

VIDEO – Interview with Peter Oundjian of the RSN0

✘ The RSN0 were rehearsing in Glasgow today when The Edinburgh Reporter met up with Peter Oundjian the Music Director who only arrived back in Scotland earlier this week to take up the baton for the orchestra's concerts this Friday and Saturday. Far from having any signs of jet lag the Canadian had played tennis yesterday evening, and was already clearly in control of the orchestra's three day rehearsal schedule.

Mr Oundjian is now one year into the job of Music Director with the RSN0 and will be conducting the orchestra at their opening concert in the 2013/14 season at The Usher Hall on Friday evening when the programme includes Gustav Holst's The Planets.

Mindful of the fact that he was giving up part of his lunch hour to speak to The Edinburgh Reporter, we have to say that Peter Oundjian is a most gracious interviewee and was only too delighted to be quizzed about his work. We began by asking how the orchestra prepares for this Friday's concert.

"We have a schedule that we stick with when rehearsing. So this week we started rehearsing on Tuesday, all day Wednesday and Thursday and end up with a dress rehearsal on Friday which is the same as usual. The Planets is a piece that we all know and love, but the key is to keep it fresh and yet feel that you have some kind of interpretation that has been absorbed by the orchestra to some degree. You don't want to hear the end result of a jolly good set of rehearsals in any concert. You want spontaneity. It is the unexpected turns that makes a concert exciting!"


As to what the conductor feels he brings to each concert he

replied:-“I think when you have been performing as long as I have you live with a certain adrenaline that erupts somewhat when you walk out there on stage. It is quite important not to have that level of adrenaline every moment of the day, otherwise you would just not know what to do with it!

“I treasure every moment on stage I think it is an opportunity to share something really powerful with people. I remember going to boring orchestral concerts when I was young. I felt that nobody seemed to care!

“I was an athlete; my family is full of athletes and there is something about being an athlete that means you have to do your best on a now or never basis. If you are a footballer for example – then one momentary lapse and the other team will score against you. I am not saying it is exactly the same but it is kind of related. Moments on stage are 100% concentration and involve making sure everyone feels the great sense of occasion and that every single moment is a treasure. That moment will never return. Yes, we will do another performance but it It is entirely about living in the present instant.”

As to the choice of music for this year, it seems that it is not wholly chosen by the Music Director alone.

“We are doing the UK premiere of a piano concerto by a  Scottish composer in our opening programme which is pretty bold, but it is all about being balanced and eclectic. We also have the Planets and some Britten – we do the War Requiem in November. This is very important for me as I knew Britten when I was a kid and it is the 100th anniversary of his birth.

“Doing the Planets you realise there is a reason why this piece is so famous – it is absolutely brilliant! It is very significant as Holst played in the RSN0 as a trombonist, but we also have the new piece by a great Scottish Composer with a wonderful pianist as we also wanted to do something that the audience would feel is special.

A new assistant conductor, Jean-Claude Picard, was appointed in the summer. In what appears to be a complete swop he is going off to Canada next week to conduct the Toronto Symphony. Oundjian laughed and said:-

“The truth is that Jean-Claude is extremely talented although he is so very young. There were many who applied for the position but there was a strong vote in his favour. I am sure he is going to do brilliantly. We were also looking for an assistant conductor in Toronto and the orchestra liked him very much, so he has made his own place there.

“The choice of music for the RSNO season is a huge subject. It takes a lot of really collaborative teamwork. I can offer my choices for a season, but it depends whether we can make sense of those pieces to create exciting programmes and series out of them. But others in the team have a voice, remind me of what has not been done for a while and it also depends on soloists being available too. But it is a moving target however and not a chess game!

Peter Oundjian has been with the RSNO for a year now and we enquired if he had seen much of the country yet.

“I love Scotland but I have not seen enough of it. I have seen far too much of hotel rooms and rehearsal rooms and concert halls in Edinburgh and Glasgow. Glasgow is amazingly cosmopolitan, has booming cultural activity and wonderful restaurants. It is a very lively town, and it lives in the present and the future, and is very forward looking. And it is Glasgow where the RSNO will have a new home next to the Royal Concert Hall. It is very exciting and we will have the best facilities you can imagine.

When asked about his decision to introduce video screens in Toronto, the conductor was enthusiastic but measured about doing the same in Glasgow:-

“I am in favour of the use of video screens to some degree.

For example the presence of screens is usual and normal in most other situations where there is an audience of this size, but in the classical music arena this is not the case. We have to wake up to being a bit more modern in certain respects, but I still firmly believe there is a purity about this experience which we must maintain. We should not use screens to tell them what they are listening to and how to interpret it. The magic of music is that we all interpret it individually and so we must not lose that aspect of the purity of the presentation.

“I almost exclusively listen to music other than classical. I have been a big Beatles and Pink Floyd fan all my life. Yes was a great band and I love Emerson Lake and Palmer jazz all kinds of jazz such as Duke Ellington. I don't listen to rap....

“I like folk music such as Nick Drake. My kids are in their early 20s and they try hard to keep me up to date and informed.

Oundjian did play violin earlier in his career but had to give up due to a repetitive stress injury. He did play last year with the Toronto Symphony but has no plans to do so this year as it is just 'not much fun' – and we have to say this is someone who clearly relishes every moment of his working day.

“As a violinist I had to practice about 150 hours or more to play for 20 minutes, and then was not sure that I would be any good! This orchestra is very dedicated and they all come to rehearsals very well prepared, and quick and alert. They are always looking for the magic. The first moment you conduct an orchestra you figure out their attitude. Highly professional music making – that is what I am always looking for.

“I think it is one of the most extraordinary and fascinating aspects of this whole business that an orchestra of identical people is different with a different person on the podium. The different warmth or different musculature pervades the atmosphere and affects it.

“All people have an aura which becomes much clearer when you group people together to create music. An orchestra is made up of around 100 individual auras which all become one and then the conductor brings their sense to it and moulds it together.”

The RSN0 had a very successful trip to China last year but this year the orchestra is off to the Festival in Aix en Provence next month.

Oundjian concluded:-“I am very much looking forward to the Usher Hall tomorrow night. It is a real home for us. We are the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and we are welcomed all over Scotland. Anywhere we go we feel a sense of belonging, as the whole country owns this orchestra and we are here to make music for everybody. But I always love to be in the Usher Hall. There is a very special atmosphere.”

The RSN0 will appear at the Usher Hall on Friday 4 October 2013 and will be back there next week on 11 October playing the Dvorak 7 as part of their programme. If you were unsuccessful in winning our competition for two tickets then you can buy tickets [here on the RSN0 website](#) for concerts here and at The Royal Concert Hall in Glasgow.