

Philharmonia Orchestra October Podcast

Mark David – Principal Trumpet

Hi, I'm Mark David and I am the principal trumpet in the Philharmonia Orchestra. As a trumpeter I've always found it beneficial to keep fit and for this month's podcast, you join me as I prepare for the biggest test of my life.

In six months' time I'll be running the Marathon des Sables, a six day, hundred and fifty mile run through the Sahara desert. Comprising a total distance of five and a half marathons over six days, with the longest day being a double marathon, I'll be enduring 50-degree heat, sandstorms and torturous terrain, in what is billed as the toughest foot race on Earth.

Today I'm in Leicester for a concert, but I need to use every spare minute I can to train and so I'm having a quick run before the rehearsal. We continue our celebration of the music of Messiaen with a concert conducted by one of his former pupils, conductor and composer, George Benjamin.

George Benjamin – Composer and Conductor

It's one of the later orchestral concerts in the Southbank and Philharmonia's massive celebration of Olivier Messiaen's Centenary. It's one large and very extraordinary piece of Messiaen, surrounded by, actually, just two pupils. Xenakis, a work of my own, which Pierre-Laurent [Aimard] chose and then a work that Messiaen hugely admired by a composer whose music he always loved, Ligeti.

The program starts with the Xenakis. *Pithoprakta*, a 1950's work of really, revolutionary originality. It's very, very, very strange music, it's very rarely played. In some ways this is Xenakis' most radical, single piece and it's a complete success I think. A piece that was influenced by the Xenakis, in its notation and in its great subdivision of all the strings is Ligeti's *Atmospheres* which is just a little bit later.

It's famous to people for having been used very remarkably in Kubrick's 2001. Mainly an extremely soft, slow moving piece. The first page is just one huge, clustered chord lasting maybe a minute or more and the music drifts without any sense of traditional melody or harmony and above all, no sense of pulse. Through a sequence of very subtly moving textures, which change register in a very smooth way, almost like lava or plasma.

My work is a piece that cost me many years of work because the whole idea behind the piece is, I hope, a lightness of touch and to treat the orchestra as a vast chamber resource, rather than a massive, huge, monolithic object. On the wall here I've got a picture of, people don't know what it is, but in fact it's a flock of starlings, about a million of them and they make these incredible shapes. Sometimes

splitting into 3 or 4 or 5 balletic forms, then reforming into a single, tight ball, then splitting out into strata and I saw that in Rome while writing this piece and in a way the form is a little bit like that. Every now and then, it crystallizes into an extremely simple musical object, with a pulse, with a sense of melody, with a very simple sense of background, with regular harmony and then it drifts apart and splits into sometimes, very diffracted and very complex multi-coloured textures and then in another couple of minutes later or three minutes later it will reform into a similar object, related to the one before but in a different place.

The concert ends with a very important work of Messiaen and his most experimental orchestral piece, *Chronochromie*. Written at the beginning of the 1960s, when he was still, in a way, the focus of the international avant-garde, in his class in Paris.

It's a climax of his experimentation into really rather esoteric ways of composing, using complex rhythms, super-imposing complex durational streams of rhythms and juxtaposing those with grand collage of birdsong from all round the world.

Well all his students will probably say the same thing, that he was wonderful and inspirational and subtle and passionately involved and loved teaching, and had a lot to give, huge amount to give, very original. There wasn't the slightest trace of academicism in his teaching. Everything was a discovery and everything was done because he loved it. So it was completely, completely thrilling as an experience, I was sixteen, I was terribly young so it was really amazing.

Mark David

George Benjamin conducts the Philharmonia Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall on Tuesday the 21st October with works inspired by and which inspired the great French composer. As part of the orchestra's Messiaen series the Philharmonia's and conductor Kent Nagano will perform *The Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ*. This monumental work features a choir, seven soloists and an orchestra of huge proportions. Sylvain Cambreling conducts the final concert in the series on the 23rd of October with a programme including works by Scriabin, Debussy and Messiaen.

As part of our Messiaen series we went to find out more about synaesthesia, the condition that influenced much of his composition.

Peter Hill – Messiaen Biographer

When we talk about colour in music in a rather kind of loose kind of way, we talk about it in all music. But with Messiaen it was different, he actually really did, as it were, see these colours when he heard musical sounds and in a way that's a sort of

difficulty with Messiaen's music because one feels he owns a whole kind of private world that we can't have access to because we don't have Messiaen's private colour language. He had this faculty, which is called synaesthesia.

Jane Mackay – Artist

I have found a condition called synaesthesia, it's a condition in which normal sensations like hearing or tasting or feeling are actually intertwined so that, for example, seeing or reading or hearing a word will give you a colour or a shape. That's a common example. For me it's always taken the form of being able to see images to sounds and that can be any sounds really, not just music.

I didn't know the work, synaesthesia, until relatively recently. When you see sound and you've always seen sound it's really unremarkable. Synaesthetic sensations really grab you, they're thrown at you like a bucket of water really, you don't have much, you don't have any control over them really. For example, if I'm listening to a CD I don't know at all, it'll be throwing all sorts of stuff at you, it may be all of a sudden what the cellos are doing will grab you and they'll throw a colour or shape at you. Often it's like watching a film but, to paint any of that piece, I had to take salami slices and it may be, for example, things that grab you most which might be a key change and you get a terrific shift of colour from one chord maybe which is where the key changes.

Painting is so inadequate, I want to do them in collage, materials, you know, fur, cardboard, copper, glass and I think a lot of those differences might be to do with a lot of timbres and that would really relate to something like Turangalila because you've got all these delicious textures. It's very hard to put it into words but I get almost meditative, I just don't move. I see all these images and colours and I tell you if somebody is flapping a program or rustling sweets or something I get those as images too and they come across the music, it's really painful, it's almost like walking on pebbles or sharp, sharp stones you know. It's really an irritation. I get these images of coughs and things coming across, I can remember once a sneeze coming across in a concert, it was a huge rhomboidal shaped, deep turquoise, opaque thing which came over my shoulder. I feel it's being in your right brain, if you know what I mean. The left-brain is the logical, linear, verbal side of us all. The right brain is the airy-fairy, intuitive, colour, shapes, disorganisation, can't find your way from A to B side of your brain and I think when you're listening to music or walking in a park or through a wood or looking, just watching the sea, you're in the same hemisphere I think.

It's interesting with Messiaen, I've done some painting of Messiaen, not very much, and his music often presents to me as really more like coloured glass. Really I want to construct a chandelier with his music, not just paint. I would hear different things and break it down into all sorts of different images for the different sounds that were coming at me and then perhaps paint a big series of them but ideally if

one had 5 years instead of 1 year I would want to do probably a series of stained glass, but it would be a wonderful project, so if you know anyone who wants a church filled with Turangalîla as stained glass windows, let me know.

Mark David

Also in October Sir Charles Mackerras joins the orchestra for a series of concerts including Alfred Brendel's final UK performances. Philharmonia flautist Paul Edmond-Davies caught up with Sir Charles to find out more about his amazing career.

Paul Edmond-Davies – Joint Principal Flute

Sir Charles, this is a rather unusual moment for an instrumentalist because even though we have worked since the beginning of the 1980s together, we don't really or haven't had the opportunity to talk to one another in this kind of manner, so I'm very interested to ask you a whole load of questions. I didn't realise that you actually started off as an oboist.

Sir Charles Mackerras – Principal Guest Conductor

Well I even started off as a flautist.

Paul Edmond-Davies

That's right, yes. But you saw the light.

Sir Charles Mackerras

But my first non-keyboard instrument was actually the flute but then I read that there was a great shortage of oboe, bassoon and horn players and that there were scholarships going at the Sydney Conservatorium to study those three wind instruments and so I thought, well it would be nice to play the oboe. So I switched from the flute to the oboe, but my chance really came when I joined the Sadler's Wells Opera as 2nd oboe and cor anglais on tour, but also I was doing repetiteur, teaching the singers their role and doing a bit of off-stage conducting. In those days they didn't have television monitors and things to help to keep you together with the off stage chorus' but there was the intermediate conductor, that was me, who looked through a whole in the scenery and looked at the main conductor in the pit and followed him.

It was during this time that I got to know this gentleman. I had just bought a score of the Dvorak D minor Symphony in a shop in Kensington and I was studying this while drinking a cup of coffee in a cafe and this man opposite me says "Oh, I see

you are studying the music of my country!" So we got into a conversation and I tried to tell him of my ambitions of becoming a conductor and all that, he said "You should go to Prague and study with Vratislav Talik". And he said "As a matter of fact I've just come from a meeting for 6 British students to go to Prague to study and 6 Czech students to come to England." The reaction against the Nazi occupation was the Russians and the Communists and my wife and I were in Prague as the Communists took over. We couldn't really stay with the communists there so we went and I went back to Sadler's Wells and that's where I started my conducting.

Paul Edmond-Davies

I think I'm right in saying that you started your relationship with the Philharmonia Orchestra in 1955, so can you tell us a little bit about your first experience with the orchestra.

Sir Charles Mackerras

I got to know Walter Legge, who was of course the famous founder of the orchestra and he took a certain interest in me. At that time the people who were conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra all the time, particularly in recordings, were Giulini and Klemperer. Both of whom suffered a lot of ill health, so they were always planning, Legge was always planning to do recordings with them and suddenly they were ill. And at very short notice he was always getting me to come in and take the sessions, which is how it happened that so many of, there's so much light music which I recorded with the Philharmonia in the old days, which came from that fact that Klemperer and Giulini were constantly backing out, suddenly cancelling at very short notice. And I used to go in and conduct, not the same repertoire as they were supposed to do like the Verdi *Requiem* or Beethoven Symphonies or something but always light music.

Paul Edmond-Davies

What are your plans for the future with the Philharmonia?

Sir Charles Mackerras

I've got concerts in October which are built around the two Dvorak Symphonies, one of those being the historic Dvorak 7th Symphony, which changed my life and made me into a Czech specialist.

Mark David

Sir Charles Mackerras also conducts pianist Alfred Brendel's final UK performances with the magnificent piano concerto no.9 by Mozart, in London and Basingstoke on the 12th and 14th of October.

Other concerts this month include a trip around the country with Leif Segerstam, stopping off for performances at London, Cheltenham, Plymouth and Southend. Programs include Sibelius and Tchaikovsky Symphonies and Brahms' 1st piano Concerto.

In his first concerts as honorary conductor for life Christoph von Dohnányi joins the orchestra for performances Beethoven and Bruckner Symphonies, Sibelius' exhilarating violin concerto and the enchanting Sinfonia Concertante by Mozart.

If you are interested in finding out more about my race you can visit www.saharamarathon.co.uk or check out my blog on the sound exchange. Do join us next month for a preview of the Philharmonia's Vienna series and a look at the Rite of Spring. Thanks for watching.