Music is food for the soul, and that's more important now than ever

Jaap van Zweden

Jaap van Zweden talks about energy a good deal. It pulses around him. I'm tough on myself. I really am,' he says. It's a sentence that seems to ring true as he begins to explain the discipline he expects from an orchestra. ‘Yes, you have to be tough. If something's not working well, I want to know why it is not working. That search is the keystone of my life. I always want to know why, and then how to fix it. Something terrible that you see - especially, I think, with young conductors - is when a conductor just stops the orchestra and says “play it again”. And that's it! Without asking why and then fixing it. That's not right. When a phrase is not working with the cellos or the violins, it's our responsibility to know why. So I like to find out why certain things are not working. Then we have to discuss why. If you can't do that, then the orchestra will be thinking about you: “there we are, we've got another one!”'

And so witnessing his Wagner is to realise the extent to which he's made himself a master of detail. Gotterdammerung showed his textures to be meticulously layered, and at
almost every point in the opera his pacing seemed perfectly judged. There was virtually no drama on stage – a decision had clearly been made to concentrate on the final recording. But Naxos – whose headquarters are in Hong Kong, and for whom the climax of this four-year recording project is an important moment – have now got themselves a complete concert-hall Ring that many Wagnerians will want in their collection.

For Van Zwanen himself, now 57, this Ring has been a proud achievement because he believes, with considerable justification, that it has taken the orchestra into an entirely different sphere. 'It gives the musicians confidence,' he says. 'We have taken a huge step up. If I hear the orchestra now I can say that it's in a different league. Maybe they don't realise that yet. That is good – I want to keep them hungry.'

He tells me how he feeds that hunger, and his approach to the Ring. For Goetterdammernung he imported two European choirs – one from Germany and one from Latvia – in part because he said he wanted to give the Asian players in the orchestra (the majority) the flavour of a European sensibility to Wagner. He reveals a good deal about his thinking, and how he approached the Ring project with some players who had never tackled Wagner on this scale before.

For my musicians it was important that they understood not just the story but the world behind the words. We worked really hard on that. I talked as if we were reading a book: this is where that sentence fits, and so on. We concentrated on the architecture of the piece first.'

And then the sound. 'What matters are not only the notes but what's between them. Not all the time, but at least we know when the singers are taking a breath.'

When he began the project, he searched for scores from Bayreuth and the New York Met to check bowing marks. 'I looked at them, and then made changes. I wanted to see them, because I like tradition. Why would I be so arrogant to think that if there are great orchestras I shouldn't study them? And if I want to make changes, well I have to understand the tradition first.'

'Look at your parts, I say to them. There has to be a reason why you do everything. Even looking at the Bayreuth and the Met scores we might want change the bowing because it needs to stay alive. Tradition is not something that you look at like an old painting, and that's it. You need to look at something first and then dare to change it. That's how it evolves.'

His cast includes experienced Wagnerians. Eric Halfvarson's Hagen, such an important element of the climactic opera in the cycle, was a dark and powerful presence; but the Brünnhilde of Gun-Bruijn's particularity caught the character of the performance.

'I used to say that the most difficult thing in life is to become who you are,' Van Zwanen says. 'That can be a lifetime search. I always say that the road to heaven is more beautiful than heaven itself. But I felt yesterday that Gun-Bruijn had become Brünnhilde. She got it. I think one of
New York, new music

Van Zweeden’s world premieres

In amongst the more conservative fare, Jaap van Zweeden’s first season at David Geffen Hall will feature some intriguing world premieres, many of them New York Philharmonic commissions. Just before this issue went on sale, Van Zweeden conducted the first performances of experimental composer Ashley Fure’s Filament and Conrad Tao’s Everything Must Go. Louis Andriessen’s flail-inspired Agammemnon gets its first outing at the start of October, and at the end of January, Julia Wolfe’s Fire in My Mouth explores the clothing industry in New York City at the turn of the century, including the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire that killed 146 workers. A world premiere by David Lang will round out the 2018/19 season; prisoner of the state is billed as a contemporary take on Beethoven’s Fidelio — “Lang transforms the classic opera into an exploration of challenging an evil government, putting a fresh lens on the fall of a political tyrant,” says the New York Philharmonic website. Visit nyphil.org for more details.

Oslo Philharmonic +

NEW RELEASE

LAWO CLASSICS

www.lawoclassics.com

Oslo Philharmonic +

Petrenko

Alexander Scriabin
Symphony No. 1, Op. 26
Prometheus: The Poem of Fire, Op. 60

Vasily Petrenko
Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra
Kirill Gerstein — piano

Once again pairing the winning combination of Gramophone’s 2017 ‘Artist of the Year’ Vasily Petrenko, the Oslo Philharmonic and pianist Kirill Gerstein together, LAWO Classics is delighted to present the last instalment of their critically acclaimed Scriabin Series.

Release date 28th September

“Gerstein and Petrenko are outstanding…”

The Arts Desk on
Scriabin Symphony No. 2 (LWC1139)

“Kirill Gerstein is just the sort of ‘thinking pianist’ to take it on [Scriabin’s Piano Concerto] and he does a terrific job, and Vasily Petrenko and the Oslo Phil are highly sympathetic partners.”

Gramophone Magazine on
Scriabin’s Piano Concerto (LWC1139)

“This is a highly recommendable version of the concerto…”

MusicWeb International on
Scriabin’s Symphony No. 2 (LWC1139)

“An excellent disc.”

International Piano Magazine on
Scriabin’s Symphony No. 2 (LWC1139)

Distributed in the UK by PROPER MUSIC
www.propermusicgroup.com