



“ Music is food for the soul, and that’s more important now than ever ”

THE BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE INTERVIEW

Jaap van Zweden



BBC Radio 4’s **James Naughtie** flies to Hong Kong to meet conductor Jaap van Zweden and to witness the completion of his *Ring* cycle recordings with the Hong Kong Philharmonic

PHOTOGRAPHY: VIRGILE SIMON BERTRAND

A musician has to wake up every morning and ask a question. What can I learn today? Not what can I do better, but what can I learn?

I meet Jaap van Zweden in Hong Kong, the morning after *Götterdämmerung*, the conclusion of his Wagner *Ring* cycle recorded by Naxos in concert performances by the Hong Kong Philharmonic. And he appears restless.

In fact, restlessness is his signature as a conductor. It’s probably why he’s renowned as a hard taskmaster by his musicians, but perhaps also explains why he’s starting his first season as music director of the New York Philharmonic while keeping one foot in Hong Kong, an orchestra that, over the last eight years, he’s taken to a whole new level.

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. *Götterdämmerung* showed his textures to be meticulously layered, and at

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West Side stories: Van Zweden leads the New York Philharmonic in Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5 at David Geffen Hall earlier this year

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 Zweden 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 *Götterdämmerung* 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

'I used to say that the most difficult thing in life is to become who you are'

the notes. So how do we create our own acoustic for this music? Stretching ourselves in how we use the bowing arm, for example, becomes very important, as does deciding where the wind should take a breath. All these things are important because you must never lose those long lines. They are built up by the small details. A long line survives if you have worked out the small details. But only then, if you are confident about how to fix details in a long line, will it turn out right. Otherwise it's just a long line and nothing happens. I started with the thought that when the singer has to take a breath we have to breathe with

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-Brit Barkmin particularly caught the character of the performance.

'I used to say that the most difficult thing in life is to become who you are,' Van Zweden 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-Brit had become Brünnhilde. She got it. I think one of



Big Apple firsts:
Julia Wolfe and
(below) David Lang

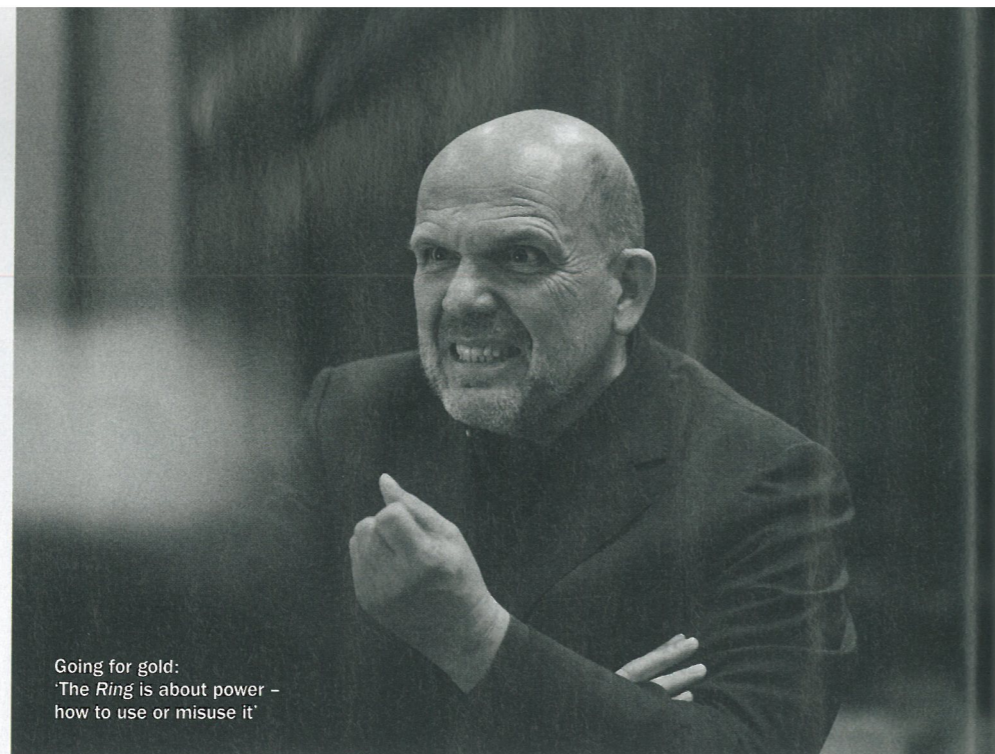
New York, new music

Van Zweden's world premieres



In amongst the more conservative fare, Jaap van Zweden'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 Zweden conducted the first performances of experimental composer Ashley Fure's *Filament* and Conrad Tao's *Everything Must Go*. Louis Andriessen's *Iliad*-inspired *Agamemnon* 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.

PETER SERLING



Going for gold:
'The *Ring* is about power –
how to use or misuse it'

the great things is that you can only become something you want. You have it in yourself to become that person. But it's tough.'

It's clear in Hong Kong (where, as in mainland China, Wagner evenings are a rarity) that the outcome of this project has proved a rewarding experience for the orchestra. Having moulded it in his own image – making difficult early decisions, like the replacement of the orchestra's concertmaster – he has them playing for him in the way he wants. Talking to some of the singers afterwards, it was obvious that they believed the attention to detail and the sheer power that the players could muster when it was required had lifted their performances.

And as for the operas themselves, Van Zweden – raised in the Netherlands, and a co-leader of the Concertgebouw when he was only 18 – has seen the four-year journey to Brünnhilde's mountain-top as thoroughly necessary. It's music that he has known since his youth and he argues that it has never been more vital.

'The *Ring* is about power. How to use it or misuse it. We're living in a time when there are a lot of questions about power. So I think it is very important at this moment. Something that people need more than anything else at this time is to go and see that an orchestra is still playing. If you go to any kind of art – a gallery or a museum or the theatre – I think it is food for the soul that's more important than ever. And if people thought more like that, we would be more needed than ever.'

Now, with more plans for Hong Kong and the orchestra he believes he's lifted up, he's planning the New York part of his life, promising more new music from composers who are too little known. But while we talk about the shape of his musical life, things suddenly become intimate. One of his children – Benjamin, who's 26 – is severely autistic and as a consequence Van Zweden and his wife have established a foundation in the Netherlands where thousands of children receive therapy and, as he puts it, hope.

'We have a lot of children who don't speak. So we started with musical instruments to connect with them. The big next step for them is to learn an instrument. Why? Because it needs so much brainwork and the brain is a muscle that needs to be trained – never forget that. You can't imagine the experience of making music if you haven't done it. It doesn't matter if you are good or not. The involvement matters. The use of the brain.'

And so, after the *Ring*, how is that brain? 'To conduct a piece like this – it's not a feeling of power, it's a powerful feeling. There's a difference. To be part of this huge thing and to release that power is extraordinary, but at the end you feel humble that you are able to be a part of this unbelievable music.'

'What I should do is just take this music and show it to the public – and say, look at this! This is what it's all about.' *Götterdämmerung* is released on Naxos on 9 October and will be reviewed next issue

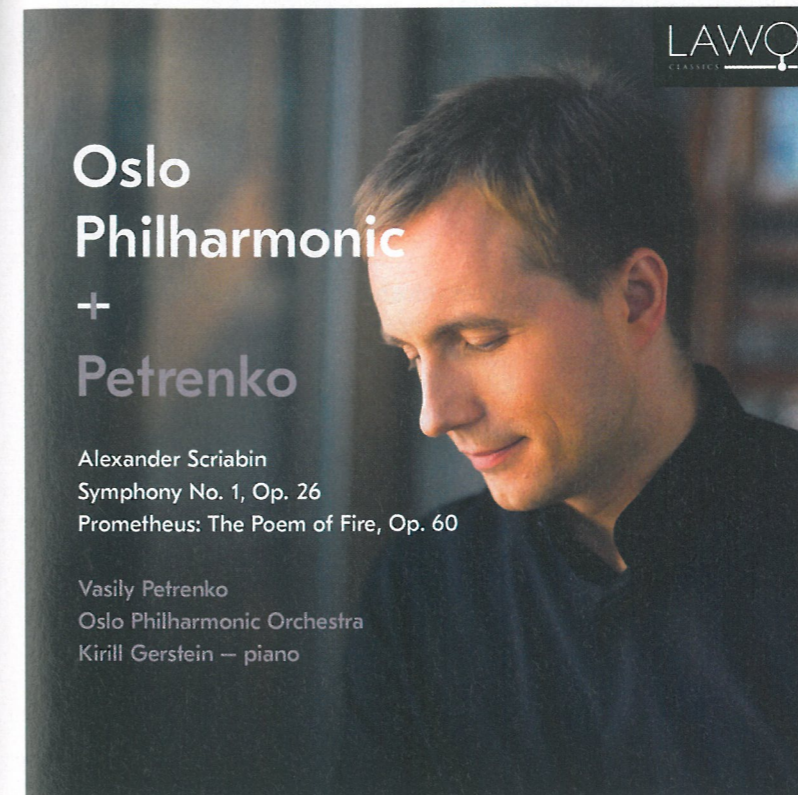
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