

LONDON CALLING

He may be 60 but Rattle has a flurry of recordings due out, is taking risks with repertoire, and plans to unite players and community when he heads up the LSO in 2017, says Geoffrey Norris

‘The thing about becoming 60,’ admits Sir Simon Rattle, ‘is simply wanting more free time, more time to think and read, more time to do things other than music and to bring up the family.’ Most of us, particularly those of us for whom the age of 60 is but a distant memory, will nod wisely and agree that Rattle, who passed 60 in January this year, has got it absolutely right. But wait. Is this the same Simon Rattle who, on the very evening before we meet to chat on the way to Heathrow Airport, has conducted the London premiere of the new Jonathan Dove opera *The Monster in the Maze*, contriving to control a cast and chorus of hundreds of young professionals, children and amateurs scattered all over the Barbican Hall? And is he not now on the way to Aix-en-Provence to conduct another production of it, with a different cast – and this time in French? Clearly achieving the age of 60 does not signify a pipe-and-slippers autumn. Rattle is still Artistic Director of the Berlin Philharmonic until 2018, and the year before that he will take over from Valery Gergiev as Music Director of the London Symphony Orchestra. Free time? Maybe not just yet.

Allied to the LSO music directorship, Rattle will also be Artist-in-Association with the Barbican Centre and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. *The Monster in the Maze* was the first manifestation of the sort of thing that such a partnership might yield. ‘Certainly every year,’ says Rattle, ‘we will do one big community opera in whatever form that takes.’ Simon Halsey, who combines the choral directorship of the LSO with a parallel post in Birmingham and also heads the Berlin Philharmonic Youth Choral Programme, is a close colleague of Rattle’s, and they realised that ‘when we came to look at Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde* [which the Berlin Philharmonic, alongside students from local elementary and high schools, performed in April 2013], there were very few followers to it. There are pieces written for skilful youth orchestras and so on, but this idea that you would have enormously mixed abilities in the same piece is still very unusual, and it takes a very skilled composer to make that work.’ As Rattle says, ‘It was very clear

when we started talking [about the LSO job] that what we needed was a holistic orchestra – which is dealing with all parts of the system of music, from education to programming to community development and also developing the orchestra. The LSO,’ he reminds us, ‘has had a very long and successful collaboration with Guildhall, but it seemed time to move much closer. It’s a way of showing the world that we want to work together in as many ways as possible. Many of us went through music colleges learning wonderful things but then feeling utterly unprepared for what the reality was. And of course the reality now is that most people basically know about music from Machaut to yesterday but that they must also know how to teach, to inspire, to share. Music is disappearing from schools. Teaching is getting less. We have to fill the gap.’

Rattle and the LSO practised what they preached by having Guildhall students alongside orchestral members in the performance of Walton’s First Symphony that followed *The Monster and the Maze*. ‘We had to give them a rather brutal crash course,’ Rattle admits. ‘It made you realise what’s to be done. Part of what I see working with the Guildhall students is to tell them, “Sorry, this is the standard. We are trying to lift our standards all the time, so you must at least come up to the standard we are setting ourselves. You, Mr X, are sitting next to somebody who’s 60 and is playing her heart out. You cannot decide just to coast.” Sometimes,’ Rattle says, ‘it’s just a matter of sitting, communicating and finding out how things work for other people. Hopefully it will slowly and surely have an effect.’ With *The Monster and the Maze* already a sign of what can be achieved, the Barbican has offered to commission further pieces in which the LSO, as Rattle says, ‘is simply involved in everything, and we would also be working with the Barbican when we go to explore other sites in London. We are in discussion with Tate Modern to do a big project. But in fact all over London there are extraordinary places to explore.’ It’s about bringing in new audiences as well as the already committed ones, and one of the things that appealed to Rattle about the performance of the Walton symphony was the positive reaction from ‘people who would not normally be

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