germany the Einschulung – the first day of school – is a huge event. Everyone sings songs and each child has a special Schultüte – a sort of big cone in which you have sweets, chocolate, a toy, a piece of Lego – to cheer you through the day. My two sons, Milos, six, and Jonas, nine, are both going to a new school. As a parent it's top priority. There's no question of missing it, wherever you are in the world. And we'll all go, the whole family, including the baby, Anežka, who is two months old.

There's a fascination about older fathers. At 59, you have just, with your wife, the Czech mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kožená, had a first daughter, in addition to Milos, Jonas and two grown-up sons from your first marriage. Can you still kick a football? Could you ever kick a football?

Oh yes! I'm precisely as bad as I ever was. With my nine-year-old I can only get the ball off him if I foul him. As an older dad you can certainly get down on the floor. The problem is can you get up again? [Laughter.] Truly, it's complete heaven. It keeps you young. It puts everything in perspective. If you think the music business is the be-all and end-all of life, you're in big trouble. Coming from a small family – just one older sister – I suddenly find myself the father of five children and I'm amazed. How did that happen?

Are you getting any sleep?

Yes. Anežka's being very sweet and obliging.

Will your children learn music? Is the system better in Berlin?

That's complicated, with no straightforward answer. There are 12 specialist music schools in Berlin which we pray are not under threat. But the entire issue of music education is becoming an ever bigger issue all over Europe. Apart from the obvious cultural value, employers want people who can work in teams, think laterally and not in straight lines, all of which music gives you in spades. A free music education was one of the glories of the UK when I was a child. Too much has been sacrificed in the name of economic necessity. Learning music is a birthright. And you have to start young. As for my children, when the boys saw me working with six- to 13-year-olds from Venezuela, they suddenly got interested. Milos has started the double bass, Jonas the cello. They're surrounded by music, so we'll see.

One of our greatest conductors, Sir Bernard Haitink, said recently too much fuss is made about conductors and conducting.

Oh bless him! Isn't he exactly right? For someone who can produce such mystery and grandeur in his performances, he's one of the least grand or mysterious of people I know. He's really saying

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we're artisans, we're workers. Conductors make too much fuss about conductors! Humility and hard work are virtues. We're nothing without our musicians.

Life after Berlin? Will it be London? The LSO is rumoured to want you?

I don't leave the Berlin Philharmonic until 2018. One thing we've decided: we all love living in Berlin and we're not moving. There are lakes five minutes away, and a great forest, the Grunewald. Also, it's really time for me to be at home a lot more, whatever job I do. It's Magdalena's turn to make the absolute best of her singing years.

It's said you'd come to London if you had the promise of a new concert hall. You built one once, in Birmingham, and it's still the best in the UK...

Whatever happens, London deserves a hall as great as its orchestras. A hall is the instrument the orchestra plays.

And in the Philharmonie, Berlin, you have one of the world's finest?

It's certainly one of the great ones. We count our blessings.

Name your greatest musical highlight, performing with Mr Bean at the London 2012 Olympics aside?

What could possibly be better than that? Hearing 80,000 people laughing is unique. But the concert that turned me into a conductor was George Hurst conducting the Liverpool Phil in Mahler's Symphony No 2 in 1966 when I was 11 years old. That changed my life.

And the single biggest influence?

The person who absolutely rescued me when I started out was [the conductor] John Carewe. So many people go through life without having a mentor who'll say the really tough things as well as the encouraging. I'd never have survived those first years as a professional without him. We remain close friends.

Is there any division between work and life at the dinner table? How do you and your wife juggle high-profile international careers, requiring private preparation, with a young family?

The difficult moment is when we sit down with our diaries. With very rare exceptions one of us is always at home, but it's not so easy.

So you can do nappies OK?

Nappies have never been a problem...

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Do you miss anything about the UK?

Most of all I miss the idea that you can walk down the street and hear a couple of words of conversation and know exactly what's going on.

You aren't yet at that stage with German?

I'm a way off yet. I'm in awe of my children who are growing up trilingual and seem to have no problem whether in Czech, English or German. As one of my sons said to me when he was only five: "Daddy, when you speak German you know exactly what you're saying but no one else does." I laughed and laughed and laughed.

Sir Simon Rattle